

ARTICLE

Foucault and Althusser: Epistemological Differences with Political Effects

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ABSTRACT: Michel Foucault was at times critical of the Marxist tradition, and at other times more sympathetic. After his dismissal of Marx in *The Order of Things*, he conceded the existence of a more compelling, non-humanist version of this discourse. Louis Althusser's innovations are crucial for the existence of this second Marxism. While consideration of the relation between Foucault and Althusser varies between those who emphasize relations between State and capital, and conversely those who inscribe Marxist considerations into a micro-political account, the distinction between the two thinkers takes place earlier in the development of their respective outlooks. Foucault initially emphasized Marxism as an anthropological eschatology; he revises this argument, commending the possibility of an epistemological mutation of history inherent in Marx's thought. I locate crucial distinctions between Foucault and Althusser in the early work of the 1960s as inflecting relations in the seemingly more proximate work of the 1970s. In this approach, we can better examine Foucault's non-Marxist contentions in order to consider the reciprocal distinctions and contributions between these two forms of anti-humanism, providing the necessary groundwork for debates regarding the nature of subjectivity, the State, and revolution.

Keywords: Althusser, Marxism, structuralism, epistemology, science.

Introduction

Michel Foucault had a vexed relationship with Marxism during his genealogical period. After his harsh archaeological criticisms in *The Order of Things*, he developed a much more sympathetic account of non-humanist discourse, leading to his period of militancy in the 1970s. The innovations of Louis Althusser, who formulated a resolutely anti-humanist account of Marxist science, conditioned Foucault's arguments. Nonetheless, there remain several implicit points of contestation between his thought and Althusser's Marxism. While he champions Althusser's opposition to the humanist rhetoric of alienation, Foucault remains opposed to the language of science and ideology and the understanding of a class character inherent in thought, as well as the significance of the leading role of the party. Consideration of the relation between Foucault and Althusser tends to focus on the production of subjects by institutions and practices, and varies between commentators who reproach Foucault for avoiding the crucial relationships between State and capital, and conversely those who inscribe Marxist considera-

tions into a micro-political account.¹ However, the essential distinction between the two thinkers takes place earlier in the development of their respective outlooks, in the approach to epistemological questions in the period of “high structuralism.” In 1966, Foucault emphasized Marxism as an anthropological eschatology, elevating a transcendental consideration of proletarian humanism to the status of pre-critical metaphysics. Three years later he revises this argument, commending the possibility of an epistemological mutation of history inherent in Marx’s thought.² Foucault accepts class conflict, mitigating its primacy, while extending the scope of inquiry into the materiality that contextualizes power and subjectivity. A close investigation of his claims can determine more subtle means of revealing the limits of Marxist discourse, while at the same time suggesting those elements of contemporary Marxism that exceed his characterization. I locate crucial distinctions between Foucault and Althusser in the early work of the 1960s as inflecting relations in the seemingly more proximate work of the 1970s. By this means, we can better examine Foucault’s non-Marxist contentions in order to consider the reciprocal distinctions and contributions between these two forms of anti-humanism, providing the necessary groundwork for debates regarding the nature of subjectivity, the State, and revolution.

This article begins with *The Order of Things*, Foucault’s anti-humanist unsettling of the contemporary era. After uncovering of the metaphysics underlying the human sciences, Foucault proceeds to argue that Marx is reliant on David Ricardo’s innovations, and that those innovations are unavoidably humanist.³ For this reason, he contends that Marxism in both its Hegelian, humanist and positivist forms are equally infused with humanism, and this prevents them from engaging in a true critique of the possibility of knowledge. At this moment, Foucault declares that Marxist discourse in its entirety is nearing obsolescence. However, Althusser’s reading of Marx undoes this contention. Shifting emphasis away from questions of history’s teleology as well as an alleged priority of man’s labour, Althusser’s reading displays a radically different, though still recognizably faithful, reading of Marx’s classic works.⁴ For Althusser, rather than uncritically reliant on Ricardo, Marx himself employs a reading strategy that uncovers the unacknowledged premises underlying Ricardo’s economic theory. Rather than confronting classical economics with the destitution of man, Marx’s critique takes place immediately at the level of the concepts proffered by his predecessors. Because they do not require recourse to pre-critical appeals to human nature, it becomes possible to imagine class-consciousness and class struggle as sharply distinct from the biological reductionism Foucault had believed it to be. Increasingly aware of this development, Foucault’s subsequent work,

¹ For the argument in favour of re-emphasizing the significance of the State, see Nicos Poulantzas, *State, Power, Socialism*, translated by Patrick Camiller (London: NLB, 1978), 36, 44. Regarding Marxism and micropolitics, see especially Jason Read, *The Micro-politics of Capital: Marx and the Prehistory of the Present* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2003), 85-90.

² Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Vintage Books, 1970), 219; and Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge and The Discourse on Language*, translated by A.M. Sheridan Smith (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972), 11-13.

³ Foucault, *The Order of Things*, 320.

⁴ Louis Althusser and Étienne Balibar, *Reading Capital*, translated by Ben Brewster (London: NLB, 1970).

The Archaeology of Knowledge, takes note of Althusser's insights.⁵ As a result, he develops a new understanding of Marx as a founder of discursivity who has allowed new truths to become possible.⁶ This encounter leads to the possibility of a "Foucauldian Marxism." However, Foucault also implicitly articulates significant criticisms of Althusser's thought; in particular, with regard to the concept of ideology and the role of the party as a guarantor of the truth.⁷ Last, I describe the possibilities for further inquiry raised by the encounter between Althusser and Foucault.

Anti-Humanism and *The Order of Things*

Foucault is sharply critical of the scientific pretensions of Marxism. In *The Order of Things*, he argues that it relies on a specific notion of economics initiated by Ricardo, proceeding from an anthropology of finitude.⁸ Foucault contends that Marxism makes economic humanism fundamental. For this reason, he believes that the "surface ripples" produced in the struggle between revolutionary and bourgeois economists do nothing to alter the "epistemological arrangement" in which they both operate.⁹ Here, he disagrees with Althusser's argument that Marxism is an anti-humanism aligned with other thinkers commonly described as "structuralist."¹⁰ Surprisingly, Étienne Balibar attempts to explain this by claiming that when Foucault "wrote *The Order of Things*, he was unaware of Althusser's reading of Marx, whereas in *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, he speaks of a Marx revisited by Althusser."¹¹ However, Foucault studied with Althusser in the 1950s and as a result must have been aware of approaches to reading Marx that avoid humanist assumptions.¹² Struck by Balibar's claim, we should investigate further in order to discern the degree to which an apparent ignorance of Althusser's Marx affects Foucault's understanding of economics, history, and thought during his archaeological period. In order to do so, we should attend to the arguments presented by his landmark work of 1966.

