

Epistemological problems and ontological solutions: Bhaskar's renewal of 'Marxist philosophy of science'

Marxist philosophy has still, just as Althusser insists, largely to be constituted. Its constitution will, however, fall primarily within the realm of social ontology, and, specifically, of the ontology of class subjects (McCarney, 1989:125)

Whatever its internal weaknesses and susceptibility to critical realist critique, in recasting Marx's thinking about itself science and society, Louis Althusser made a contribution of decisive importance. The Althusserian legacy demands nothing less than the most thorough-going critical reappraisal today. (Bhaskar, 1991: 183)

Abstract

This paper attempts to shed new light on the relations between Althusser's 'Structural Marxism' and the 'Critical Realist' philosophy of Roy Bhaskar. Like Althusser, Bhaskar shares an overarching preoccupation with human emancipation, and believes the sciences to be necessary, though not sufficient, conditions for flourishing human relations. Bhaskar also shares with Althusser a conception of reality as being 'complexly structured', and of a Marxist science dedicated to uncovering objective social structures. Here though is where the similarities end. For while Althusser ultimately remained trapped within a positivist problematic and a broadly epistemological problem field; Bhaskar follows the iconoclastic Marx in championing the primacy of being over thought and subsequently the primacy of ontological enquiry over epistemology. This, we argue, leads Bhaskar onto far more realist ground than Althusser ever managed to achieve, and ultimately dictated more comprehensive answers to the questions that Althusser set himself in his 'classic phase'. For Althusser, 'epistemological breaks' were the bedrock of an emerging science as they guaranteed the authenticity of science in absolute terms. For Bhaskar, such breaks served as a staging post for a radically new philosophy of science, as they signified that the privileged link between subject and object was definitively severed. Althusser begins and ends within Marxist theory and so fails in his bid to provide the latter with secure philosophical foundations. Bhaskar moves from a philosophical ontology through the physical sciences to the social sciences (Marxism)-provisionally anchoring each in a process that begins with a radical shift in problematic and ends with a more secure basis for Marxist social science.

Introduction

The central claims of this paper are thoroughly modernist and simple to relay. In the first instance the paper will argue for the ability of human beings to reorient their world through social praxis. In the second, it contends that knowledge in general, and the sciences in particular are human creations to be used primarily in the service of human liberation. Putting these together, we find that *in order to change the world we must be able to understand it* and thus we have a powerful dialectic between scientifically informed praxis and theory. Practice without understanding is aimless and irresponsible; theory without practice-abstract and idealist. Being modernist in its pretensions, the paper

is also Marxian in orientation, and yet in its writing the authors are aware of the dangers of a performative contradiction that must now be acknowledged. Specifically, this paper is being written in academic language for an audience that will in all likelihood be primarily academic, and so the question of relevance must be broached? Hopefully the paper will demonstrate this in due course. But again the central premise is that to abandon theory, is to abandon a primary strategic means for influencing the direction of social change. Moreover, it must be remembered that we are far from alone in this predicament. Indeed, the paper partly trades on a historical contradiction that emerged between Marxist theory and socialist praxis as part of the bourgeois separation of mental and manual workers. For 'non-oppositional discourses' this separation is largely unremarkable. For Marxists, however, it is fatal. After all, how can we hope to change the world if the primary agents of social change (the proletariat) are radically detached from a scientific understanding of their historical role? Clearly we need more than a theoretical paper to address an issue that will primarily be answered in historical practice. And yet there is also no doubt that (whether we like it or not) epistemological issues help to colour the nature of one's politics or that the relations between knowledge and the world (epistemology) and science and socialist strategy (politics) are inextricably linked. With this in mind our paper will generally engage in second order questions, but always with concrete considerations as its guiding star. This of course is not the first such attempt and as we move forward we are reminded that every philosophical enquiry inevitably runs the risk of idealism, moving as it does in the realms of the abstract. Be that as it may, we feel that it is absolutely vital that Marxism have a coherent and fully worked out philosophy of science and we hope to persuade the reader that this can be found in a constructive synthesis of the best of what Marx had to say updated with the early work of Bhaskarian critical realism.

The Althusserian interlude

Althusser is, in many ways, central to our story. Like our own, his aim was to furnish Marxism with worked out relations between philosophy, science, ideology and practice. In addition, Althusser's structuralist reading of Marx surely stands as one of most important theoretical antecedents for critical realism. Finally, in the limitations of this

‘structuralist’ project we find an enlightening example of the continuing battle that realist philosophy faces from all manner of idealist adversaries. Indeed, it is telling that when they emerged, many of the most anti-Marxist positions (post-modernism, post-structuralism, post-Marxism) coalesced around a number of his erstwhile followers, and coincided with the ultimate failure of his project.¹ As is well known, postmodern ‘discourses’ essentially invert the rational and optimistic message of modernity. For if the enlightenment was founded on the clarion call of ‘daring to know’ (*Sapre Aude*), our postmodern condition could best be described as ‘daring to accept that knowing (at least decisively) is beyond us’.

Descartes’ consciousness may well have been enough to assuage his skepticism. Today however, it is precisely because we *think* that we are *not sure*, as all around us we are told that knowledge is partial, fallible and endlessly revisable. How has this situation come about? Conceiving the question narrowly, one may well point to the abject failings of the French Communist party in 68’ or to the epistemological limitations of Althusserianism as likely candidates for the French intellectual Lefts’ mass abandonment of (Marxist) revolutionary theory.² In a broader sense, however, it now seems inevitable that societies that had overthrown centuries of dogma in the name of ‘reason’ would eventually come to interrogate the very means of this great revolution. Once one begins to chisel away at foundations, it is not at all surprising that they are eventually weakened. And yet this still leaves unanswered the burning question of how it was that the ‘postist left’ turned so dramatically from a voice that exalted reason in the name of social progress, to a regressive voice for the status quo? One (specifically Marxist) way to think about this question is to link epistemological assertions with their real world implications, and in this context it is easy to dismiss postmodernism as merely the preserve of rarified elites—themselves the result of the aforementioned separation of mental from manual workers. Postmodernism is, on this account, both an instance of reason illegitimately abstracted from the material world (akin to reasoning oneself into a situation that one can’t then

¹ Here we are specifically thinking about Hindess and Hirst, Laclau and Mouffe, and Resnick and Wolff. See Meisken Wood (1986) for an account of the idealist legacy of post-Althusserianism.

² See Ross (yr) for an interesting account of the French intellectual left’s mass abandonment of class theory post 1968.

reason oneself out of) and premised on the very success that humans have had in applying themselves (practically and intentionally) to nature.³ It follows, moreover, that to remain entrenched on the so-called ‘problem of knowledge’ is essentially to engage in an idealistic non-sequitur, engendered in the main by mistaken accounts of subjects and objects.⁴

Now while this position is fundamentally correct, it does leave certain issues unresolved. For example, while every realist would champion the existence of a knowable world, this is hardly enough. After all, positivists of all shades would fully accept this position, and in consequence, we need more than a generic realism to challenge the postmodernists. Indeed, if Marx’s own theoretical practice is to teach us anything, it is that empirical reality is often opaque and it follows that we need a *depth realism* of ontological and historical investigations designed to *uncover* real world structures through scientific labour. Despite this, the exact role of ontology has rarely been broached in the (Western) Marxist tradition, and as Bhaskar (1991) has suggested, this has left it prone to both positivist (Colletti, Althusser) and idealist (Lukacs, Gramsci, Althusser) excess. A second issue stems from the ontological one and hinges on the relations of socialist theory and practice. Specifically, how one understands the world, must, it seems to us, impact on their political strategy. Too much structure (as in the Althusserian universe) and one is liable to feel emasculated in the face of it. Too little, and one tends to overestimate the power of agency to the detriment of strategic praxis. Finally, despite a robust resistance to postmodernism, Marxism has not completely escaped its influence and this brings us to our final issue, which is to chart the relations between science and all forms of idealist ideology. Althusser again provides our staging post, and while many commentators have (not unreasonably) been quick to see residues of Althusserianism in critical realism, the decisive difference is that Althusser went first. Going first can be a virtue of course. But it can also allow those that come behind to learn from your mistakes, and in the case of

³ After all without the successful application of knowledge to the material world, the conditions that have allowed groups of people to earn their living exclusively by ‘thinking’ would never have arisen.

⁴ Specifically we believe that the problem of knowledge has been massively foregrounded by the idealist conception of subjects as radically separated from objective reality, and of the positivist insistence of seeing objects as external to a subject that then attempts to observe them. This argument will be taken up in more detail below.

Althusserianism the lessons are everywhere. Indeed to utilize an Althusserian metaphor, the difficulties were *'overdetermined'* as each problem seemed to result from, and be dialectically related to another. However, be that as it may, we believe that the central weaknesses can all be elicited if one starts with Althusser's *strategy*, as this exposes the key determinant of all subsequent difficulties, namely *Althusser's copious borrowings from bourgeois theory, themselves born of a singular inability to move beyond his own (epistemological) problem field into a novel (practico-ontological) problematic*. For Althusser, Marx's genius lay in just such a shift of problematic, and whilst we do not claim an equivalent achievement for Bhaskar, we do believe that he at least shows the way forward philosophically. If we are right, critical realism can provide the means to successfully complete the Althusserian project and in the process side-step (while enervating) the post-modern debate.

Section One

Marx's 'epistemological break'

Rarely has there been a programme so rigorously laid out as that of 'Structural Marxism'. For Althusser, Marxist theory was essential to working class struggle only to the extent that it could provide a cogent analysis of historical reality. To the extent that it fell short, Marxism was compromised, and Althusser was prepared to brook no prisoners in weeding out offending elements. Specifically, this meant engaging in a double intervention-designed to, on the one hand, draw a line of demarcation between Marxist science and subjectivist ideologies (confronting Marx with Hegel); and on the other hand, between the true theoretical basis of Marxist science, and its prehistory in an essentially Feuerbachian problematic (FM: 12-13). While they are differentiated by Althusser himself, both demarcations are ultimately tied to an 'epistemological break' that supposedly inaugurated Marxism as the science of history. This event occurred, moreover, precisely in the moment when Marx came to see Feuerbach as merely the material inversion of Hegel, and in his famous settling of accounts, rejected the problematic of individuals/human essences for one of structural complexity (FM: 227). As such, it was precisely in the struggle against the Hegelian influence of his youth that historical materialism was born. But if this is the case then the 'epistemological break'

between the early and late Marx (second demarcation) is precisely the site of the most explicit confrontation with Hegel (first demarcation) as Marxism transformed from humanist ideology into a science of structure.

That this was controversial in no way deterred Althusser. Indeed for him, dissensus actually validated his role as internal house-keeper, as he traced its origins to the historicist and humanist aberrations mentioned above. Marxism must look long and hard at itself, and this must begin with a new appreciation of where its efficacy lies, viz. in its *structural analysis of social reality*. Why has this not come out before? Althusser believes that the philosophy necessary to perceive it was similarly born in the 'epistemological break' only to remain in promissory form without a theoretical job of labour (his own) designed to bring it to light. Thus it is, that dialectical materialism is charged with retrospectively pinpointing the moment in which a science emerges from its ideological prehistory, and with constructing novel philosophical concepts adequate to thinking this rupture in truly scientific terms (RC: 75). Once active, dialectical materialism becomes indispensable as it provides the formal conditions for satisfactory theoretical elaboration (second order knowledge) (FM: 170) and the criteria to distinguish the scientific from the ideological. Marxist science (historical materialism) is therefore to be validated internally by Marxist philosophy (dialectical materialism), and while that may well set off idealist alarm bells in many readers, Althusser remained convinced that such was the power of the Marxist framework that it alone could pull it off;

That Marxism can and must itself be the object of the epistemological question, that this epistemological question can only be asked as a function of the Marxist theoretical problematic...Marxism is the only philosophy that theoretically faces up to this test (FM: 39).

