

Benton's comments on Rancière seem to put forward a rather different view of science than Althusser does, so we are in fact dealing with three positions, and we can discover the implications of Rancière's argument by working through them.

Ted Benton provides a useful example in his argument that it is possible to separate the contents of scientific knowledge from the form of their appropriation:

That such a separation can be achieved is a presupposition of any adequate history of the sciences - consider, for instance, the different ideological currents and social relationships with which Darwin's theory of evolution has been articulated: the classical 'laissez-faire' liberalism of late Victorian England, the petit-bourgeois radicalism of sections of German intelligentsia (Haeckel), the reformist socialism of Wallace in England and the Leninism of Lenin himself... [Benton p28]

This formulation sets up the idea of some 'true' Darwin's theory of evolution which can be separated from its interpretation in a similar way in which positivism sets up a 'real' world which can be separated from interpretations of the world (theory) and against which those interpretations can be tested. Yet where is this 'true' theory of evolution? It cannot be in Darwin's work itself in a clear and manifest way, otherwise it could not be taken up into ideological (i.e. wrong) currents and social relationships, since these must inevitably change the meaning of the theory of evolution, and that change would be apparent. Darwin's theory cannot exist apart from the systems (ideological or scientific) in which it is articulated.

This leads us on to Althusser's position; which seems to be not that there is some 'true' theory of evolution separate from its interpretations, but rather that one interpretation - one reading amongst others is scientific; the scientific as opposed to the ideological reading either meets the criteria of scientificity or reveals the existence of those criteria in Darwin's work, and once we know what those criteria are, we can write the history of science. To discover the contents of scientific knowledge we have to read the text in which that knowledge is contained in the right way - i.e. articulate it into another system.

In relation to Althusser's position, Rancière argues - it seems to me - that 'reading' must be extended to take account of the social and institutional relationships within which reading takes place - not only can we not separate Darwin's theory of evolution from its interpretation on the theoretical level, we cannot separate it from the social and institutional framework in which it is presented since this framework too is an interpretation.

The 'surface' effect of Rancière's position is to 'neutralise' scientific knowledge; thus, for example, Marxism may be taught as scientific knowledge of society without threatening, perhaps even reinforcing the bourgeois education system. But there is a deeper effect: if our argument above was correct - that scientific knowledge does not exist apart from its reading, and if social relationships enter into that reading - then the criteria for scientificity that Althusser presents, or discovers in the proofs of the scientific discourse itself, are inadequate; in fact the distinction between ideology and science collapses since scientific knowledge can be ideological and ideology can be scientific. The fact that Rancière continues to talk as if there were a clear distinction between science and ideology is an indication of his own theoretical confusion.

What we are left with is a number of different

types of knowledge, each defined by its mode of appropriation of its object, its own internal features, its relationship to other forms or bodies of knowledge, and the social framework in which it is articulated; in other words we move to a way of viewing knowledge that is closer to Lukacs than to Althusser.

4 Theoretical struggle

Rancière, however, does not theorise his position in this way: rather he uses it as a base to attack theory and theoretical struggle in favour of 'practice'. Ted Benton is, I think, quite right to defend theory against such an attack, but if Rancière's position is a degradation of theoretical struggle then the orthodox Althusserian position is a denegation. The confrontation of bourgeois ideology with criteria of scientificity is a confrontation only, in which there is no debate, no struggle, no argument; there is only the presentation of an alternative and a judgement.

Both positions remove the power of theory as weapon, as revolutionary practice in its own right, in the latter case whilst still recognising theory as a guide to revolutionary practice outside of theory. The power of theory is its ability to transform consciousness, to change people not necessarily by intellectual conviction but by enabling them to grasp their own world and their own experience in a radically new way and to become aware of ways of changing the world. If Marxist theory is to do this, then it must be able to live inside everyday representations of the world, to take them as the starting point of its argument, and it must be able to transform those representations into an adequate understanding of the world. 'Criteria of scientificity' do not only not enable theory to fulfil this role but they actively prohibit it from doing so; the epistemological break between ideology and science is also a chasm between the Marxist and those to whom he talks.

Ian Craib

Old & new left

'Tens of thousands of socialist intellectuals, radical philosophers, uneasily unattached' - or should we say, uneasily attached - this broad description is probably true, and would include me. I was certainly as disturbed as Jonathan Rée to read Edward Thompson's Open Letter to Kolakowski, and I was glad to read his opening discussion upon it (RP9). The Letter was very pessimistic, and so is Jonathan Rée's commentary. In those far off days of the fifties, he says, the socialist intellectuals gave their allegiance to the British Labour movement, though they might criticize it, but he suggests that this is now no longer possible and our scope is more limited.

To my mind the central fact that alleviates pessimism is that these discussions are opened up, and hence I make my own contribution. The things at issue are not those between Thompson and Kolakowski: the argument there is not worth breath, and I am surprized at Thompson engaging himself in it. As an elderly socialist I see Kolakowski taking the course that always is wide open to such people once they establish some prestige as socialists - the establishment welcome for the apostate, the pat on the back, and the spoils that go with it. I have observed it all my life.