The Order of Things argues that contemporary psychoanalysis, ethnology, and linguistics teach us that human nature is "neither the oldest nor the most constant problem that has been posed for human knowledge," and that a change in the configuration of the so-called human sciences could lead man himself to be "erased, like a face drawn in sand at the edge of the sea."¹³ Foucault contends that Marxian economics relies on a concern with "the human

⁵ Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, 11-13.

⁶ Michel Foucault, "What Is an Author?," in *The Foucault Reader*, edited by Paul Rabinow (New York: Pantheon, 1984), 101.

⁷ Most explicit in Foucault, "Truth and Power," in *The Foucault Reader*, 60.

⁸ "[S]ince Ricardo, economics has rested [...] upon an anthropology that attempts to assign concrete forms to finitude." (Foucault, *The Order of Things*, 254)

⁹ Foucault, *The Order of Things*, 261, 262.

¹⁰ Althusser dissociated himself from the term "structuralism" which he viewed as descriptive of an ideology. Louis Althusser and Étienne Balibar, 7. Foucault is also disdainful towards the term; *The Order of Things*, xiv.

¹¹ Quoted in François Dosse, *History of Structuralism. Volume 1: The Rising Sign, 1945-1966*, translated by Deborah Glassman (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 341.

¹² See David Macey, *The Lives of Michel Foucault* (New York: Vintage, 1995), 29, 38.

¹³ Foucault, *The Order of Things*, 387.

being who spends, wears out, and wastes his life in evading the imminence of death" that originates in Ricardo's work.¹⁴ Ricardo posits a pessimistic eschatology and end to history, in which the population will eventually reach its natural limit; Marx, of course, imagines a revolutionary upheaval leading to a classless society.¹⁵ For Foucault, both Ricardo and Marx are committed to "the relations of anthropology and History as they are established by economics through the notions of scarcity and labour." Marx's proletarians are more authentic by virtue of their proximity, via poverty, to "the very brink of death," truly experiencing "need, hunger, and labour," and bringing them to an apprehension of "the truth of the human essence."¹⁶ The great Marxist humanist promise, that what is natural will be revealed to be subject to human control, depends on a view of the world as the result of history and alienation of human finitude. This builds on a common understanding of Marx as combining Ricardo's economics with the philosophical insights of G.W.F. Hegel.¹⁷

Althusser was strongly opposed to the humanist reading of Marx. In particular, he identified this humanism as having been inherited from Hegel's philosophy. Beginning in 1953, Althusser pursued the task of expunging all Hegelian aspects from Marx. He located his antecedents in the work of Franz Mehring and Auguste Cornu, who began a similar enterprise nearly twenty years prior.¹⁸ Foucault, who studied with Althusser in the late 1950s, was necessarily aware of the existence of anti-humanist Marxism.¹⁹ However, while Foucault's description of Marx as humanist, historicist, and concerned with human finitude bears the clear marks of Alexandre Kojève's Hegelian reading, Foucault argues that the more positivist variation found in Friedrich Engels or Soviet Marxism is "archaeologically indissociable" from the eschatological humanist narrative.²⁰ Foucault argues that in both positivism and Hegelianism, "Pre-critical naïveté holds undivided rule."²¹ What does Foucault mean by this failing of all modern (and hence humanist) discourse, whether bourgeois or revolutionary, positivist or dialectical? For the answer to this question, we should examine what Foucault says about critique. Foucault argues that Immanuel Kant's critical philosophy coexists with Destutt de Tracy's rational, scientific Ideology.²² Both Kant and de Tracy are essentially concerned with representations and their relations to one another. Kant's critique, calling into question the commensurability of representative systems and the conditions of their general possibility, mediates between the classical age of representation and the modern age of anthropology.²³ Kant's concern with *a priori* founding experience makes him critical; "Not that it is a question of an-

¹⁴ Ibid., 257.

¹⁵ Ibid., 259-261.

¹⁶ Ibid., 260-261.

¹⁷ Louis Althusser, *Politics and History: Montesquieu, Rousseau, Hegel and Marx*, translated by Ben Brewster (London: NLB, 1972), 171-173.

¹⁸ Louis Althusser, *Early Writings: The Spectre of Hegel*, translated by G.M. Goshgarian (Verso, 1997), 243.

¹⁹ Macey, 29, 38.

²⁰ Foucault, *The Order of Things*, 320.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid., 240.

²³ Ibid., 241. For a sustained discussion of Foucault's relation to the Kantian critical project, see Colin McQuillan, "Philosophical Archaeology in Kant, Foucault, and Agamben," *Parrhesia* 10 (2010), 39-42.

other world, but of the conditions in accordance with which any representation of the world in general can exist.”²⁴ While Ideology remained within the realm of representation, Kant’s critique “marks the threshold” of modernity, making the subsequent philosophies of labour, life and language possible in Ricardo, Georges Cuvier, and Franz Bopp.²⁵

The Metaphysics of the Human Sciences

However, Foucault argues that these new disciplines and their histories (including Marx, as a follower of Ricardo), remain “pre-critical” even in spite of the indirect significance of Kant at their birth, because, while avoiding transcendental subjectivity, they remain metaphysical by relying on “transcendental objectives.”²⁶ In other words, the modern era merely erects labour, life, and language as new transcendental principles, de-historicizing them and making them the provinces of an unquestioned human essence. It is properly critical to restore Kant’s true consideration of the basic *a priori* principles for cognition.²⁷ The discourses usually grouped together under the name of structuralism do this by offering “a perpetual principle of dissatisfaction, of calling into question, of criticism and contestation of what may seem, in other respects, to be established.”²⁸

At this climactic moment, Foucault, having demolished the anthropological assumptions of the modern era, valorizes three counter-sciences: (Lacanian) psychoanalysis, (Lévi-Strauss’s) ethnology, and (post-Saussurean) linguistics. Why is Althusser’s anti-humanist Marxism absent? After all, while Foucault spends a great deal of time historicizing and rendering the building blocks of Marxist teleological history and the labour theory of value arbitrary, Althusser had already vigorously rejected these tenets and demonstrated the possibility and the validity of a newly “scientific” and formal Marxism. What is it about Marxism that disturbs Foucault more deeply than these already excised elements? Ought we to believe that, despite the conciliatory comments Foucault may have made in a spirit of *soixante-huit* rapprochement, the clear respect he has for Marx’s accomplishments, and his sometime militancy on behalf of labour struggles, Foucault’s archaeology possesses a constitutive hostility towards Marxist historical materialism? Are Foucault’s critiques of Marx merely venomous overstatements made for polemical effect against the hegemony of the French Communist Party, or, of necessity, statements of opposition to the primacy of the economic and the privileged position of the proletariat? In order to explore these questions, we should first understand Foucault’s early dismissals of Marx, before investigating his later reconsideration in light of Althusser.