This, unfortunately, is hopelessly circular, as Althusser ends up with a self-referential system, wherein the philosophy necessary to validate the scientificity of Marxism is simply unavailable until that science itself has developed. Indeed, the very act of invoking this philosophy assumes that which needs to be proven as Benton (1984) rightly suggests. How can we account for such a lapse? One answer would be to indict Althusser

the *Marxist philosopher* for placing too much trust in his craft. However, this would be to miss a far more fundamental problem, which is that Althusser is not only staying within Marxism, but within a Western Marxism that is centrally preoccupied with epistemological questions—chief among them the problem of knowledge.⁵ As such, he is duty bound to address the cognitive adequacy of Marxist knowledge, and this is only magnified through his insistence on addressing it in positivist terms. Specifically, Althusser erects an eternal dualism between science and ideology, wherein ideology becomes a universal ‘other’ to be opposed, at every juncture, to a science that is sacrosanct. This immediately foregrounds the importance of guarantees, for if science is the keystone, it is left floundering without a philosophy to legitimate it. This, then, is the absolutely essential role for dialectical materialism, and it remains to be said that if a vicious circularity is the manifest effect of a defective strategy. The strategy itself is dictated, at least in part, by an *epistemological field* and a *positivist problematic* that Althusser never managed to escape.

Structural Problem (atic)’s

Structure is omnipotent in Althusser, and in the theoretical field, structural determination is captured by the idea of an overarching framework (problematic) that relates the terms of a thinker in such a way as to determine their specific meanings.⁶ According to Althusser, *a philosopher thinks in it, rather than of it* (FM: 69), as it determines both the questions that can be asked and the solutions that can be gained. The act of seeing is therefore dependent on the structural conditions of the problematic (RC: 20-25) and this consideration is decisive in moving beyond the express intentions of authors, to a problematic that determines the types of solutions they are likely to achieve and what will remain opaque no matter how rigorously they apply themselves.⁷ Moreover, each problematic forms part of a larger theoretical (ideological) field to which it must be dialectically related if a satisfactory exposition of any thinker is to emerge. Indeed, it is only by unearthing the problematic and relating it to its larger theoretical (or ideological)

⁵ Reference how the problem of knowledge is key for Althusser

⁶ Alienation in the early and late Marx is an example here. Another one could be taken from neoclassical economics structurally unable to see exploitation.

⁷ See RC (20-28), FM (66-70)

field that one can hope to situate (and comprehend) theoretical programmes, and assess the merits (and novelty) of their analysis

Understanding an ideological argument implies, at the level of ideology itself, simultaneous, conjoint knowledge of the ideological field....Knowledge of the ideological field itself presupposes knowledge of the problematics compounded or opposed in it (FM: 70 emphasis in original).⁸

To concretize this talk of fields and problematics, Althusser again refers to the 'epistemological break', but now in more detail, as he charts the relations between Marx and his bourgeois predecessors in political economy (Smith and Ricardo). Althusser specifically locates Marx's originality not in his answers, but in the novelty of the questions he developed (FM: 29). Moreover, he was able to pose these questions precisely because he effected a change of problematic, and from this vantage point it became obvious that the classical economists had never managed to solve their difficulties around value theory (*the value of labour*), because the question they posed was a non sequitur. What was needed was a change in theoretical horizon, and once this was achieved, Marx could see what the classical economists necessarily could not; an answer had been given to a question that was never properly posed, and could only be corrected with the insertion of the proper question, viz. *what is the value of labour-power*, for the previously developed answer; *the value of the subsistence goods necessary for the maintenance and reproduction of the labourer* (RC: 20-25).

Is there to be an analogous shift on the plane of philosophy? A priori, we could be forgiven for expecting one. But this would be to forget that Marxism was, for Althusser, both the object of an epistemological question and the means for answering it (FM: 39). By courtroom analogy, Marxism is thus to serve as both defendant and prosecutor and Althusser knew that sooner or later he would have to look outside the courtroom to substantiate the case. Specifically, he turned to *historical epistemology* and *structuralism*, and in a subtle maneuver, tried to pass off their contributions as implicit in Marx.⁹ This

⁸ This also holds for theoretical problematics and theoretical fields etc.

⁹ Reference this

however, is not sustainable. For although Marx was never slow to acknowledge his debts to bourgeois theory, the latter only ever served as a staging post on the way to affecting a radical shift in problematic.¹⁰ Indeed, it is actually Althusser who reverses this procedure, as his own problematic was thoroughly reliant on bourgeois imports, and remained exclusively within the dominant ideological field. According to Lipietz (1993) for example, the Althusserian's were thoroughly at ease with identifying the French university system as the appropriate site for the development of Marxist thought, and it is hard to disagree, given the lack of a 'class break' with French epistemology (Bachelard, Calluillheim, Koyre etc) and the weakness of the 'break' with bourgeois structuralism. Immersion in the academy is further substantiated by Anderson (1976) who argues that Althusserianism developed against the wider back drop of Western Marxism,¹¹ and adopted many of its thematic problems. In particular, Anderson notes that Western Marxism was born in the wake of a defeat for the Western working class, and that this dovetailed with the monopolisation of knowledge within bourgeois universities to produce a Marxism that was mainly philosophical in character and dominated by professional philosophers.¹² With knowledge as their currency, it is unsurprising that epistemology dominated, and Althusserianism was both a reaction against humanist (and historicist) variants of the philosophical turn, and a continuation of it. It too dwelt exclusively on epistemological terrain, and while there were certainly advances in terms of the re-appropriation of the importance of science; this could never be substantiated without a *realist philosophy of science*, and a shift in conceptual framework from *epistemology to ontology* (a real epistemological break as it were). Ontological enquiry

¹⁰ This indeed is exactly the point made by Althusser in relation to the bourgeois economists. Strange then that while Althusser was extremely alert to the limitations of bourgeois theory in many of its guises he felt the need to unproblematically import large swathes of it from the historical epistemologists (Vilar) makes this point too.

¹¹ McCarney's (1989) also concurs with assessment, viz "what chiefly remains...of Althusser's thought... is the overwhelmingly epistemological character of his philosophical project and the specific shape his epistemology takes. In this context he emerges as a quintessentially western Marxist thinker". (McCarney, 1989: 122)

¹² Anderson draws up a list of the thirteen most prominent Marxists in the western tradition, nine of whom were professional philosophers and a further two who were extremely predisposed to philosophical enquiry. The list is obviously subjective and open to debate, but seems reasonably uncontroversial: K.Korsch, T. Adorno, H. Marcuse, M. Horkheimer, L. Althusser, G. Della Volpe, L. Colletti, H. Lefebvre, L. Goldmann, G. Lukács, A. Gramsci, W. Benjamin, and J. P. Sartre The first nine were the professional philosophers while Lukács and Sartre were those non-professionals who were nonetheless very predisposed to philosophical enquiry. What is more with the exception of Gramsci all came from bourgeois families far removed from the daily experiences of the working class

would have offered an external reference point to anchor epistemology, and helped to immunise Althusser's philosophy against the influences of positivism.¹³ As it was however, Althusser was trapped by the unconscious presuppositions of his own theoretical field, and in a manner analogous to the classical economists, continually faced inextricable contradictions while he remained within its structure. This finally constituted Althusser's own 'non-vision in vision', (RC: 21) decisively determining the forms in which his problems had to be posed (RC: 25) and ultimately, the invalidity of his solutions. To substantiate this we move in the next section to the core of the Althusserian intervention for scientific Marxism.

Science against ideology

Science is the keystone of Althusser's system. It provides the standard of authenticity; the object of investigation; and the central motivation for philosophical intervention. Scientific practice is the sole means to authentic knowledge, and in the case of the workers movement this consideration is decisive. Marxism must be scientific, and Marx's achievement (his theoretical revolution) must be conceived in the same way as Galileo's in the physical sciences (FM: 14). How to distinguish the scientific from the ideological? This question sustains the entire enterprise; and (under an unacknowledged positivist influence) Althusser believes his project stands or falls on its ability to provide clear means of demarcation, and further, on its ability to reorient the Marxist tradition in light of this.¹⁴ The dualism between science and ideology thus becomes all important. For as long as ideology functions as a universal 'other', science appears as a special realm of knowledge exempt from ideological distortions, provided it complies with scientific method (Larrain, 1979: 192). Moreover once established, this (science: ideology) relation became progressively reinforced, as Althusser continually perceived the scientific basis of Marxism being threatened by internal aberrations.

Aberrations that could be seen, for example, in the orthodox distortion of Marxism as it moved from 'oppositional discourse' to 'Stalinist orthodoxy' in the hands of the Soviet's.

¹³ After all, ontological investigation immediately foregrounds the importance of starting with the real.

¹⁴ Reference this

Althusser's firmly believed that Marxist theory must not be treated as a slave to tactical political decisions, and his own work was designed partly as a register of protest against this subversion;

Ideology takes its meaning from the current interests in whose service it is subjected...: unlike science, an ideology is both theoretically closed and politically supple and adaptable. It bends to the interests of the times (RC: 141-2).¹⁵

If political manipulation was the hallmark of 'objectivist distortion'; Althusser also perceived great dangers in subjectivist ideologies, particularly those of a historicist and/or empiricist origin (FM: 12). In the case of historicism, Althusser argued that despite appearing complex and differentiated, each totality is ultimately homogeneous (ibid: 94), with every element standing in relation to the others, and to the social totality that contains them. Gone is the base and superstructure model of orthodoxy, but rather than increasing the complexity of the system, (Hegelian) historicism reduces it, leaving every practice (including science) as an expression of some internal essence determined within the whole. Neither inversion, nor extraction, can alter this important reality, and for Althusser this is decisive in rejecting all attempts by historicist Marxists to simply turn the Hegelian dialectic onto its feet (FM 108-9). Indeed, it was precisely in rejecting this Hegelian (Feuerbachian) problematic that Marx's great theoretical revolution lay.

The critique of empiricism is closely bound up with the critique of the humanist subject. Yet again, however, the universal 'otherness' of ideology is central as Althusser argues that ideology is pervasive in the lived experiences of the masses and theoretical ideologies are merely a subset of the forms of conditioning imposed on the masses from without. We saw earlier that (theoretical) ideology is unlike science in being governed by extra theoretical interests, and this can now be generalized by taking account of the dialectical relation between strictly theoretical ideologies and the lived experiences of the masses. On the one hand, pure observation of the empirical realm is irredeemably ideological and this leads to a trenchant attack on the pretensions of empiricism to gain

¹⁵ Give the footnote in Collier also.

knowledge from a purportedly unmediated confrontation with the real (RC: 43). On the other hand, theoretical ideologies (whether empiricist or not) feed back into the lived experiences of the masses by providing sets of conceptual means with which to understand the world. Science, if it is to be possible at all, must be above the taint of empiricism and this entails a radical separation between theory and the world.¹⁶ It must, moreover, (in implication at least) be above the class struggle, radically pushed into a space where neither politics, nor ideology, nor empiricism can contaminate it.