The real issue is between Thompson and the *New Left Review*, and here I am profoundly reluctant to take sides, in the light of the contribution that both are making to socialist thought and

understanding. I regret that Edward Thompson chooses to make the issue so much a personal one as he does. He takes his stand upon the position of the 'Old New Left' in the late fifties or early sixties, when divergences began to disclose themselves. These have apparently rankled within him for years - perhaps justifiably - but I feel that it is not appropriate now to take up the issues from that point. A great deal of water has flowed beneath many bridges since then. I realized how much this was so, when I tried to follow him by turning up the files of the *The Reasoner* and the early issues of the *New Left Review*. There have been immense changes in the world picture which now needs to be our starting point. I am thinking of the naked disclosure of the real position of Great Britain in the world: I am thinking of the emergence of a new generation that is post-Stalin, and free of the inhibitions that that era imposed: I am thinking of the radical change in the composition of the British Labour Party, and mass swing of its real working class dynamic towards industrial action. I do not see the decline of the old sectarian left wing groupings as so much of a tragedy as all that: they were too set in self-defeating spites to cope with drastic change.

It is quite true that the *New Left Review* under the editorship of Perry Anderson displays a highly specialized and systematic marxism that shows too little need for contact with active socialist groups. But in an international sense it is more in tune with the present world than the parochialism which is displayed in those files of the reviews of a decade and a half ago. However valuable the 'English idiom' may have been, and however much it may still have to contribute, an excessive preoccupation with it can cloud the perspective of the modern world. Jonathan Ree seems to me to illustrate the point in his last paragraph in his eloquent plea for work that is not merely academic or theoretical. The range of action for socialists will not stay the same for long, he says, 'the crisis of British capitalism will see to that'. The most glaring feature of the position today that it is not a crisis of British capitalism; it is a world crisis of an unprecedented nature, in which for the first time Britain can only play an incidental part. Anything we may be able to do has to be conditioned by that, and we have to begin by understanding that. If we do not we are likely to be surprised by events at every turn.

How can we (presumably socialist intellectuals) be active today as Jonathan Ree would like to see? He thinks that the rather tenuous links which the old left had with the labour movement are no longer possible, and that our scope is much more limited. So it would be, if we continued to think in the old ways; but surely the circumstances require that we should begin to think in new ways, adapted to the changes that have been and still are taking place. In recent years there has been a steady change in the composition of the Labour Party, and in its role in relation to the working class. At one time the organized working class regarded it as its principal political voice and instrument. The experience of the earlier Wilson governments changed all that, and it has been turning away sharply towards a reliance on industrial action, inspired less from Transport House than from the shop floor.

At the same time the Labour Party machinery itself is being taken over by what was once the black-coated and professional lower middle class, which suffers continual encroachment on its status by proletarianizing tendencies. Alongside these

changes there has also been an efflorescence of *ad hoc* bodies created for all kinds of purposes that parliamentary politics have ceased to serve. The fluidity in attachments and political affiliations has been demonstrated this year; first the flow towards the Liberal Party, and then against it. As one door closes, another is apt to open, and the world crisis of capitalism will continue to see to that. It is these flows that we need to understand, so that we may hope to get into a fruitful socialist relationship to them, if our thinking is flexible enough.

During recent years there has been radical change in the trades union movement, but how little effort there has been amongst socialist intellectuals to trace its roots, to analyse its present position and to elucidate its differences from trades union practice in other western countries. Yet these differences may be crucial in the months ahead. We need to understand that a movement which is an organic growth deeply rooted in history, as in Britain, must necessarily behave differently from a system that is a recent logical ideological construct such as that in Germany. There has always been this inability of the potential socialist intelligentsia in this country to achieve an understanding of the unions. It was present in the incipient turn of the intelligentsia towards marxism in the 1930s. Even in its best days, the *New Statesman* always suffered this disability, and the unions were a closed book to it. The unions present special difficulties for the academic because the rationale of their processes is not on the surface. It is not perceived, for example, that the apparent anarchy of union rank and file practice today is traceable directly back to the betrayal of the general strike by its leadership in 1926. There is a deep instinct to try to make a repetition of such betrayals impossible. No one would be better fitted than a historian like Edward Thompson to illuminate such matters, which would be less a waste of time than to debate with Kolakowski.

There seems to be an inveterate tendency among the intelligentsia to delight in keeping abstract concepts in the air, like so many ping-pong balls. We are very ready to talk in general terms about 'the empirical potentia' that is to be inferred from history, but are less ready to strive to grasp the multifarious ways in which that potentia discloses itself in the developing situation. Elaborate discourses go on in the *New Left Review* - and in *Radical Philosophy* - about 'alienation', and 'reification', and these are treated as though they were no more than literary or psychological manifestations or a new dramatic technique: experiences merely in the minds of the educated and the intelligent. These things are not seen for what they more importantly are, above all in this time of gathering crisis, as men separated from other men and from nature, and treated more and more as 'things'. In these circumstances the instinctive but blind efforts to re-assert common humanity must be happening all around us. It is our problem how best to give light and leading to these efforts wherever we find them; but we have first to be able to recognize them for what they are. When we begin to display that clarity, it may be that new channels of communication will disclose themselves, and new groups begin to form, less addicted than the old slogans, splits and sterile logic-chopping.



David A. Wilson