Marx’s Reliance on Ricardo

Foucault’s understanding of the critical project enhances his hostility to Marxism. Whereas Althusser replaces the term humanism with socialism, he retains a crucial commitment to the distinction between science and ideology, with science corresponding to the proper applica-

²⁴ Foucault, *The Order of Things*, 242.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 242, 243.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 244, 245.

²⁷ Foucault refers to his own discovery of distinct *epistemes* as constituting “historical *a priori*.” (*Ibid.*, xxiv)

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 373.

tion of historical materialism by the proletariat.²⁹ In contrast, Foucault argues that the distinction between truth and falsehood is much less a problem than the production of truth-effects. Foucault argues that the distinction between ideology and science crucial to Marxism relies on metaphysics, in that ideology is discussed as a mere appearance governed by something more fundamental and more substantial.³⁰ The Marxist attempt to reveal the real mechanisms of class struggle in history appears as a pre-critical metaphysic, in that it elevates a consideration of political economy, one that is basically nineteenth-century, humanist, eschatological, and Ricardian, into an unexamined transcendental principle. In sharp contrast to Foucault's claims, a year before the publication of *The Order of Things*, Althusser argues that *Capital* is "the founding moment of a new discipline, the founding moment of a science" and an altogether new "beginning of the history of a science."³¹ He claims that this new theory of history divorces itself from Hegel and aligns with Benedictus Spinoza in its "distinction between ideology and science."³² Unlike the young Marx of 1844, the mature Marx of *Capital* breaks with metaphysics not by recourse to the truth of economic categories but by its new approach to reading. According to Althusser, the materialist moment in Marx is not a better empirical grounding than his predecessors, but rather in his capacity to reveal the omissions and lacunae inherent in Smith and Ricardo's discourses.³³ In other words, Althusser and Foucault agree on a Ricardian basis for Marx's innovations, but disagree on Althusser seeing Marx's reception of Ricardo as establishing a new practice of critical reading. Ironically, Althusser credits Foucault with a similar historical methodology in his *History of Madness*, revealing "the conditions of possibility of the visible" in a discourse, but argues that Marx had made this insight possible.³⁴

Chapter 6 of *The Order of Things* concerns itself with the transfiguration from a Renaissance-era notion of intrinsic value to a Classical science of wealth, and this science's eventual dissolution in favour of a political economy of production. This chapter describes a process of abstraction, but also argues that this is not continuous or logically ordered. Modification to traditional conceptions in the history of economics creates the background for the spectacular criticisms of Marx that follow. Pausing briefly to sneer at the traditional view by which scientific economics was merely inhibited by the moral problematic relating to usury, Foucault discusses the Renaissance view of coinage, in which the "sign the coins bore was merely the exact and transparent mark of the measure they constituted."³⁵ This conception of God-given value was riddled with acknowledged problems and paradoxes, among them "Gresham's law," which realized that currency circulated faster the less it was worth.³⁶ These unanswerable is-

²⁹ Louis Althusser, *For Marx*, translated by Ben Brewster (London: Verso, 1969), 223.

³⁰ Michel Foucault, "Truth and Power," in *The Foucault Reader*, 60.

³¹ Althusser, *Reading Capital*, 15.

³² *Ibid.*, 17.

³³ *Ibid.*, 18.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 26. For an account of Althusser's reception of Foucault's *History of Madness*, see Warren Montag, "Foucault and the Problematic of Origins: Althusser's Reading of *Folie et déraison*," *Borderlands e-journal*, 4:2, 2005.

³⁵ Foucault, *The Order of Things*, 170.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

sues led to a split into two forms of value: the mark that determines money “refers to a quantity of metal that is a constant measure,” certainly, but in addition, “to certain commodities, variable in quantity and price, called metals.”³⁷ This is the beginning of a process of commodification, the prehistory of the tautological and accumulating relationship Marx identifies with money and commodities. The role of exchange was conceived as a form of similitude, with the relation between resemblance and sign similar to microcosm and macrocosm. While God established value, exchange signified the dark, human reality of desire.³⁸ Marx charts the historical victory of this black, secularized quality; this line, in his view, is contemporaneous with the eventual reduction of the role of God to being merely an opiate for the masses on the one hand, and a holy water for consecrating the burning heart of aristocrats on the other. Foucault writes,

Whereas the Renaissance based the two *functions* of coinage (measure and substitution) on the double nature of its intrinsic *character* (the fact that it was precious), the seventeenth century turns the analysis upside down: it is the exchanging function that serves as a foundation for the other two characters [...].³⁹

This inversion, which Foucault argues was the accomplishment of mercantilism, even might suggest a dialectic flavour; a chiasmus of the functionalism of character, replaced by the characteristic of function. However, he localizes this dialectical appearance to the degree that it is rendered contingent with regard to more complex shifts. For the mercantilists, money was enlisted to represent all possible wealth. Through this identification, money reveals a conventional character that avoids being arbitrary.⁴⁰ The value of gold and silver is not based on their God-given innate worth, nor because they are arbitrary stand-ins for pragmatic purposes; rather, their value rests on their adequacy for the purpose of representation.⁴¹

With each of these historical changes, there is the surface appearance of abstraction: the denigration of the material in favour of the imaginary. Foucault will not counter this appearance, but he demonstrates that at every step these alterations correspond to shifts in episteme, from resemblance to representation to anthropological measurement, rather than constituting a linear process of the victory of exchange-value over use-value. In this schema, the accumulation of capital will not be indexed to the necessary expansion of an economic base, destined to conflict with the political interests of a super-structural edifice, necessitating successive bourgeois and socialist revolutions. Rather, this accumulation, this abstracting force, is ascribed to contemporaneous shifts in philology and natural history, shifts which are abrupt and arbitrary, with no subject and no reference to the conscious minds of men or to their revolutionary will. Mercantilism is the effort to bring “reflection upon prices and money into alignment with the analysis of representations.”⁴² The frequent hyperinflations of the eighteenth century,

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid., 173.

³⁹ Ibid., 174.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 167.

⁴¹ Ibid., 176.

⁴² Ibid., 180.

buttressed by discovery of materials in the new world, lead to a redefinition of money as a pledge, associated with John Locke.⁴³ However, while this establishes value as merely a social convention, “it is also to say that it has exactly the same value as that for which it has been given, since it can in turn be exchanged for that same quantity of merchandise or the equivalent.”⁴⁴ This, then, is the invention of exchange-value. Foucault will further argue that use-value finds its place with Étienne Bonnot de Condillac, as the abandonment of a traditional notion of intrinsic merit gives way to a consideration of surplus and of demand.⁴⁵ Neither use nor exchange values are natural in the sense that they appear to be for Marx.