Section Two

The Bachelardian influence

Two issues are central to understanding the nature of Althusser's reliance on the historical epistemology. The first is the specific temporality of the project. It occurs late in the day, and must therefore challenge the authority of *pre-established* interpretation(s) of Marxism (Benton 1984). The second is its philosophical entry point, which determines that any attempt at restructuring will not appeal to novel empirical evidence, but will be done from within the tradition itself. Starting within pre-constituted knowledge, the task for Althusser is to shed new light on an oft seen object; to explicate the unexpected through the symptomatic nature of his enquiry. Yet this 'synchronic' analysis of given problematics (provided by structuralism) must ultimately be supplemented with a diachronic dimension, capable of accounting for the historical development of epistemology. *How does a given problematic emerge? What is the relationship between problematics? Is there historical continuity in their development? If breaks occur, what is the corresponding cognitive status of the discipline?* These are all questions that must be grappled with, and in the historical epistemology of Gaston Bachelard, Althusser finds ready-made a set of *conceptual* tools capable of answering them.¹⁷

¹⁶Althusser enigmatically phrases this as a separation between the '*real object*' and the '*object of knowledge*' (RC: 41).

¹⁷Reference Althusser's reliance on Bachelard

For Bachelard science is a revolutionary process, marked by the rejection of outmoded problematics and their replacement by new theoretical *constructs* (Benton, 1984: 25).¹⁸ Construction implies creativity, and Bachelard draws on recent developments in the philosophy of science to argue for a distinctly human element in the development of science. Empirical reality is underdetermined and scientific theory must therefore contain an irreducibly creative element, wherein the scientist actively labours to produce theory. Indeed, for Bachelard this creative element is exhaustive, as science has no object outside its own activity and so becomes authenticated on the basis of intersubjectivity (Bhaskar, 1975: 51). As a revolutionary process, the trajectory of science is also inherently open and the initial ‘epistemological break’ is particularly important as it signifies that a science is born in a historical rupture that leads to a transformation in cognitive status. Science emerges from a ‘web of error’, but in its fledgling state it must be protected from ‘epistemological obstacles’ that would seek to impede its progress. Many of these obstacles are manifest as common-sense and so Bachelard sustains an important dualism between scientific and common sense understandings of the world. This then entails an important role for philosophy, which emerges as an aspect of the self-same epistemological rupture, and is uniquely equipped to underlabour for science by distinguishing what is truly scientific within a post-revolutionary science (Benton, 1984: 25).

The benefits for Althusser are obvious, as remaining within Marxism suggests the need for conceptual means to (re) analyse its historical trajectory and to disrupt the canonical interpretations of his opponents (Benton 1984). No longer, is it sufficient to isolate individual quotations or concepts in support of one’s particular thesis. Rather, strict attention must be paid to the problematic that conditions the nature of a thinkers output, often without their being fully aware of it. Marx himself is only partly aware of his own great innovation, and yet its full significance is readily discernible if one only knows how to search for it.¹⁹ Reading symptomatically,²⁰ Althusser argues that the works of 1845

¹⁸ The analysis of the relations between Bachelard and Althusser presented here relies heavily on Benton (1984).

¹⁹ Reference this

²⁰ Quote for symptomatic reading.

constitute a historical rupture in the development of Marx's thought, in-as-much as they play witness to a decisive shift in the nature of his object. Marxist science is born precisely because Marx inaugurates a novel object of investigation and simultaneous with this development is the birth of dialectical materialism (FM: 33). Indeed, it is in this 'unearthing' that Althusser's own claim to originality lies, as he purports to disclose the specificity of historical materialism via a more complete elaboration of dialectical materialism. Any originality must, however, be tempered in light of the level of intellectual debt that Althusser owes to Bachelard. Indeed the latter's influence can be seen to have impacted in at least four significant ways.²¹

- In the first instance Bachelard's focus on the emergence of a science, offers Althusser ready made tools to conceive the moment that Marxism proper emerges.
- In the second, he provides Althusser with an account of the trajectory that an ideology must take on its way to becoming a fully fledged science.
- In the third, he imparts relevance to Althusser's project by arguing that it is only *after* the rupture that the 'tissue of errors' that characterized the prehistory of a science can be described (Bhaskar 1975: 50).
- Finally, the *historical* element of historical epistemology offers a temporal criterion with which to relegate the early (humanist) works to the status of ideological pre-history (FM: 34).

There is however, paradox here; as one of the principle benefits of *historical* epistemology, viz. the ability to see science as produced by historically situated individuals, is disregarded by Althusser as problematic. Indeed, it is telling that all his particular borrowings from historical epistemology are firmly rooted in the latter of the two terms. Marxism was born in an *epistemological break not a historical one*, and Althusser continually highlights the programmatic and cognitive elements of Bachelardian conventionalism while any historical analysis of Marxism as a discourse

²¹ Benton agrees that Bachelard was most important intellectual source.

born in the milieu of industrialization and proletarian formation is conspicuous by its absence.²²

The (epistemological) Object of *Capital*

If *For Marx* was the initial statement of Althusser's philosophical intentions, *Reading Capital* was the site of its first real application. Althusser had initially looked outwards to establish the importance of scientific discontinuity, and now it was time to establish the Marxist pedigree of the 'epistemological break' by applying it to Marx himself. This specifically meant eliciting the nature of the object of *Capital* (RC: 74); for although the rupture from may have occurred earlier (in 1845), the innovative object was only truly established in that momentous work. Reading symptomatically, Althusser sets the problem in terms of a radical break from the object of bourgeois political economy and so we initially find him posing the question in terms of contrasts;

What, strictly speaking, is the nature of the object whose theory we get from *Capital*? Is it Economics or History? And specifying this question, if the object of *Capital* is economics, precisely what distinguishes this object in its concept from the object of Classical Economics (Althusser, 2006: 74).

Economists (and most Marxists!) had frequently taken this object for granted, viz. capitalist society. But this option was simply not open to a philosopher who understood that "knowledge of the real is not reached by immediate contact with the 'concrete' but by the production of the *concept* of that object" (ibid: 182). To be consistent this object must be novel (if it is to inaugurate a scientific revolution) and allow for deeper conceptual understanding. But if this is the case, a straightforward reading of *Capital* as an economic treatise is horribly misguided. The object of *Capital* is neither political economy (idealist) nor the economy itself (the real), but a novel theoretical problematic

²² Althusser's anxiousness to remove the process of science from the messy confines of historical reality is one of the many unacknowledged positivist influences on his work. Specifically, while he rejects the idea that science is an enterprise born of the unproblematic recording of external reality, he does accept that science must be above the taint of the individual and institutional prejudice. We broach this issue more fully below.

designed to appropriate the real, if only in the last instance.²³ Moreover, what Marx actually achieves in his *epistemological* revolution (ibid: 182), is a change in the conceptual structure of political economy, which renders the classical paradigm obsolete whilst transforming the scientific status of the discipline. To capture the extent of Marx's achievement it is necessary to remember the difference that a change in theoretical structure delivers, and Althusser does this with a discussion of the different stages involved in theoretical production. Specifically, he argues that knowledge is an iterative processes made up of three stages or Generalities. Contra empiricism, the first of these is never 'concrete reality' but rather is sets of existing concepts that are partly scientific (being the outcomes of previous iterations) and partly ideological (FM: 184).²⁴ Practice presupposes transformation, and in the case of theory, Generalities I are transformed into Generalities III (knowledge, or more correctly scientific concepts embodying knowledge), using a theoretical means of production (Generalities II) (FM: 185). This of course, is the theorists 'problematic' and as the *means of scientific production* it is crucial, both in *determining* the nature of the resulting knowledge, and in being *determinate* of the field in which the problems of a science must be posed. It follows, moreover, that if Marx can see further than the Classicals' it is not because 'he is standing on their shoulders', but because he has completely changed the direction of his gaze, aided all the while by new theoretical lenses.

Thought and Reality

If the 'object of knowledge' is *absolutely* distinct from the real concrete (RC: 40-42), the obvious question becomes how can we be sure of its scientific authenticity?²⁵ In *For Marx*, Althusser addresses this question in relatively Marxian fashion, arguing that the

²³ This phrase is borrowed from Geras (1979).

²⁴ "In the development of an already constituted science, the latter works on a raw material (Generality I) constituted either of still ideological concepts or of scientific facts...which belong to an earlier phase of the science (an ex Generality III)" (FM: 184).

²⁵ Geras (1972) makes an acute observation regarding a change in the status of the 'object of knowledge' from *For Marx* when it is ultimately the 'real concrete', to *Reading Capital* where it becomes little more than a complex of concepts (problematic); viz. "In *For Marx* a distinction is made between the concrete-in-thought and the real concrete, and the latter is, that which is to be known by theory, the *object of knowledge*. In *Reading Capital* this is no longer the case. To be sufficiently sharp the same distinction now seems to require that the object of knowledge should be not the real-concrete, not the real object, but a different object, itself completely distinct from these. The object of knowledge is now situated within the realm of theoretical practice and is a theoretical object, a concept or complex of concepts (Geras, 1972: 65).

very framing of the question is ideological, as the quest for guarantees could only arise within an idealistic framework which had problematised reality in the first place.²⁶ By *Reading Capital* however, a distinctly Bachelardian influence is again in evidence as Althusser proclaims that,

theoretical practice is its own criterion, and contains in itself definite protocols with which to validate the quality of its product...once they are truly constituted and developed they have no need for validation from external practices (Althusser, 2006: 59).

Recall that science is the paradigm of authentic knowledge in Bachelard, but it neither works on an object outside itself, nor seeks validation from external practices. For Lecourt (1975), this actually makes Bachelard's position authentically materialist as it seems to reject the problem of knowledge simply by arguing that the "truth of a scientific truth imposes itself by itself" (Lecourt, 1975: 12). However as Larrain (1979) has cogently noted, this route is not strictly open to Bachelard given the dualism that he imposes between the authentic world of the scientific community, and the contaminated world of experience. In particular, he points out that Marxist's generally dismiss the 'problem of knowledge' on the basis that it cannot be solved by pure thought alone, but finds its solution in the dialectic between human praxis and the external world. For Marx, the object of knowledge was a *result* because it was mediated by human practice, but the real was for all this, the only authentic object of knowledge (Larrain, 1979: 198). For Bachelard (and Althusser) this is no longer the case, as the object of knowledge is a *result* because it is produced using an authentic means of production, and this is confirmed by the idea that the real survives in its independence outside the head, being radically unchanged by theoretical practice (RC: 41).²⁷ With this insistence on separating knowledge from the real, Althusser is in real danger of undermining his whole

²⁶ "That the concrete-in-thought...is the knowledge of its object (the concrete real) is only a difficulty for the ideology which transforms this reality into a so-called 'problem' (the Problem of knowledge).