Althusser’s Marx as Critical Reader

In Marx’s writings, the question of the relative importance of scholarly interpretation and empirical observation is complex. Speaking of bourgeois economist failings, the Marx of *The German Ideology* called attention to their dogmatic book-learning: “As though it were the text books that impress this separation [distribution and production] upon life and not life upon the text books; and the subject at issue were a dialectic balancing of conceptions and not an analysis of real conditions.”⁴⁶ Regardless, he would have agreed that all of his tools of analysis originated in previous moments of the history of economic thought—he had only perfected those analyses. For him, the object of study is “life,” not textbooks; “real conditions,” not conceptions. Foucault argues that Marx had not grasped the truth of life or immersed himself in real conditions through his efforts on behalf of the class struggle. With Foucault, his categories will be re-imagined and artificialized; they are no longer the lucid apprehension of the nature of labour and its possibilities, but merely truths predictably produced by a regime of sciences, a regime that eventually and covertly takes the human as its object. Althusser argues that the realist concern with life championed in *The German Ideology* is superseded by *Capital’s* critical reading strategy. In Althusser’s view, Marx shows that “the production of knowledge which is peculiar to theoretical practice constitutes a process that takes place *entirely in thought*,” and that knowledge “does not work on the *real* object but on the peculiar raw material, which constitutes [...] its ‘object’ (of knowledge), and which [...] is distinct from the *real object*.”⁴⁷ In this approach, Foucault’s criticisms kick down an open door, in a manner of speaking. For Althusser, the mature Marx not only concedes, but also requires that economic theory constitutes its own domain, which needs internal criticism; diligent reading reveals the conditions of possibility governing its discourse and this revelation is itself the very distinction between science and ideology.

As well as the nature of reading and knowledge, time and history are crucial concerns for Althusser and Foucault. In Foucault’s understanding of the development of economic thought, the definition of value as a function of exchange was unsettled circulation. Rather than by intrinsic value, wealth could be best understood by the potential for exchange. With

⁴³ Ibid., 181.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 181.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 196.

⁴⁶ Karl Marx with Friedrich Engels, *The German Ideology* (New York: Prometheus Books, 1998), 7.

⁴⁷ Althusser, *Reading Capital*, 42, 43.

this, value began to rely on the representation of exchangeability.⁴⁸ At the same time, exchange-value is only provisionally wealth, while true value is created by consumption.⁴⁹ In the epistemic shift that was to occur, time became the determining variable. With the transformation associated with Smith, economic time is neither linear nor cyclical but rather “the interior time of an organic structure which grows in accordance with its own necessity and develops in accordance with autochthonous laws—the time of capital and production.”⁵⁰ According to Foucault, Marxism establishes itself as the result of the interaction of a new concern with time, in its “great” sense as history and in its “minor” sense as value as a function of labour-time; history takes its place as the “depths from which all beings emerge into their precarious, glittering existence.”⁵¹ In Foucault’s view, Ricardo and Marx depend on a continuist notion of history according to which human truth appears by means of the passage of time. For Althusser, in contrast, Marx’s historical materialism is paradoxically anti-historicist.⁵² How is this possible? Building on his claim that Marx’s materialism is a critical reading strategy rather than depending on correspondence to reality, Althusser also argues that a Marxist understanding of history is synchronic rather than diachronic.⁵³ Rather than a progressive unfolding, Marx’s history, like Foucault’s, demonstrates conditions of knowledge and possibility at a fixed moment, without a solution presenting itself as the product of natural development. For this reason, Althusser’s Marx, unlike Foucault’s presentation of the Ricardo-Marx couple, does not suggest the appearance of any human essence as a truth promised at the conclusion of a historical process.⁵⁴

Labour or Language

For Foucault, in contrast, modern economics asserts human labour as the fundamental key to history. He argues that Smith’s real significance is the displacement of labour as a concept and its function of analysis for exchangeable wealth: “analysis is no longer simply a way of expressing exchange in terms of need,” but further, “it reveals an irreducible, absolute unit of measurement.”⁵⁵ In this new schema, wealth will represent labour rather than the object of desire. Ricardo measures the common unit of labour by days of subsistence, with the quantity of labour determining value.⁵⁶ His significance lies in the quantification and temporization of labour-value. This final dispensing of the determining importance of representation in value analysis makes the cross-fertilization of economics and history possible.⁵⁷ The new political economy will establish the existence of use-value and exchange-value, the notion of value as surplus, and as a function of time. These parts form an ontology of capital for Marx, the privi-

⁴⁸ Foucault, *The Order of Things*, 190.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 194.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 225.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 219.

⁵² Althusser, *Reading Capital*, 118, 139.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 68, 107-108.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 132.

⁵⁵ Foucault, *The Order of Things*, 223.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 254.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 255.

leged historical functions of labour and life, which can be seen by the proletariat armed with science. Foucault has, in a sense, archaeologized this ontology; he has not tried to disprove it, but he has denaturalized its categories. He has not merely demonstrated that Marx found his concepts ready-made in Ricardo and Adam Smith. This could be accounted for in traditional Marxism, as the science of economics matures along with the progress of capitalism. What is disturbing is that Foucault has also shown that if these concepts spring from a lucid and correct reading of the potential of labour-time, surplus-value, and the commodity's dual qualities of use and exchange, those concepts remain prejudiced and constrained by the uncritical acceptance of these factors as essential and primary. Foucault's incisive and dogged pursuit of the formulation of these concepts, rendering them arbitrary and even outdated, is especially damning for those Western Marxists, such as humanists and existentialists, who centred their analyses on alienation. A certain absolute notion of value rooted in the toil of the labourer, measured in units of time, expropriated by the vampire bourgeoisie, is crucial to an understanding of exploitation as a form of alienation. However, as we have seen, Althusser also attacks humanism in addition to positivism and historicism as deviations from Marx's scientific insight. For Althusser, the struggle for socialism contests humanism; critical reading replaces realism and positivism; and a synchronic understanding of historical relations replaces the teleological process of history. With all of this in mind, many of Foucault's criticisms of Marx appear neutralized.

This being said, unlike Foucault, Althusser continues to posit priority for the economic dimension of history. Foucault establishes a relationship between economic thought, and the concepts of two adjacent disciplines, linguistics and biology, without privileging economic relations.⁵⁸ This calls into question the primacy of an economic base. While Marxism nurtured a relationship with biological evolutionary theory, epitomized by Engels' comparison between Marx and Charles Darwin, language was generally treated as a neutral entity. This view of language as beneath the good and evil of class war reached its canonization in Joseph Stalin's declaration that language was not a superstructure. For Stalin, language is in fact an object that anticipates the future unity of the people: "It was created not by some one class, but by the entire society, by all the classes of the society, by the efforts of hundreds of generations."⁵⁹ Therefore, language has a predominantly communicative function, consisting "not in serving one class to the detriment of other classes, but in equally serving the entire society, all the classes of society."⁶⁰ Foucault seeks to conceive language differently, as a site of contestation and violence rather than a shared space.