²⁷ Larrain goes on to suggest that Lecourt's mistake is compounded by seeing in Bachelard an anti-positivism premised on a rejection of verification. Indeed, for Larrain this just transforms the position into an a priori form of positivism; "one of the features of positivism is precisely its postulate that scientific knowledge is the paradigm of valid knowledge, a postulate that indeed is never proved nor intended to be proved. So what Bachelard and Althusser consciously propound, in the sense that scientific truth imposes itself by itself, is precisely and nothing less than the a priori of positivism (Larrain, 1979: 197).

endeavour, for he has still to answer the fundamental question of the relation of (Marxist) knowledge to the world. Moreover, an unacknowledged positivism is again in evidence as Althusser's ontology is implicitly one of subjects confronting external objects. Albeit our 'subject' is now the *object* of knowledge, standing opposed to the real object(ive) world. Finally, in his attempts to grapple with the 'problem of knowledge' Althusser continually came up against the limits of historical epistemology and was forced to look elsewhere for a solution. We spoke earlier of a paradox in his dealings with historical epistemology. Now, however, we see that Althusser's self-imposed restriction to epistemology made perfect sense; for to accept the historicity of knowledge on Bachelardian terms is essentially to give up the apodictic status of its object and to fail as a Marxist-materialist.

Bhaskar (1975) highlights the revolutionary implications of Bachelard's focus on scientific discontinuity as this helped to snap the privileged relationship between thought and objects. Prior to this science was presumed to be monistic with thought acting as little more than an epiphenomenon of nature. With radical scientific change, however, this account was no longer tenable as the history of the 'actually existing sciences' could only be rendered intelligible by accommodating creative subjectivity. While illuminating the significance of agency fell to subsequent epistemologists, Bachelard himself would have balked at the relativism that emerged from their writings.²⁸ However once the unique relationship between subject and object was severed, it was almost inevitable that his own epistemology would lose its anchor in reality. After all, any creativity in his framework was quarantined from the taint of historical reality to the scientific city. Indeed, it is noteworthy that both he and Althusser are totally reliant on the initial break of a science, but thereafter are almost completely silent on the changes that take place once a science is established.²⁹ In Bachelard's case such changes must be done by convention within a scientific community. But in this case the rationality of science is completely subverted to the point that it becomes little more than a "meaningless enterprise lurching from one

²⁸ Foucault etc

²⁹ Granted Althusser's own project could be seen to speak directly to what can happen in terms of unscientific elements impinging on scientific development. The point is merely to point out that most of the explicit intellectual labour is expended in trying to foreground the initial break as opposed to how it progresses thereafter.

unaccountable paradigm shift to the next” (Norris, 1990: 98). To transpose this into Althusserian language-problematics have now become quintessentially human constructs reproduced on the basis of antecedent knowledge in a never ending cycle. Moreover, as they are freed from the disciplining logic of reality, none can claim unique authority as each merely vies for the intersubjective approval of the scientific community. Accepting this would obviously undermine the thrust of Althusser’s position. For what has the whole project been about if not to provide authority for *one particular reading* of Marx, and to establish Marxism as *the unique* science of social formations? Failing to defer to some form of realist criteria would render Althusser’s project completely emasculated, as he could neither cogently defend his internal intervention nor guarantee the unique scientificity of Marxism against that of its rivals. Indeed, Bachelardian conventionalism even fails on its own terms, for how are we to be sure that the initial rupture is uniquely scientific as opposed to a general shift in conventions? Does Althusser appreciate the gravity of this situation? The answer it seems is both yes and no. For while he accepts the limits of historical epistemology in terms of grounding knowledge in the real, he is adamant that it can at least point the way towards possible sites for the birth of a science;

The theory of the history of knowledge...enables us to understand *how* human knowledges are produced in the history of the succession of different modes of production, first in the form of ideology, then in the form of science. It makes us spectators of the emergence of knowledges, their development, their diversification, the theoretical upheavals within the problematic that governs their production...(RC: 61 original emphasis).

Reading this, it would seem as if historical epistemology can, in fact, establish the moment of an epistemological break between science and ideology. However only a few lines later Althusser goes on to state that;

At each moment of the history of knowledges this history takes knowledges *for what they are*....This history...does not enable us to understand the *mechanism* by which the knowledge considered fulfills its function as a cognitive appropriation of the

real object by means of its thought object...But it is precisely this *mechanism* that interests us (ibid: 64 original emphasis)

Clearly we must enquire after this elusive mechanism, and while Althusser variously attempts to secure the status of science using both socio-historical and purely cognitive means, neither of these fully satisfies his requirements.³⁰ What he really needs is an ahistorical counterweight to historical epistemology and in the synchronic anatomy of linguistic structuralism, Althusser found a way to ground the authenticity of science via transcendental correlation with the real (Glucksmann 1972).

Section Three

From ‘historical epistemology’ to ‘structural complexity’

Most, if not all, of the redeeming qualities of Althusserian Marxism undoubtedly relate to its insistence on ‘structural complexity’. Prior to this Marxism had been floundering between the extremes of economism and subjectivism and a reorientation towards both structure *and* complexity is largely down to the Althusserians. For Collier (1989) this ‘reclamation of structure’ opened up the very possibility of a realist approach to social science, while for Lipietz (1993) the same feature can be attributed with firing a renaissance in historical materialism itself. Althusser would insist, of course, that this emphasis was there from the outset, as Marx (like Althusser) came to his conception of a ‘structured whole’ through a negative evaluation of the historicist problematic that preceded it. Indeed, it was precisely in rejecting this Hegelian (Feuerbachian) problematic that Marx’s great theoretical revolution lay; decisively *transforming* the

³⁰ We saw earlier that ideology unlike science is tainted by extra-theoretical interests. Now while this is, strictly speaking, consistent with the rest of the framework, the problem is that it renders the science emasculated of all extra-theoretical influence and so one wonders in whose interests Marxism is generated. Accepting (the orthodox answer) that it is generated in the interests of the exploited class would not only have offered normative relevance to Althusser’s project but it would have offered one possible solution to the problem of knowledge along Lukácsian lines. Specifically, Althusser could argue that given the respective positions of the principle classes; the exploited class unlike the exploiting one has a bona fide interest in understanding the world and the requisite position to achieve this. This story is essentially one of motivations and the analogy of the PR man versus the police detective should suffice to capture its essence. Turning now to the cognitive solution, Althusser sometimes argues that as a result of its extra-theoretical influences ideological problematics are inscribed from the outset with certain answers and ultimately limited to propounding these. As such, ideological problematics are quintessentially closed whereas scientific ones are open. The problem here, as Benton (1984) has pointed out, is that scientific problematics emerge from ideological ones and so one wonders how closed they really are.

Hegelian dialectic, whilst positing a *structured totality* characterised by *structural causality*;

We know that the Marxist whole cannot possibly be confused with the Hegelian whole: it is a whole whose unity, far from being the expressive or spiritual unity of Leibniz's or Hegel's whole, is constituted by a certain type of *complexity*, the unity of a *structured whole* (RC: 97).

If the 'Marxist whole' put paid to historicist pretenses, it also precluded humanist attempts to ground emancipation in mass subjectivist projects. Marx had rejected humanist essentialism in the moment of discovering 'structure', and the implications are clear. Philosophical 'Man' is dead and there is no subject of history. Instead there is a historico-dialectical materialism of praxis, in which 'man' is conceived in his reality; as the bearer (Träger) and reproducer of numerous social relations (FM: 229). Now while this anti-humanism/anti-historicism couplet offers one entry point into the core of structural Marxism. We can similarly understand the 'structural imperative' from the view point of science. From this perspective, historicism negates the very possibility of autonomous science (illegitimately flattening the social levels); while humanism mis-describes science in both its practice and its object (we could hardly have a 'humanist science' given the omnipotence of ideology). Althusser locates his own entry point in a negative evaluation of Hegel.³¹ However, we approach the issue from the science-side for two important reasons

- (1) While it may not take Althusser at his word it does focus on the nature of his problematic, and
- (2) Once Althusser is disentangled from his positive role in critiquing economism and subjectivism, it allows us to see more clearly why the promise of structural Marxism was lost.

³¹ "I hope I shall be allowed to remind the reader that I merely undertook to give a theoretical expression of the specific difference of the Marxist dialectic active in the theoretical and political practices of Marxism and that this was the object of the problem I had posed: the problem of the inversion of the Hegelian dialectic" (FM: 216).

We saw earlier that in order to accomplish his aims, Althusser he must provide criteria for distinguishing science from ideology. That said, it seems remarkable that he would lean so heavily on the programmatic elements of a wholly conventionalist philosophy. The ‘epistemological break’ was his ‘centre of gravity’ and yet right at its heart there lay a relativism that would deny Marxism the very thing that Althusser needs—scientific knowledge that pertains unambiguously to the real. How to account for this? One point is that Althusser never developed a novel philosophy of science and so was forced to borrow of necessity. Another is that Althusser never meant for conventions to suffice. Indeed, he was quite explicit about their limits and he saw clearly the relativist implications of too strong a focus on historical process.³² No matter though as historical process was itself to be dismissed. Indeed, the very conception of ‘time’ as commonly conceived (linear, homogenous, and continuous)³³ was irretrievably ideological, pertaining as it did to Hegelian essentialism. What was needed was a new ‘scientific’ definition of temporality to accord with Marx’s emphasis on structural complexity (RC 91-99). Yet this is not quite correct either, as what Althusser really wants is to reject historical time *tout court*, in favour of a synchronic analysis of the finite elements that can be distilled from every mode of production that has hitherto existed;

Marxism is not a historicism: since the Marxist concept of history depends on the principle of the variation of forms of ‘combination’...by combining or inter-relating these different elements—labour power, direct labourers, object of production, instruments of production etc.—we shall reach a definition of the different modes of production *which have existed and can exist in human history* (RC: 176-77 emphasis added).

Granted, society is the historical result of successive modes of production. But this ‘history’ cannot be viewed from the perspective of common-sense, for what Marx has truly laid bare is that once we pierce the veil of empiricism, we find that society ‘hangs together’ due to the interrelations of its component parts. This, indeed, is the true source of his scientificity, as underlying the surface contingencies of everyday life, Marx has

³² Reference this

³³ See Vilar () where the author engages in an extended discussion of Althusser’s dismissal of historical time.

exposed that capitalism, like every social structure, is a relatively fixed system of production, and that while it may be the case that societies be empirically investigated to ascertain their specific combinations, the real scientific achievement was to discover such atomistic invariants at the heart of every system (RC: 215). In short, while Marx discovered the ‘continent of history’ the key to its scientific nature was the concept of *structure*, and in consequence, architectonic function not historical evolution becomes paramount. Indeed, banishing history is not only permissible; it is actually demanded by any science worthy of the name.

With such a decisive rejection of ‘history’, Althusser now has the intellectual means to distance his framework from historical epistemology-but at what cost? After all, is not his own tradition a *historical* materialism? Not, according to Althusser, if we mean by this a *historicized* materialism (RC: 92). Indeed, Marx himself failed to appreciate his own achievement as long as he couched it in terms of historicizing the ‘Classicals’, as it was never a matter of historicizing bourgeois categories, but of establishing a novel problematic on the articulated-hierarchy of a mode of production (RC: 98). To substantiate this Althusser argues that reading symptomatically one discovers that Marx actually illuminates society in two discrete senses; viz. society as historical *result* and society as *society* (RC: 65). Commentators have generally seized upon the first of these, but it is the second that is fundamental. For what this reveals is that society becomes a *society* precisely because it ‘hangs together’. Society is not merely a ‘heap of sand’ or an ‘ant hill’ as it *persists* through a ‘*society effect*’.³⁴ Moreover, causality cannot be Hegelian or Cartesian, rather, it is structural and society is an overdetermined structural whole wherein each of the levels exhibits their own degree of *effectivity* and *specificity*.

From ‘structural complexity’ to ‘epistemological structuralism’

Althusser generally refers to three ‘levels’ in the social formation (economic, political and ideological), which are hierarchically articulated, and yet develop against the backdrop of their own particular history (ibid: 99). Each level functions as the site for a

³⁴ Reference this

particular practice (economic political ideological and theoretical),³⁵ and just as the levels are relatively autonomous, so too are the practices. Being relatively autonomous, each practice is causally significant, and this ensures that the social whole is *overdetermined* by the complexity of their interactions. Moreover, as each practice is structured around a specific means of production, it follows that the social formation is ultimately a *structure of structures*. ‘Complex articulation’, dictates that all practices (on every level) are efficacious, as each *transforms* a given raw material, into a novel product, using a determinate means of production (FM: 166). Crucially such transformations always take place within a structure that is both homologous and generalizable, as can be seen by the similar forms taken by Marx’s theoretical and Lenin’s political practices (see FM: 199). However, while there is an isomorphism in form, each practice also has its own degree of *specificity*; with economic practice producing use-values; political practice transforming social relations, and ideology working on (transforming) individual consciousness. Knowledge too is a structured process and it follows that just as society ‘hangs together’ so too does knowledge through an effect born of the structuration of the problematic. Here then is the first glimpse of our elusive ‘mechanism’, as thought is ultimately founded on, and articulated to the real by virtue of the systematicity of their respective systems (RC: 68). Moreover, the primacy of the latter is evinced by virtue of the fact that as a global structural formation the real is the site for all production (including theoretical);

Marxism establishes in principle the recognition of the givenness of the complex structure of any concrete ‘object’, *a structure that governs both the development of the object and the development of the theoretical practice which produces knowledge of it* (FM: 198 emphasis added)

Unsurprisingly the ‘knowledge effect’ pertains to the method by which a given knowledge is *produced*³⁶ and the mechanism which can guarantee this ‘mode of appropriation’ is therefore paramount (RC: 62). Yet in a truly masterful equivocation,

³⁵ Notice the slippage: there is no level for theoretical practice and one wonders where this form of practice is situated?

³⁶ According to Geras “*that* the effect produced is knowledge is no problem; *how* it is produced is” (Geras, 1972: 69 original emphasis)

Althusser says much, but delivers little, beyond gesturing at the systematicity of the respective systems, and an outright rejection of all forms of empiricist grounding. Indeed, in spite of his obvious need for guarantees, Althusser admits that he can do no more than sharpen the question (of the nature of the mechanism that guarantees knowledge) and so we are left wondering whether the whole enterprise is in danger of collapsing around us.³⁷ This will obviously not do, and under the pressure of his own symptomatic reading Glucksmann unearths the (silent but active) real intention of the discussion of effects, viz. *to establish a transcendental correlation between them*. Thus despite official restrictions, Glucksmann argues that in practice, we are obliged to posit a ‘correspondence of knowledge’, as the ‘society effect’ can only be known in the ‘knowledge effect’ and this is true reciprocally (Glucksmann, 1972: 69). As before, the relationship cannot be direct, as the one is not (strictly speaking) the object of the other, and so in order to understand the real as the ‘absolute reference point’ for theory without it actually being its object, Glucksmann contends, that we are invited to presuppose some secret correspondence that is everywhere present but never theorized (ibid). Specifically, this entails a Kantian move in which the kinship of thought and being is sustained on the basis of a transcendental correlation between *the categories of thought and the elements of reality* (ibid). In other words, the elementary categories of all productions (real and theoretical) are isomorphic, and the articulation of production determines both the order of knowledge and the order of the real. According to Glucksmann,

If the logic of all productions can be read ‘through’ theoretical productions, it is because a kinship is supposed to exist between them which should be visible in theoretical production. Conversely, if the reality of all production can be determined ‘in the last instance’ by material (economic) production, this is again because of the kinship of all productions, this time in their material aspect (Glucksmann, 1972: 74).

To sustain this argument Glucksmann makes much of the fact that Althusser deems his own intervention (unearthing dialectical materialism) as allowing the full significance of Marxist philosophy to emerge, as dialectical materialism is now purported to “*express*

³⁷ Reference this

the essence of theoretical practice in general, through it the essence of practice in general, through it the essence of transformations, of the development of things in general” (FM: 169). Dialectical materialism is thus massively extended from underlabourer for a single science to master key of reality and the unity of science and reality is thus guaranteed, although not on the basis of any empirical or ontological investigation. Rather, ‘it merely ‘happens’ that everything is production’ just as ‘it merely ‘happens’ that every production is divided into three’ (Glucksmann, 1972: 71). One would have thought a scientific investigation (of the respective real world structures) indispensable, but Althusser never offers this. Instead the unity of nature and society is established epistemologically, and we come face to face with the very thing that Althusser constantly railed against; a rational speculative philosophy enabled to discern the essence of the real.³⁸ In practice, Althusser’s whole position has been undermined and he is thus reduced to proclaiming the scientificity of Marxism via a philosophical fiat,³⁹ itself backed up by the services of an ahistorical (epistemological) structuralism. Marxism is a science and dialectical materialism *as master key* can corroborate this. Yet when it comes down to it, all Althusser actually offers us is an impressive (if evasive) phrase, viz. ‘the mechanism of the knowledge effect’ for the otherwise rather blatant emptiness of his solution (Benton 1984: 40).

Bourgeois imports; the case of ‘structural linguistics’

As a means to making sense of some of this, Lipietz (1993) has argued that the entire Althusserian project was resolutely inscribed in what was to them, a purely *scientific* movement corresponding to the emergence in the French university, of a ‘new scientific continent’, dominated by structuralism. Having relied so heavily on French epistemology, French structuralism must have offered what seemed like the perfect counterweight, and like his linguistic counterparts Althusser was determined to subordinate questions of historical evolution to an a priori investigation of structural invariants.⁴⁰ Just as *langue* supersedes *parole*, so architectonics were to predominate an epistemological

³⁸ Viz. ‘we must think if we are to attain the essence of political practice’ (FM: 177)

³⁹ “It has been possible to apply Marx’s theory with success because it is true; it is not true because it has been applied with success (RC: 59).

⁴⁰ Reference this

investigation far removed from the vicissitudes of history. Attempting such an Archimedean investigation is, of course, quintessentially positivist as Althusser felt it was his duty to demarcate science from all other social relations. To remain value-free was paramount, and those who would seek to reduce Marxist science to an ethical inspiration are woefully misguided (RC: 139).⁴¹ We saw earlier that structuralism helped to sustain the scientificity of Althusserianism via transcendental correlation, and now we find a related attribute, as it helps to define the object of knowledge as (positivistically) adequate on the basis that “structures are devoid of meaning... [And so] can easily be turned into a fit object for scientific investigation (Smith, 1986: 175).

Opting for synchronic analysis avoids any metaphysical conceptions of ‘Man’ and like his linguistic counterparts, Althusser is prepared to stake his position on the claim that *difference* is a function of relationality and that the structure of the entire system determines the position of every element within it (Smith, 1984). Marx’s real genius lay in discovering that social formations contain their own unique combinatory articulation (*Verbindung*); and with the help of French structuralism Althusser felt that a programme could be initiated to bring the promise of Marxist science to fruition. However, as Anderson (1984) points out, it was just this structuralist reliance that eventually routed French Marxism from the inside out, and in the process, paved the way for the scourge of post-structuralist idealism (in Eagleton, 1985: pg). Key to this process was the linguistic challenge to phenomenological subjectivity and the related propensity towards systemic analysis. According to structural linguistics all meaning is given within a system of signs; each being decomposed into signifier (sound) and signified (concept), and their identity being both arbitrary and solely intelligible within a linguistic system of difference. Crucially moreover, the external referents of such signs are generally disregarded, and having imported this structuralist infrastructure into Marxism, it was a short step into a world of unrestrained discourse with little concern for the vagaries of external reality. Indeed, this was made all the more likely given Althusser’s insistence on a ‘relation of articulation’ between the systematicity of the world, and that of knowledge. For once in the hands of his ‘postist’ successors, it became all too easy to *disarticulate* such

⁴¹ See Davis paper

knowledge into free floating realms of discourse. This structuralist moment represented the complete imperialisation of social structure by discourse, and led in the words of Eagleton (1985) to the ‘exorbitation of language’, the ‘attenuation of truth’ and the ‘randomization of history’.⁴² In other words, as they became freed from the disciplining logic of reality, postmodernists were enabled to make great play on the importance of plurality, immersing themselves in any number of ‘language games’ replete with relativistic signifiers and epistemological breaks; mostly from Marxism.⁴³

‘Epistemological structuralism’ or a ‘fallacy of misplaced concreteness’

While a radical loss of reality was always a possibility of Althusser’s rejection of history, it bears repeating that he in no way sanctioned the ‘amorphous post-structuralist garbage’ (Joseph 1997) that was to follow in the wake of his own waning star. Indeed, Althusser repeatedly championed the necessity of realism, and both *For Marx* and *Reading Capital* are peppered throughout with realist and materialist references.⁴⁴ On this account it may well be argued that the Marxist tradition held sway and that when it really mattered, Althusser was realist. This in fact is the position taken up by Andrew Collier in *Scientific Realism and Socialist Thought*, as Althusser is certainly admonished for idealist excess but ultimately offered an (extremely) sympathetic reading as the principle forerunner of Bhaskarian critical realism. According to Collier,

The [structuralist] theses of Althusser opened up the possibility of a new realist approach to social science and to ‘scientific socialism’: realist in the philosophical sense, that it would aim to discover real social structures which operate independently of our conscious intentions...Realist secondly in a political sense-

⁴²“Linguistics rashly extended its jurisdiction to imperialize all major structures of society, culminating in Derrida’s flamboyant claim that ‘there is nothing outside the text’. Parallel with this inflation of the signifier went the attenuation of its referent, breeding the various neo-Nietzschean skepticisms about the very possibility of determinable truth, and the consequent elimination of the very grounds of rational knowledge. History was accordingly scattered into a purely aleatory phenomenon, in which adjacency eclipsed sequentiality. An implacable structural determinism gave birth, ironically, to a sheer contingency of historical change, which is no more than the chance outcome of synchronic combinatory (Eagleton 1985: 3).

⁴³ See Meiskin Woods (1986) on the post-structural legacy of Althusserianism.

⁴⁴ See for example, the two central essays in *For Marx* (Contradiction and Overdetermination, and *On the Materialist Dialectic*) wherein Althusser uses Mao and Lenin’s experiences of political practice and Marx reflection on political practice in the 18th Brumaire to derive conception of society as a totality of complex structures. Also see *Reading Capital* pages (32, 87,172).

not indeed of *Realpolitik* or opportunistic tinkering but of knowing the strengths and weaknesses of the forces of liberation (Collier 1989: ix-x).