Foucault argues that the analysis of wealth is closely related to general grammar, and that the concept of value is analogous to the verb, but "at the same time *verb* and *noun*, power to connect and principle of analysis, attribution, and pattern."⁶¹ Monetary price theory corre-

⁵⁸ Ibid., 76.

⁵⁹ J.V. Stalin, *Marxism and Problems of Linguistics* (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, HTML version by M. and Charles Farrell, <http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/stalin/works/1950/jun/20.htm>. Access date: January 27, 2012).

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Foucault, *The Order of Things*, 200.

sponds to the analysis of roots, designation, and derivation.⁶² The Classical age strives for a perfect language. Foucault argues that this urge gives birth to the work of the Marquis de Sade. The concept of value will become the new foundation for political economy; its analogue, the verb, this principle of analysis, attribution, and pattern, will then become the foundation for a new way of speaking. Foucault is not thinking of philology, but of literature, its counter-discourse. Sade argues that in the sister novels of *Justine* and *Juliette*, the “order of discourse finds its Limit and its Law.”⁶³ Foucault notes that, in the Classical age, language “is not an exterior effect of thought, but thought itself.”⁶⁴ With modernity, “language began to fold in upon itself, to acquire its own particular density, to deploy a history, an objectivity, and laws of its own.”⁶⁵ He seeks to redress this subordinated position for language; he declares that the first book of *Capital* is nothing more than an exegesis of “value,” and not a scientific work demonstrating the historical victory of exchange-value over use-value.⁶⁶

Marx’s own comments on language are inconclusive and tantalizing. In *The German Ideology*, he argues that thought must be conceived as both material and linguistic:

The ‘mind’ is from the outset afflicted with the curse of being ‘burdened’ with matter, which here makes its appearance in the form of agitated layers of air, sounds, in short, of language. Language is as old as consciousness, language is practical, real consciousness that exists for other men as well, and only therefore does it also exist for me.⁶⁷

Marx always allowed for the materiality of language, but at the same time, language, accompanying consciousness, is always subordinate to the “materialist connection of men with one another, which is determined by their needs and their mode of production,” which is a state equally intrinsic and ahistorical to language. Marx asserts a constant and eternal reciprocal nature between consciousness (that is, language) and material needs and production. He reserves withering criticism for those who, like the Young Hegelians, are “in no way combating the real existing world,” “combating solely the phrases of this world.”⁶⁸ He considered the notion of an autonomous consciousness to be a deluded product of the original division of labor, accompanying private property, and believed that this apparent autonomy would be abolished with the elimination of that bourgeois prerogative. It is the duty of proletarian science to apprehend the correct relationship between consciousness and its material conditions of possibility, anticipating the eventual unity of these factors. For him, consciousness and language can indeed threaten the politico-economic order, but “this can only occur because existing social relations have come into contradiction with existing productive forces.”⁶⁹

We have seen that Althusser rejects the epistemological realism of *The German Ideology* as immature, replaced by the critical reading of economic knowledge presented in *Capital*.

⁶² Ibid., 202.

⁶³ Ibid., 209.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 78.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 296.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 298.

⁶⁷ Marx and Engels, *The German Ideology*, 49.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 36.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 50-51.

However, he maintains a commitment to what Engels called “determination *in the last instance*” by the economic.⁷⁰ Althusser argues for society understood as structured by a complex overdetermination of factors.⁷¹ This bears comparison to Foucault’s description of history in modernity, constituted by links between biology, economics, and philology without any of these functioning as determinate. Despite his emphasis on causality as “the *accumulation of effective determinations* (deriving from the superstructures and from special national and international circumstances),” Althusser nonetheless argues that productive capacities and class relations are, to a degree, fundamental.⁷² In contrast, Foucault does not agree that the subversive force of thought gains its efficacy by recourse to productive capacity, that is, labour and technology, against the apparatus of class power. Foucault will instead invoke as his allies Sade, Friedrich Nietzsche, Stéphane Mallarmé, Antonin Artaud, and, as will be discussed later, Gregor Mendel; solitary eccentrics, not militants endowed with the force of a class.

Biology and Class-Consciousness

Foucault considers political economy’s inspiration biology more arbitrary and suspect than Engel’s homology between Darwin and Marx allows. For Foucault, an essentially modern concern with the finitude of man draws strength from the Darwinian notion of a struggle for life: “throughout the nineteenth century, from Kant to Dilthey, and to Bergson, critical forms of thought and philosophies of life find themselves in a position of reciprocal borrowing and contestation.”⁷³ Foucault argues that Marxism indulges in an anthropology of *homo oeconomicus*, which is not true or false, but fully accounted for by the concerns and prejudices of modernity. For Ricardo and Marx, man “spends, wears out, and wastes his life in evading the imminence of death.”⁷⁴ Foucault discusses their opposing eschatologies to conclude that they are equally mired in the anthropological hollow.⁷⁵ Marx will posit a class of men who truly experience “need, hunger, and labour,” which will allow them to recognize in the apparently natural “the result of a history and the alienation of a finitude.”⁷⁶ This allows them to “re-apprehend this truth of the human essence and so restore it.”⁷⁷ Upon the success of this recovery of the truth, History will end and be replaced by a new mode of being. Foucault reduces this narrative to its schematic form as an examination of “the relations of anthropology and History as they are established by economics through the notions of scarcity and labour.”⁷⁸ He then declares that this reliance on the concept of man, the location of transcendental subjectivity, the proletariat, within an empirical given, compromises any consistent or rigorous scientificity for the discipline:

⁷⁰ Althusser, *For Marx*, 112.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 101.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 112-113.

⁷³ Foucault, *The Order of Things*, 162.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 257.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 257.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 261.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

[E]schatology (as the objective truth proceeding from man's discourse) and positivism (as the truth of discourse defined on the basis of the truth of the object) are archaeologically indissociable: a discourse attempting to be both empirical and critical cannot but be both positivist and eschatological; man appears within it as a truth both reduced and promised.⁷⁹

While Althusser's history dismisses history and eschatology, he maintains the priority of the proletarian viewpoint on different grounds. In an interview from 1968, he argues strenuously that adopting a proletarian class position is necessary for correct analysis and that most intellectuals are blinded by petit-bourgeois ideology.⁸⁰ He declares that the working class possesses a spontaneous "class instinct" that can be educated towards the proper class position, whereas intellectuals must study against the false impressions of the ideology in which they are immersed.⁸¹ This can be difficult to understand because Althusser has argued that Marxist critique takes place primarily as a strategy for reading his predecessors rather than empirical research. How can we link this emphasis on class position and struggle to Althusser's critical practice of reading? Previously, in *Reading Capital*, Althusser credits Marx's innovation not only for his innovative method of reading, but for his "direct experience of the earliest struggle organizations of the Paris proletariat."⁸² Althusser argues the correct reading strategy necessary to oppose ideology proceeds, paradoxically, from an awareness of the false totality produced by the bourgeoisie best gained by concrete experience of its exploitive nature. For this reason, he locates anti-humanist insights in the historical effects of class struggle; science is extricated from ideology by means of successes earned by the revolutionary movement.

Althusser devoted a great deal of time to the problem of humanism: its tactical value, its historical beginnings, its utility, and its ultimate falsehood. He establishes a variety of positive roles for humanism. In the immediate political context of his writing, he opposes an authentic humanism of class (advanced by China) to a revisionist people's humanism (defended by the USSR).⁸³ After pausing to defend the tactical value of Chinese class humanism, he declares that humanist ideology is the product of bourgeois domination, since it was progressive in its revolutionary phase, but reactionary in the period of advancing socialism. He argues that the socialist humanism of the young Marx, which reached its apex in the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*, was abandoned with the epistemological break of 1845, reappearing only in such compromised texts as the first book of *Capital*.⁸⁴ Most of the Marxian value theory that Foucault so aptly archaeologizes is contained here, already sharply qualified by Althusser's exacting reading. For this reason, the break Althusser identifies is ready-made for Foucault's argument. Just as Foucault opposes the critical dimension in Kant to the humanist aspect, nothing would be easier than for Foucault to oppose the anti-humanist, scientific Marx of exploitation to a modern, anthropological Marx of alienation. However, Foucault is con-

⁷⁹ Ibid., 320.

⁸⁰ Louis Althusser, *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, translated by Ben Brewster (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2001), 13-15.

⁸¹ Ibid., 13.

⁸² Althusser, *Reading Capital*, 60.

⁸³ Althusser, *For Marx*, 222.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 227.

cerned with deeper anthropological complicities. Among these complicities are those concepts most vital to Althusser: ideology and science.

As his discussion of the opposing humanisms of China and the USSR suggest, Althusser's real criticism of humanism is its false and liberal universalism, which is to be vigorously opposed by a proper class position. It is absolutely essential for him that philosophers cast off their petit bourgeois class origin through sustained and careful study and adopt the proper historical viewpoint natural to the working class. All philosophical sins proceed from a failure to properly acknowledge and combat the ideology, which pervades us and which is hostile to the correct ideas that can only be formulated and tested by class struggle.⁸⁵ Philosophy's duty is to unravel this dominant ideology on behalf of the insurrectionary class. His driving conclusion is that "in the framework of the Marxist conception, the concept 'socialism' is indeed a scientific concept, but the concept 'humanism' is no more than an ideological one."⁸⁶ Althusser has abolished humanism and replaced it with socialism, aided by proletarian science.

Archives and Founders of Discursivity

In contrast Foucault asks: "Why should Marxist practice be called scientific?"⁸⁷ In a 1972 interview, Foucault clearly states his difficulties with the concept of ideology. We can read these difficulties as his difference with Althusser, and as a microcosm of all that he wishes to distinguish himself from in Marxist practice *tout court*. First,

I believe that the problem does not consist in drawing a line between that in a discourse which falls under the category of scientificity or truth, and that which comes under some other category, but in seeing historically how effects of truth are produced within discourses which in themselves are neither true nor false.⁸⁸

This incredulity regarding any clear subordination of the false to the true avoids the claims of a scientific socialism; Foucault instead prefers a multitude of truths produced by a variety of practices, indexed by power. Foucault goes on: "The second drawback is that the concept of ideology refers, I think necessarily, to something of the order of a subject."⁸⁹ The subject Foucault refers to here is the proletariat as subject of world-history, the agent on whose behalf Althusser is a partisan. Foucault wishes to avoid this privileged subjectivity allocated to a position, a class, party, or sector. Lastly, "ideology stands in a secondary position relative to some thing which functions as its infrastructure, as its material, economic determinant, etc."⁹⁰ This third caveat is with regards to the precepts of materialism; Foucault's thought rejects economic determinism of all crude and sophisticated varieties. Later in the interview, Foucault opposes the figure of the universal intellectual, a figure he believes is transposed from a faded Marx-

⁸⁵ Ibid., 239.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 223.

⁸⁷ Quoted in Béatrice Han, *Foucault's Critical Project: Between the Transcendental and the Historical*, translated by Edward Pile (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 114.

⁸⁸ Foucault, "Truth and Power," in *The Foucault Reader*, 60.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

ism, and prefers the notion of a specific intellectual to it, circumscribed in his capacity, but immersed in the conditions of domination and resistance.⁹¹

Ideology and Power

A significant body of work has accumulated on the relationship between Foucauldian notions of biopolitics and Althusser's approach to ideological interpellation. Both Foucault and Althusser are concerned with power relations and their capacity to produce knowledge and subjects; they differ, however, in their estimation of the usefulness of the name "ideology." Nicos Poulantzas reproaches Foucault for greatly underestimating the significance of the State in determining social possibility; in his view, this misguided decentralization leads to a failure to recognize the significance of class and ideology.⁹² In contrast, Warren Montag and Jason Read view the work of Althusser and Foucault on power relations as essentially complementary. Both Foucault and Althusser reveal thinking individuals as effects rather than causes of societal institutions, their apparent liberal freedoms only concealing the context of power and domination in which they are enmeshed.⁹³ I argue that the possibility for this close comparison of the works of the 1970s partly rests on Foucault's modifications, mediated by Althusser, of his earlier harsh criticisms of Marx. In the introduction to *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, Foucault declares that the "epistemological mutation of history," of which his work is one strain, found its "first phase" in Marx.⁹⁴ He argues, however, that this radical aspect of Marx was almost entirely neglected, to the expense of other structuralist developments.⁹⁵ This recovery of potentials found in Marx, renders his later analysis of discipline possible, in that it maintains an understanding of the vital role of productive relations while avoiding the humanist eschatology of traditional Marxisms. Simon Choat writes that, "there is a kind of silent dialogue between Foucault and Althusser in the 1960s and 1970s through which the former often seems keen to distance himself from Marx and Marxism."⁹⁶ In *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, Foucault first concedes the continuing significance of Althusser's Marx. This willingness to advocate an anti-humanist Marx is the necessary precondition for his reception of Marxist ideas in *Discipline and Punish*.

While a continuous theory of history, like Hegelian Marxist theory, relies on a sovereign, conscious subject, we might find instead a "decentring operated by Marx"; a consideration of "the historical analysis of the relations of production, economic determinations, and the class struggle" which concerns human beings, but does not rely on an anthropology.⁹⁷ Marx was made humanist, but the questions of "discontinuities, systems and transformations, series

⁹¹ Ibid., 67.

⁹² Nicos Poulantzas, *State, Power, Socialism*, translated by Patrick Camiller (London: NLB, 1978), 36, 44.