This of course is partly true as Althusser's Marxism was an important catalyst for 'reclaiming structure', and his legacy is significant even if judged on this alone. Moreover, there is little doubt that Althusserian Marxism was an important antecedent for critical realism. Nevertheless we can't let Althusser off the hook quite so easily. For accepting this important contribution doesn't change the fact that Althusser's legacy is also that of the most promiscuous 'Western Marxist' in his borrowings from bourgeois theory (McCarney 1989) and it remains that case that this unremitting dependency had damaging effects that were lasting. Indeed, Collier actually (if unwittingly) admits as much in his own critique of Althusser's tendency towards *misplaced concreteness* (Collier, 1989: 29). According to Collier, Althusser is guilty of separating scientific and ideological practices, when in fact most practices in the social realm are complex and irreducible. Specifically, he argues that social practices are multiply determined and attempting to decompose them into discrete levels causes Althusser to fall foul of an epistemic fallacy; *wherein epistemological concepts are being fallaciously used to stand in for ontological reality*. Economic production, to take one example, is not merely the transformation of raw materials into use-values, but actually presupposes all manner of ideological and political relations such as the family, education system and legal frameworks to even get off the ground (Joseph, Kennedy 2000). Similarly, scientific practices are embedded in political and ideological environments and any attempt to isolate them is again traceable to a latent positivism and a related tendency towards reification. Yet where does this tendency arise if not in a defunct structuralism that coerces its user into decomposing totalities into atomistic elements amenable to (re) articulation. Championing synchronic analysis thus leaves Althusser predisposed to eliding the distinction between levels (an obvious epistemological category) and practices (an ontological one), and subsequently, to posit both interchangeably as pertaining to the real.⁴⁵ Moreover, even when he does focus more centrally on Marxist structure (his own rational kernel?) this is generally achieved against the negative backdrop of Hegelianism,

⁴⁵ As opposed to seeing the levels analogy as an analytical category for explaining complexity.

never as a result of empirical (or transcendental) reflection on the nature of the real world.⁴⁶ In consequence, any realism that does emerge must do so as the result of a negative investigation of idealist philosophy and Althusser is again forced to radically separate practices if he is to distinguish his own position from Hegelian historicism. Specifically, linear (or continuous) time must be disregarded as little more than a bourgeois construction necessary for an essential section, and to be sufficiently sharp each practice is not merely synchronically autonomous, but must now also have its own particular history as it beats to the drum of its own peculiar time! (RC: 99). With this, social reification is complete and Althusser has yet again fallen back into an epistemological structuralism premised on his own explicit starting point (in Marxism) and his implicit failure to sustain reflexivity. In short, either we have an articulated whole made up of epistemologically grounded practices (fallacy of misplaced concreteness) or we have a postmodern structural articulation wherein all of the Althusserian categories are merely free floating modes of theoretical production. Moreover, it bears repeating that if these are the choices, the underlying reason must be a continual reliance on a form of positivism that sees subjects and objects as radically discrete, so that the problem of knowledge is never far from view and Althusser is forced to conceive the relation of knowledge as one of externality and articulation.

Structuralism in hyper mode

One final word on Althusserian structure is in order. It would be remiss to focus exclusively on the relations of knowledge to real world structures without thereby examining (albeit briefly) the form that such structure takes. In consequence, we turn now to an issue that has provoked more consternation than almost any other in Althusserian Marxism, namely their tendency to reify structure. By rejecting the undifferentiated lumping of ideas into the category of superstructure, Althusser's position represents an improvement on the orthodox (base/superstructure) model. Every practice, including the purely economic must have an ideational component (Bhaskar, 1998) and

⁴⁶ Viz, "I hope I shall be allowed to remind the reader that I merely undertook to give a theoretical expression of the specific difference of the Marxist dialectic active in the theoretical and political practices of Marxism and that this was the object of the problem I had posed: the problem of the inversion of the Hegelian dialectic" (FM: 216).

by freeing up the conceptual space for the influence of ideas, Althusser presents *at least the possibility* of moving away from cruder forms of mechanical materialism. Moreover, by incorporating the influence of structural environments, Althusser definitively lays to rest the pieties of bourgeois-humanist subjectivity (Eagleton 1985). Yet having made these advances, Althusserianism immediately squanders them by relying on a positivistic structuralism that fails to incorporate actors' creativity in social reproduction. Just as science confronts an external object, so the individual confronts external structures that compel them absolutely. This, of course, is reminiscent of the Durkheimian view on structure⁴⁷ and its positivistic basis is apparent in the manner in which structure opposes individuals' that become little more than dupes of interpellation. We saw earlier that ideology is indispensable in every social totality (FM: 232), and now we find the reason why, as it constitutes our very subjectivity, and in-so-doing allocates individuals to their respective roles in social reproduction.

It is clear that ideology (as a system of mass representations) is indispensable in any society if men are to be formed, transformed and equipped to respond to the demands of their conditions of existence (FM: 235).

Lipietz (1993) argues that the hyper-structuralism that emerges does so from an elision of scientific methodology (the structural conditions of action) and scientific ontology (what exists in being). It literally confuses 'conditions' and being' and in-so-doing renders the social sphere into a perpetual motion machine, unable to change tack beyond the repetition of its eternal pattern. What then of the Marxist concept of contradiction? What of class conflict? Neither of these Marxist categories can find a central place in Althusser, as society, like history, is bound to repeat itself.⁴⁸ Surely it is a central weakness in any Marxist problematic to fail to see that while abstract labour has indeed come to dominate concrete individuals, this is never unmediated or absolute, but rather is played out in the contradictions of a class based society in which social production is appropriated by

⁴⁷ Reference this

⁴⁸ Obviously there is space for contradictions that emerge as part of a complex conjuncture. However, the role of agency is lost as overdetermination becomes a by-word for contradictions at the supra-structural level. Moreover, as we will later argue contradictions must be continuously related to conflictual social relations.

private accumulators. Capitalist (social) structures are thus unlike their physical counterparts as their very existence is premised on contradiction. And while it may be true that the tendency for the profit rate to fall and even ‘overproduction’ are primarily analyzable without the concept of the individual, it is not the case that these contradictions can be managed unproblematically. Indeed it gets worse, for if common sense is merely a web of ideological error, then how can science ever ‘speak to the masses’ in order to effect the changes in collective consciousness necessary for emancipation? (Benton, 1984)⁴⁹ Gramsci was surely right to suggest that common-sense is never absolutely mystified, but always exists in an unsteady relationship with good-sense.⁵⁰ How else could one explain the constant need for hegemonic discourses that would surely be superfluous in a world of interpellated dupes? Clearly there exists some positive content in lay accounts of reality, and even if it is momentarily absent, common sense is never monolithic or absolute; but rather is fragmented and negotiated and contains the ability to change under the auspices of intentional agency.

Section Four

The need for an ‘ontological break’

Hitherto our narrative has focused on the ongoing difficulties sustained by Althusser in relation to positivism. While decrying theorists to be mindful of their structural determinants, Althusser himself was strangely compliant to the positivistically dominated French university system, and importing bourgeois elements became a necessity once Althusser failed to develop his own philosophy of science. Staying within Marxism left Althusser in desperate need of cognitive supports and failing to reflect on his own ‘conditions of existence’ meant it was almost inevitable that his programme would degenerate into an uneasy mixture of conventional epistemology, positivistic structuralism and Marxist materialism. While the first two elements are ostensibly in tension, they actually work in unison to deliver the programmatic and ‘scientific’ building blocks of Althusser’s position. Moreover, while they are counterweights, both ultimately tend towards an idealism that is most apparent in the post Althusserian legacy

⁴⁹ Bhaskar makes a similar point pg 182.

⁵⁰ Reference this

of post-structuralism. Staying within knowledge immediately foregrounds the need to ensure some correspondence with external reality, and having failed to deliver this, many of his erstwhile followers voted with feet (almost) universally rejecting realism for a conventionalist route out of the epistemological dilemma (Benton 1984:181).

How much of this is down to Althusser? Quite a lot according to Bhaskar (1991) who insists that Althusser's failure to sufficiently ground the 'real' led to a quasi-Kantian limiting *concept* that was forced in the hands of his post-structuralist successors into the most thorough going idealism (Bhaskar, 1991: 181).⁵¹ In response Bhaskar is careful to ensure that his own position is quintessentially materialist and he follows the iconoclastic Marx in arguing (and sustaining theoretically) that being has primacy over thought, before extending it to the realization that ontological enquiry must therefore come before epistemology. This immediately leads Bhaskar onto far more realist ground. Indeed, it is noteworthy that his strategy almost inverts that of Althusser; for while the latter is explicit about the need to start within Marxism, Bhaskar is adamant that scientific knowledge be premised on how the *world* must be if it is to support conscious beings who gain knowledge of it. He therefore moves *from philosophical enquiry, through the physical sciences to the social sciences (Marxism)-provisionally anchoring each in a structural reality gleaned from his philosophical ontology*. And lest anyone think this overly abstract, Bhaskar continually draws on concrete social practice to achieve this. Indeed, his opening salvo is highly suggestive of Marx's own approach as it accepts the centrality of praxis before honing in on the only form that is truly decisive in his opponent's armory viz. the centrality of scientific experiment.

Interestingly Sprinker () in an appraisal of *Reclaiming Reality* fundamentally misses the import of Bhaskar's starting point, and in an unflattering comparison suggests that; "on the face of it, nothing in the Bhaskar corpus to date can rival the contribution to a specific, existing scientific practice of Althusser's labours on behalf of historical materialism (Sprinker, Year: 134-35). Bhaskar has, according to Sprinker, engaged too

⁵¹ See also quote in Sprinker-also need footnote on why the early work is more substantial-Collier, Bhaskar, Elliot etc

much fire on abstract philosophical issues and while his philosophy *of* science is thus beyond reproach, his philosophy *for* science leaves much to be desired, as there are surely “other and arguably more direct means of carrying on the class struggle in theory” (Sprinker, year: 134-35). The implication of Sprinker’s position is that while the early Althusser may well be indicted on charges of ‘theoreticism’, there is little need for us (or anyone else) to pursue this line of critique, given that Althusser himself engaged in a thorough-going reappraisal of his own theoretical biases.⁵² According to this account, Althusser eventually came to his early conception of philosophy (‘the theory of theoretical practice’) as overly rationalistic as it necessitated equating science with truth, and ideology with error.⁵³ To rectify this Althusser begins to see the role of philosophy in strictly political terms as it now becomes a partisan tool to be wielded in defense of science. Philosophy no longer has its own object (historical materialism) or its own results. Rather it merely represents class struggle in theory (Collier 1989).⁵⁴ To be sufficiently sharp one must point out that this is not completely at odds with the earlier definition as although dialectical materialism eventually emerged as an overarching ‘master key’. It was originally intended as a tool for use in the double intervention referred to at the outset. Sprinker is therefore right to suggest that Althusser’s first major works attempt to ‘undertake in philosophy, but for the sciences, some of the major tasks specified by his second definition’ (ibid: 133). But herein lies the problem, for as we have been suggesting, Althusser’s intervention failed as he never developed the means with which to sustain the authenticity of science. If we can accept that philosophy does, in fact, defend the sciences, we must also insist that it can only do so on the basis of the cogency of its arguments. Despite this, however, Althusser now seems to be conceiving philosophy in non-cognitive terms as somehow riding in at the opportune moment to ‘rescue the sciences’. This of course, can only be achieved if the philosophy *of* science holds sway. Indeed without it, the philosophy *for* science degenerates into little more than a battering ram to be used against opponents, who in their turn have a partisan equivalent

⁵² Reference this in Sprinker

⁵³ Thus leading to a severe neglect the historical reality, and to a conception of the ‘break’ in purely cognitive terms (without class struggle as its basis)

⁵⁴ Reference when the so-called second period began

to fight it out. Collier captures the essence of Althusser's difficulties in the following way;

If philosophy defends science it does not do so by shouting 'science hurrah, ideology boo' or vice versa. It must operate by the power of its arguments....Now to the unresolved-indeed largely unposed-problem of Althusser's second period: how can philosophy take up cudgels against the ideologies unless it has the equipment for distinguishing one from the other (Collier, 1989: 120, 131).