⁹³ Warren Montag, "'The Soul is the Prison of the Body': Althusser and Foucault, 1970-1975," *Yale French Studies* 88 (1995), 54-56. See also Jason Read, *The Micro-politics of Capital: Marx and the Prehistory of the Present* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2003), 85-90.

⁹⁴ Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, 11-12.

⁹⁵ Althusser had already written of historical mutation; Althusser, *Early Writings*, 24.

⁹⁶ Simon Choat, *Marx through Post-Structuralism: Lyotard, Derrida, Foucault, Deleuze* (London: Continuum, 2010), 98.

⁹⁷ Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, 13.

and thresholds" found in his work would not be bound by nineteenth-century pre-critical considerations after all.⁹⁸ When discussing his predecessors, after Gaston Bachelard, Georges Canguilhem, and Michel Serres, Foucault mentions the emphasis placed on discontinuity in Althusser's thought, "which establishes a science by detaching it from the ideology of its past and by revealing this past as ideological."⁹⁹ However, Foucault is also drawing attention to his distinction from Althusser. Foucault remarks that it is this view of the break which is a much more radical discontinuity than the work of theoretical transformation he himself practices.¹⁰⁰ In this version of his thought, Marx is acknowledged as the beginning of the first phase of the epistemological "mutation" of history.¹⁰¹ However, he argues, "it took a long time to have much effect."¹⁰² This represents a certain affirmation of Althusser's thought, which had argued for a certain lag following an epistemic break. Mutation is itself Althusser's term.¹⁰³ At this moment, Foucault opposes an anthropological Marx of a continuous history, against a more true, implicitly Althusserian Marx. Foucault revisits his criticisms, now aiming them more forcefully in the direction of Sartre's Hegelian historical materialism, in which "time is conceived in terms of totalization and revolutions are never more than moments of consciousness."¹⁰⁴

A Revived Marxism

We can then read Marx's concepts in two different ways. Foucault has already described the expropriation of labour value as being wrapped up in a consideration of man as the finite being who confronts history and economics with its truth. However, surplus value and the falling rate of profit could also belong to a "quite different discursive practice," occupying an entirely different position, occurring "around the derivation of certain economic concepts, but which, in turn, defines the conditions in which the discourse of economists takes place, and may therefore be valid as a theory and a critique of political economy."¹⁰⁵ So, Marx is correct to say that political economy serves capitalism, "that it serves the interests of the bourgeois class, that it was made by and for that class, and that it bears the mark of its origins even in its concepts and logical architecture."¹⁰⁶ However, inquiring into the ways that truth is produced in class society does not take for granted that the ruling ideas are the ideas of the rulers, as Marx argued.¹⁰⁷ Instead, the ideology of capitalist society must be viewed in context of the "discursive formation that gave rise to it and the group of objects, concepts, and theoretical choices" it develops, and the other discursive practices to which it relates. In keeping with

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ Ibid., 5.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 11.

¹⁰² Ibid., 12.

¹⁰³ Althusser, *Early Writings*, 24.

¹⁰⁴ Foucault, *Archaeology of Knowledge*, 12.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 176.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 185.

¹⁰⁷ "The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas: i.e., the class which is the ruling *material* force of society is at the same time its ruling *intellectual* force." (Marx and Engels, *The German Ideology*, 67)

Foucault's critical project, it remains impossible to discriminate between a scientific discourse armed with historical truth and a class-bearer and an ideological discourse of mystification; rather, the goal continues to be a consideration of the epistemological assumptions that both the revolutionary outlook and the bourgeois worldview hold in common.

This mitigated viewpoint opens up the possibility of the accommodation with Marxism that Foucault chose in the 1970s during his alliance with the Gauche prolétarienne and the Prison Information Group.¹⁰⁸ This politically militant period for Foucault led to his work *Discipline and Punish*, which draws on Nietzsche as well as Marx. Here, Foucault follows his method of charting transformations rather than distinguishing proletarian truth from bourgeois ideology. Just as Althusser emphasized the productive as well as repressive elements of power, Foucault writes a "correlative history of the modern soul and of a new power to judge" by refusing to "concentrate the study of the punitive mechanisms on their 'repressive' effects alone" but rather intending to "situate them in a whole series of their possible positive effects."¹⁰⁹ In keeping with his previous work, he considers the juridical not as the repressive apparatus controlled by the bourgeoisie as a method of class domination, or at least not only that, but rather as a "technique of power," the "effect of a transformation of the way in which the body itself is invested by power relations."¹¹⁰ Foucault describes the transformations in punitive practices that took part in, and effected, wide-ranging alterations in the way power invested itself in the body. However for Foucault, this relationship between power and the body is not directly correlated by the State or class positions. This contrasts with Althusser, who advances a view of power as proceeding from a State that enforces class domination by both repressive and ideological means.¹¹¹

Foucault does not, however, disregard Marxist insights, nor does he strive to disprove or argue against them. He cites *Capital* with regard to the disciplinary techniques essential to capitalism.¹¹² For him, however, the prison system is not best viewed as constituting one segment of a political superstructure supported by and reproducing an economic base.¹¹³ Rather, the prison system and the maintenance of class society both depend on less easily schematized or binarized, but empirically measurable, transformations in societal considerations of bodies and power. This is why Foucault asks "Is it surprising that prisons resemble factories, schools, barracks, hospitals, which all resemble prisons?"¹¹⁴ Foucault recuperates Marxist accounts

¹⁰⁸ Macey, 84-105.

¹⁰⁹ Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, translated by Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage, 1977), 23.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 23-24.

¹¹¹ "The State is a 'machine' of repression which enables the ruling classes [...] to ensure their domination over the working class, thus enabling the former to subject the latter to the process of surplus-value extortion [...]" (Althusser, *Lenin and Philosophy*, 92) While Althusser strives to outline the more positive effects of ideological interpellation in a Marxist framework, he explicitly considers the police, courts, and prisons as belonging to the specialized repressive state apparatus.

¹¹² Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 221.

¹¹³ Marx offers a very simple account of base and superstructure in his *Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy. The Marx-Engels Reader*, second edition, edited by Robert C. Tucker (New York: W.W. Norton, 1978), 4.

¹¹⁴ Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 228.

into his own historical method, which he calls genealogy. His new history strives to rely on empirical data to the greatest possible degree, and to address itself to bodies and power as its quasi-transcendental principles. In this sense, his method is “materialist,” in that it takes account of the material body and its actions within a field of power relations, even as it might be distinct from or opposed to Marxist materialism, which considers productive relations to be fundamental.¹¹⁵

Foucault accuses the pre-Althusserian Marxist view of opposing Marx’s insight, the possible decentering of man, “the historical analysis of the relations of production, economic determinations, and the class struggle” in favour of “the search for a total history in which all the differences of a society might be reduced to a single form, to the organization of a worldview, to the establishment of a system of values, to a coherent type of civilization.”¹¹⁶ The former effects of Marxism—a historical account of productive and economic relations as driven by class struggle—describes an Althusserian account that would be invulnerable to most of the criticisms levelled against Marx in *The Order of Things*. However, as the book proceeds, Foucault offers further points which support his earlier criticisms of Marxist thought, criticisms which are now held in abeyance for tactical reasons. Foucault discusses “enunciative modalities,” rules governing the qualifications for a type of language.¹¹⁷ He defines a discursive practice as “a body of anonymous, historical rules, always determined in the time and space that have defined a given period, and for a given social, economic, geographical, or linguistic area, the conditions of operation of the enunciative function.”¹¹⁸ Between the possibility inherent in language and the post-festum corpus, Foucault uncovers an “archive”: “a practice that causes a multiplicity of statements to emerge as so many regular events, as so many things to be dealt with and manipulated.”¹¹⁹ This is nothing less than “the general system of the formation and transformation of statements.”¹²⁰ It is clear from his statements in “What is an Author?” that Marxism as well as psychoanalysis, play the roles of a specific species of archive.¹²¹

Truth and the Party

Foucault uncovers another anomalous case, not a founder of discursivity, but a renegade scientist, Gregor Mendel: “Mendel spoke of objects, employed methods and placed himself within a theoretical perspective totally alien to the biology of his time.”¹²² Invoking Georges Canguilhem, Foucault makes use of the notion of being “*dans le vrai*,” the position of being within the conditions of enunciative possibility of a given time and place: “Mendel spoke the

¹¹⁵ In one later interview, Foucault simplifies his view in a manner that bears immediate comparison to Marx’s description of base and superstructure: “The state is superstructural in relation to a whole series of power networks that invest the body, sexuality, the family, kinship, knowledge, technology, and so forth.” (Foucault, “Truth and Power,” in *The Foucault Reader*, 64)

¹¹⁶ Foucault, *Archaeology of Knowledge*, 12-13.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 50.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 117.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 130.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*

¹²¹ Foucault, “What Is an Author?,” in *The Foucault Reader*, 101.

¹²² Foucault, *Archaeology of Knowledge*, 224.

truth, but he was not *dans le vrai* (within the true) of contemporary biological discourse."¹²³ Mendel incarnates a monstrous truth, speaking the truth "in a void."¹²⁴ The choice of Mendel is not idle, because it was under Stalin's authority that Lysenko argued against apparent errors inherent in the Czech founder of genetics. Foucault's implied sympathy with Mendel, the dissident scientist, is congruous with his hostility to the notion of the party-form of knowledge. In V.I. Lenin's notion of ideological struggle, enthusiastically advanced by Althusser, correct ideas must be tempered in the hard-core of professional revolutionaries, intellectuals, and workers alike, who then must apply those ideas on behalf of the workers in the all-important test of the class struggle. The party is one means of being *dans le vrai*; ideas are stamped with their class origin, but it is possible to adopt correct ideas, whatever one's class origin, if one is sufficiently immersed in the theory and practice of the workers' movement. It was for this reason that Althusser refused to lend his support to the May 1968 student movement, and why he never broke with a party he believed Stalinized, revisionist, and autocratic.

Foucault has no time for this notion of truth-production. He instead locates the source of the intellectual grotesqueries occasionally produced by the party-form in its utopian strands, its belief in an end to history—a belief that Foucault ties to Marx's pernicious nineteenth-century inheritance and opposes to Nietzsche's overcoming of history and man with the eternal return.¹²⁵ Foucault will, however, discover a trace of truth in the Marxist notion of class struggle, in its awareness of the inherent struggle and battle that takes place upon the assumption of knowledge or truth. He admires a certain decisionism in Marxist practice; the awareness of thought as "a perilous act."¹²⁶

Can we say that it is not known by those who, in their profound stupidity, assert that there is no philosophy without political choice, that all thought is either 'progressive' or 'reactionary'? Their foolishness is to believe that all thought 'expresses' the ideology of a class; their involuntary profundity is that they point directly at the modern mode of being of thought. Superficially, one might say that knowledge of man, unlike the sciences of nature, is always linked, even its vaguest form, to ethics or politics; more fundamentally, modern thought is advancing towards that region where man's Other must become the Same as himself.¹²⁷

It is only the final clause that Foucault denounces, the attempt on the part of Marxism to heal the cleavage it has opened up by declaring that the warfare of class against class is only a means to the glorious end of socialism, conceived as a final truce and peace in the pursuit of truth. It is the prospect of this victory that Foucault attacks, as if it were an illusory ego-ideal for thought. Just as he argues that psychoanalysis recognizes itself in psychosis, Foucault seeks to shatter the imagined integrity of a solution for history.¹²⁸ On this count, Althusser agrees; the synchronic and materialist understanding of history abolishes the possibility of its

¹²³ Ibid.

¹²⁴ Ibid.

¹²⁵ Foucault, *The Order of Things*, 293.

¹²⁶ Ibid., 328.

¹²⁷ Ibid.

¹²⁸ Ibid., 376.

ultimate conclusion.¹²⁹ However, while Althusser maintains a commitment to class and ideology as crucial, Foucault argues for a much more singular possibility of truth, subtracted from these concepts.

For at least a moment, a Marxism that could accept Foucault appeared possible. However, with the violence of the criticisms articulated in *The Order of Things* in mind, it would be appear that any Foucauldian Marxism must be first Althusserian as well. An essential unity can be found between Althusser and Foucault in their insistence on the primacy of language and the mediation of discourse before an immediate understanding of bodily need, and following from this, the rejection of the question of “man” as crucial to knowledge. Indeed, Foucault sees class struggle, in the sense it is given by Althusser, as decisively refuting the unity of human nature. Foucault retains clear distance from Althusser, however, on the question of the possibility of a truly scientific critique of ideology; for him, knowledge and power relations cannot be absolutely distinguished according to categories of truth and error. More significantly, Foucault cannot abide Althusser’s attribution of the capacity of making this distinction to the Leninist party. To the extent that contemporary Marxism might be maintained after Foucault, then, we are left with two possibilities: A Foucauldian Marxism that attends to the role of class struggle while framing it in terms of the dangerous relation between power and knowledge, or a neo-Althusserianism that accepts and learns from Foucault’s attacks on the tradition while re-asserting the need for an epistemological gap between science and ideology, and calls for a political agent capable of doing so.¹³⁰

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¹²⁹ Althusser, *Reading Capital*, 132.

¹³⁰ One can recognize the former possibility in the work of Jacques Rancière, in particular *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*, translated by Julie Rose (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), and delineations of the latter in Alain Badiou, *Metapolitics*, translated by Jason Barker (London: Verso, 2006).