This issue haunted Althusser's work in all its stages and if the initial optimistic phase was the most explicitly positivist. Many commentators have pointed out that even in his 'more Marxist' phase Althusser could not quite bring himself to sully science with the vagaries of empirical reality.⁵⁵ Instead, while science was to remain sacrosanct, it was philosophy that was to take the brunt of the class struggle in theory. In light of its partisan nature, philosophy cannot reach the status of scientific 'truth', as it can only be 'correct' or 'incorrect' on the basis of its class perspective (Larrain, 1979: 199). Marxist philosophy thus becomes a political as opposed to a cognitive practice (Collier 1989), and this helps to maintain the original insistence on the authenticity of science, whilst simultaneously incorporating class struggle. However, as Larrain has cogently pointed out, this maneuver can only be sustained on the basis of a dualism wherein Marx the philosopher (engaged in class struggle) is radically distinguished from Marx the scientist (concerned with objective truth) (ibid: 199). This surely renders Althusserianism defunct, for as both Geras and Benton make abundantly clear; Marxist theory could only be produced *within* the working class movement by theorists who relied on a theoretical training *along with* their experiences of working class struggle. Indeed, Marx always learned from experience, incorporating historical successes and failures into his theoretical practice and by failing to appreciate the dialectical nature of this enterprise, Althusser renders Marxism stultified, and academic in the worst sense of the word (Geras, 1972). Even without this difficulty it is still not clear how Althusser's new position is to proceed without a cognitive mandate, and so we are back to the original problem identified by

⁵⁵ McCarney, Larrain and Collier on this point

Collier. In the final analysis, Althusser never broke from positivism; he merely incorporated class struggle via an eternal dualism, and rather than seeing the error of his ways, continually insisted on categorical scientific foundations, before slipping (his third phase?) into a form of irony that eventually parodied that which had gone before. Again Collier is informative;

Althusser's third position manifests itself in gratuitous irony in the use of epistemological concepts, 'truth' 'error' and so on...This point is not just self criticism: it dismisses all Althusser's previous work as 'illusion and deception'...The rejection of criteria (implies) a refusal to do epistemology on the grounds that 'we've got knowledge and there's an end to it' (Collier 1989: 128).

This last sentiment clearly suggests a defeated 'epistemologist' and as we have been stressing, only a 'break from epistemology' would have secured the necessary means to escape such fatalism. To substantiate this we now turn to a problematic that is squarely premised on ontology and a self-conscious refusal to accept the positivist account of reality.

Bhaskar's ontological problematic

Bhaskar's intervention was, from the outset, designed to move the sciences out of the positivist impasse without succumbing to a postmodernism, which had promised much, but delivered little, in emancipatory terms. That the world exists independently of consciousness is an essential presupposition of realist theory and 150 years ago Marx and Engel's made short shrift of any position that attempted to reverse the order of being and knowledge.⁵⁶ Engels relied on the latest anthropology to argue for the primacy of material existence⁵⁷ while Marx generally took this relation for granted. Bhaskar on the other hand, argues long and hard for realism, and his own contribution can be seen to cash in this earlier materialism in a pincer movement that takes on the currently hegemonic realist (positivist) and idealist (postmodernist) positions. Bhaskar's first move is to dispose of the idea that we can ever have categorical scientific foundations and so he

⁵⁶ Reference this from the German ideology

⁵⁷ See Sayers' paper.

immediately emasculates the thrust of postmodern skepticism. Once one accepts that knowledge is our creation, one must also accept that it can never be unequivocal. But for all this, scientific practice *has* produced knowledge, and this has frequently been applied to a world that must be congruent with it in some asymptotic way.⁵⁸ Bhaskar initially takes the history of the sciences as his premise and proceeds to ask the transcendental question; *given that the sciences exist and that their achievements have been non trivial, what must this determine about the nature of the world.* Although his object is science; Bhaskar contends that this procedure actually generates extra knowledge about the world via the *philosophical ontology* that emerges.⁵⁹ Specifically he argues that while it is contingent that the sciences exist and that our world is such that it allows them to. Once they are seen to exist, the world *must* be a certain way (complex, structured, stratified etc), and a first (transcendental) defence of the relationship between knowledge and the world has therefore been established;

The status of propositions in ontology may be described by the following formula: it is contingent that the world is such that science is possible...But given that science does or could occur, the world *must* be a certain way. Thus, the transcendental realist asserts, that the world is structured and differentiated can be established by philosophical argument (Bhaskar, 2008: 29).

Taking science as his premise, Bhaskar accepts that his ontology cannot be established independently of a general account of the latter's history. However, he is adamant that this order of analysis reverses the real nature of dependency, for it is not the fact that science occurs that gives the world its structure. Rather, it is the structure of the world that makes (at least the possibility of) science possible (ibid: 30). Hence Bhaskar's move is ultimately realist as it argues that knowledge only becomes feasible on the basis of the specific features of *our* world. If this procedure seems somewhat circular⁶⁰ Collier (1989) points out that 'even the conclusion that the world is such as to yield scientific results' is far from tautological, as it allows one to argue that while science is, in principle, possible;

⁵⁸ Whether we conceive gravity in Newtonian or Einsteinian terms there must be some congruence between our theories of gravity and a mind independent physical force; after all airplanes do fly.

⁵⁹ Distinguish between scientific and philosophical ontologies

⁶⁰ Specifically he moves from the sciences to a philosophical ontology, which then becomes the basis for an interrogation of the particular sciences (Collier on this).

it must respect the contours of the world. Granted, if one is to dispute the historical results of the sciences, Bhaskar has little more to say by way of a rational conversation. But to even suggest this, seems to us to be little more than obscurantism. Moreover, Bhaskar's procedure is much more than a speculative analysis of 'knowledge in general' as he moves quickly from his initial question, to a specific account of the nature of scientific experiment. Indeed, as Collier points out, Bhaskar is not "arguing from the bare fact of knowledge, to the bare fact of a real world, but from the peculiar nature of experiments such as those that have been performed in the history of the sciences" (Collier, 1989: 23). The procedure is thus quintessentially dialectical as it moves from the existence of science in general; to a philosophical ontology of a complexly structured reality; back to a conception of just how it is that experiments become possible. With this Bhaskar moves onto the philosophical territory of his most important adversary, for it must surely be the case that if any position has reified verification through experimentation, it is the positivists. Just like Marx did with the value form, Bhaskar takes an oft seen object and proceeds to engage in an immanent critique of its mainstream conception, pointing out that while the practicing scientist must respect the contours of the world (this they do implicitly in experimentation) they often reflect on this in mistaken terms (seeing experiment as the verification of a constant conjunction in reality as opposed to a constant conjunction imposed by the experimenter on a non atomistic reality).

Once one accepts that non-trivial knowledge can be gleaned from Bhaskar's philosophical ontology, provisional criteria for scientificity begin to emerge. In particular, any (natural) science worthy of the name must remain faithful to 'depth structuralism' and theoretical practices that eschew these elements must be looked on with suspicion. Having shed light on the natural sciences Bhaskar then attempts to investigate whether his philosophical ontology is applicable in the social domain (social science is more or less coextensive with Marxism) and he puts forward a number of powerful arguments to suggest that a qualified naturalism is possible and that the social sciences can be sciences in roughly the same ways as the natural sciences but with

important qualifications.⁶¹ This then leaves Bhaskar particularly well placed to defend the scientificity of any social enquiry that accepts a critical naturalist framework, and looks for underlying structures in social reality. Transposing this into Althusserian language; Bhaskar now has the means to chart the minimum necessary theoretical requirements for defining scientificity, and whilst these are never categorical, neither are they expected to be. Rather, they are just enough to provisionally argue against the un-scientificity of those positions that eschew a structural ontology of depth and complexity. With this, Bhaskar has begun to address the second of Althusser's two interventions (against encroaching ideologies). However, it is important to point out that this is achieved precisely because he chooses not to initiate his discussion from within Marxism (confronting Marx and Hegel), but rather moves from the general history of the sciences, to the assessment of particular theoretical practices against this benchmark. Marxism may well be the only social science, but it is not the only science, and philosophy must look at the sciences in the round if it is to provide any guidance as to the nature and specificities of their practices. Bhaskar's ontological investigation allows this to happen and it has the added merit of clearly defining the respective roles of science (a first order discipline charged with illuminating reality) and philosophy (an underlabourer, taking science as its object and investigating it from the outside) (RTS: 10). We abandon any hope of critical scrutiny once we envelop philosophy within Marxism, as the outcome can only be a self-referential system with no criteria with which to assess it. Marxism and philosophy do separate jobs, and we need a philosophy that comes at Marxism from the outside but in a scientific way (Joseph).⁶² Critical realism can achieve this and Bhaskar is unequivocal in viewing the real as the object of science, and science as the theoretical object of philosophy. For Althusser, on the other hand, Marxism was an all embracing meta-theory, and as it contained both philosophical *and* scientific elements it became much more difficult to differentiate their respective roles. Indeed, we have evidence of this, as the object of *Capital* (Marxist science) is itself a theoretical object (albeit one that ultimately appropriates the real) and philosophy shifts around from master key to underlabourer and back again.

⁶¹ Explain the critical naturalism

⁶² May ask who evaluates the philosophy

The two sides of ‘knowledge’

In a *Realist Theory of Science*, Bhaskar promises a Copernican Revolution in the philosophy of science, based on a realist interpretation of recent trends within the discipline (RTS: 61). With the realisation of scientific discontinuity seeping into the philosophical consciousness (in the second half of the 20th century), and the ‘linguistic turn’ signifying a general problematisation of mediums, it was inevitable that positivism would be challenged. And Bhaskar sees the rise of historical epistemology as a broadly favourable first (albeit decisive) step away from the idea that we can unproblematically access the world in monistic terms. Once we conceive of science as contradictory, uneven and discontinuous, it becomes all but impossible to discount human creativity in scientific discovery, and with Einstein’s achievements ringing out, the philosophy of science took a decidedly relativist turn. However, while a recovery of human agency was to be welcomed, the conventionalist preoccupation with the machinations of scientific production represented, for Bhaskar, a classic case of bending the stick ‘too far in the opposite direction’; as the conception of science as passive medium was replaced with one constructed on the basis of intersubjectivity. Collier (1989) represents this phenomenon in terms of mistaking our creating knowledge; with our creating the *object* of knowledge; and both he and Bhaskar have pointed out that this form of idealism is as old as philosophy itself.

If thought cannot be viewed as a mechanical function of reality, neither can it be viewed as creating the world. Bhaskar argues that scientific discontinuity can therefore only be rendered intelligible, if we carefully distinguish between the unchanging objects that exist independently of science, and the changing *cognitive* objects that are produced in the process itself (Bhaskar, 1975: 32). These are termed respectively the *intransitive* and *transitive* elements of a science, and Bhaskar refers to their absolute irreducibility in the following terms;

Scientists try to discover the reasons for things, events...and structures. To understand how they do so one needs both a concept of the transitive process of knowledge production and a concept of the intransitive objects of the knowledge they

produce: the real mechanisms that generate the actual phenomena of the world (Bhaskar, 2008: 62).

Science is a 'produced means of production', as sets of theories and conceptual frameworks are developed on the basis of antecedent material causes. This recognises that science is a human practice and allows the conceptual space to accept that knowledge is fallible and revisable. Yet it is surely only revisable on the basis that something exists outside it. After all, how are we to understand the need for change without such an intransitive benchmark? To take but one example; Bhaskar argues that Kuhnian 'paradigm shifts' can not literally be incommensurable, as historically they occur as resolutions to conflicts over adequacy (they replace each other), and this implies a real domain over which they clash (Bhaskar, 1975: 38). Foregrounding the real thus allows one to sustain the historical development of the sciences in a (rationalistic and materialistic) way that the Kuhnian account simply does not.⁶³ Specifically, this entails premising the uneven (and contradictory) trajectory of the sciences on the depth ontology of the world. Knowledge develops historically, but not in ad hoc fashion. Rather, its historical development signifies an ever deeper awareness of the nature of the ontological contours of our own particular world (ibid 47).

Given the influence of Bachelard on Althusser, it is noteworthy indeed, that Bhaskar chooses to interrogate Bachelard in one of his earliest published writings. As was earlier indicated, Bachelard is given credit for focusing squarely on scientific discontinuity.⁶⁴ However, by failing to posit an intransitive realm irreducible to the transitive, Bachelard is forced by just this achievement into the realm of idealism. To see how this occurs, Bhaskar argues that the key to Bachelard's error is his unacknowledged reliance on a certain form of (empirical) realism wherein the real is identified with experience. If experience is so tainted as to be un-amenable to scientific understanding, Bachelard now needs a theory of *secondary objects*, which are derived from within science with no correspondence to the world outside. Bachelard thus speaks of the tetrahedral structure of

⁶³ Giddens on the similarity between Kuhnian paradigms and Althusserian problematics

⁶⁴ Two forms of discontinuity (1) temporal changes, and (2) the radical disjuncture between scientific and common sense perceptions of the world

carbon as an object without a direct referent in ordinary experience. But as Bhaskar explains this is to confuse the transitive and intransitive elements of a science. For while it is surely correct that the concept (of the tetrahedral structure of carbon) must wait to be produced by science, the tetrahedral structure itself existed long before we became aware of it. Indeed, this ‘becoming aware’ is the quintessential process of scientific discovery, as scientists’ equipped with their theoretical training and antecedent material causes, fashion new and ever deeper understandings of material reality. Failing to sustain a concept of intransitive depth, Bachelard is ultimately forced onto the ontological ground of his enemy and the only outcome is that scientific change becomes a series of reorganizations or recastings of knowledge rather than a progressive deepening of our understanding. Indeed, change itself can only now be conceived as a construction in thought, rather than a “work in thought (on thought objects) with an (intransitive) object outside thought” (Bhaskar, 1975: 52).

All of this has the most direct bearing on Althusser. Like Bachelard before him, Althusser begins with a general mistrust of experience and ends with a conception of science as definitively isolated from empirical reality. Starting within knowledge (Marxism) Althusser lacks the requisite distance to engage with knowledge in Bhaskarian terms, and so the ‘epistemological break’ becomes just that; a break within knowledge precipitated by a recasting of the secondary objects of the discipline itself (Generalities II).⁶⁵ We saw earlier that theoretical practice constitutes for Althusser “a practice that takes place *entirely* within thought” (RC: 42) on an object that is “*absolutely* distinct from the real object (ibid: 40). Similarly, for Bhaskar; knowledge takes place within thought⁶⁶but “what is known in, and via this process is precisely the real object” (Bhaskar, 1989: 188). One could argue (as Sprinker does) that Althusser is similarly realist, and that nothing in his account is at odds with the commitment to relatively enduring structural reality (Sprinker, year: 130). There is, however, a fundamental difference, as all of Althusser’s Generalities correspond exclusively to the transitive

⁶⁵ Footnote on continents and no depth.

⁶⁶ As Vilar points out, where else could it take place?

domain, and as Bhaskar himself has pointed out; this results in a latent idealism in which the intransitive dimension is effectively neutralized;

An account that cannot think the necessity for both, and the irreducibility of, the concepts of thought and being...must lapse into idealism where *concepts are part of being*. The origin of these errors is clear. It lies in Althusser's initial inadequate theorizations of the concepts of the 'real object' and the 'thought object'. His failure to provide an apodictic status for, or indeed give any real function to the former, rendered it as disposable as a Kantian ding-as-sich- a service duly performed against the materialist letter of Althusser's texts (SRHE: 237-38 emphasis added).

Ironically, it is exactly this charge (of collapsing concepts into being) that is put to the empiricists by Althusser; as knowledge in the empiricist problematic is supposedly that part of the real that must be extracted in a process of abstraction (RC: 36). Knowledge therefore lacks autonomy and Althusser believes that empiricism is the Janus face of Hegelian idealism, as both positions illegitimately blur the distinction between the real and thought (albeit in different directions) with Hegelianism collapsing the real into knowledge and empiricism committing the same infraction in the opposite direction.⁶⁷ Interestingly, Bhaskar argues that empiricism does exactly the opposite, as it secretes an implicit ontology based on sense experience and so collapses the real into our knowledge of it (Bhaskar, 2008: 28). Bhaskar sees empiricism as illegitimately negating the real under an illicit anthropocentricity, and his thrust is immediately away from empiricism towards a more realist appraisal of the sciences. For Althusser the opposite is the case, as his intellectual energy is, yet again, spent defending the autonomy of science and rejecting the empirical realm as a conduit of empiricist aberration. Having worked out relations between the transitive and intransitive, Bhaskar is better able to argue that while the immediacy of empiricism is clearly ideological, the 'real' must be part of the scientific process both at the initial stage, where it forms (part of) the raw material, and in the final one where experience becomes "epistemically decisive without supposing that its objects are ontologically ultimate" (Bhaskar, 2008: 38). In short, while science must be above the taint of empiricism, it cannot (as in Althusser) be remiss of empirical reality.

⁶⁷ Reference this

Indeed, as Vilar (1973) correctly suggests, the abyss of empiricism is separated by a hair's breadth from that of idealism, and in trying to avoid the former Althusser plunges head first into the latter.

The two 'outsides of knowledge'

Distinguishing 'what exists' from 'what we know' is, as we have seen, the first step in allowing Bhaskar to fully elaborate the 'duality of science'. This entails differentiating epistemology into intransitive (roughly corresponding to what exists) and transitive (theoretical) processes, on the basis of ontological supersedence. 'What we know' is logically subsumed under the category of 'what exists' and so the transitive process of scientific discovery is rendered intelligible by the prior existence of a knowable world. Having established that knowledge has 'two sides', Bhaskar now argues for a further epistemological distinction based on the reality of *historically situated* sciences that nevertheless achieve *cognitively significant discoveries*. On the one hand, conceiving science as humanly constructed allows one to examine the site of its production (primarily done under the banner of 'sociology of knowledge'). On the other hand, there must be some form of real world adequacy (if scientific results are to be significant), and so we must also have recourse to a philosophical benchmark. Extrinsic considerations account for the historicity of a science, whilst intrinsic ones account for its scientificity (Bhaskar, 1991: 69) and together they do justice to the fact that while science is committed to investigating some region of the real, it is also a product of historical process and must be explicable on the basis of its relations to other social structures. Taking this on, Collier (1989) usefully suggests that science must therefore have 'two outsides' roughly corresponding to the 'two sides' outlined by Bhaskar. One 'outside' is the (rather obvious) object of investigation. But there is another that emerges when one considers that transitive productions are not solely reliant on antecedent theoretical materials, but on funding and institutional mechanisms that control the dissemination of knowledge and bestow it with authority. Thus while (social scientific) knowledge takes the real as its object of investigation, the real impacts on it in numerous ways and this dialectic is key to understanding the many determinants that impact on the generation of science.

Having carefully established his threefold distinction (ontology/epistemology; intransitive/transitive; intrinsic/extrinsic), Bhaskar is now suitably well placed to elaborate a philosophical position that self consciously avoids many of the pitfalls mentioned above. Of these, the most important is undoubtedly the avoidance of the fallacy of misplaced concreteness, as science is now quintessentially a human practice situated within the messy world of historical reality. Science is produced within its own community, and just as they are, so it too is subject to all sorts of influences including ideological and political ones. For Althusser, on the other hand, theory could only be bought at the expense of experience (Bhaskar, 1991: pg). Indeed, the extrinsic conditions of scientific development must quite simply be eradicated if science is to sustain its scientificity and yet in attempting this Althusser was led to innumerable contradictions.⁶⁸ Bhaskar experiences no such difficulties. And the ease with which he handles the historicity and empirical nature of the sciences not only allows for a more coherent philosophy *of* science, it also significantly develops a philosophy *for* it. For once we accept the inevitable gap between knowledge (our creation) and the world, it not only throws the creative nature of our knowledge into sharp relief, it also allows us to fully consider the myriad other practices that can (and do) impact on the sciences. This entails a significant role for *ideology critique* and so Sprinker's earlier demand can ironically be better met by Bhaskar than by Althusser. Indeed, critical realism ultimately turns the most potent tools of the postmodernists against them, pointing out that discourses are often infiltrated by myriad influences, and that if we do as the pragmatists suggest⁶⁹ and see knowledge in terms of its practical effects. One can easily see that the effect of the *postist* positions is a veiled defence of the status quo, engendered (in the main) by an almost total disregard for ontological reality. In sum, while there are no longer any

⁶⁸ In the first instance, radically insulting science had the unfortunate consequence of undermining the complexity that Althusser originally introduced with the concept of 'overdetermination'. All processes are supposedly interrelated but with the elision of levels and practices (and the radical insulation of science) Althusser is left with a model that can only sustain multiple causal complexities at the global structural level. Secondly, any historicity introduced into his framework was severely compromised by its relativist origins and Althusser had great difficulty reconciling historical epistemology with a positivist science of structure. A point made clear by his continual attempts to move away from the situatedness of specific social structures to an ahistorical account of structural relations that are 'perpetually present'.

⁶⁹ See Lyotard.

guarantees; Bhaskar's tools are frequently polemical and being premised on a coherent philosophy of science they are inevitably better able to achieve the aim that Althusser originally set himself.

One final comment in relation to agency is in order. While a combination of positivist structuralism and ideological omnipotence drove Althusser to an analysis of ahistorical structural articulation. Bhaskar is adamant that architectonic function (the relations of the parts to the whole) cannot be separated from their reproduction through time. Moreover, his rejection of the fallacy of misplaced concreteness meant that his discussion of the relations between practices and structures is much more accommodating of the active and skilled participation of actors (in this case scientists) in the reproduction (and occasional transformation) of their structural surroundings. In particular, Bhaskar argues that while Althusser is right to focus on the determining effects of the (structural) problematic, the very capability of engaging the latter entails a training designed to transform the agential potential of the actor.⁷⁰ One needs a scientific training to engage in scientific production, and thus the empiricist idea of passively recording the world immediately collapses. But so too does a mechanical structuralism bereft of the creative power of individual agency, for just as structure acts on individuals, so it is ultimately reliant on the skilled achievement of agents in their daily practice (in this case 'doing science'). Practices are no more than the 'situated doings of agents' (Giddens, 1976: 119), and although they may well crystallize into structures, they must not be isolated into an ahistorical realm of unproblematic reproduction. Rather, structures are the medium and outcome of human (inter) action, and as such, they are inherently dynamic, frequently unstable, and ultimately the potential site for class based (structural) transformation.

Section Five

Agency and social structure in the Marxist tradition

As a descendent of the German idealist tradition, Marx was keenly aware of its longstanding problems. Determined to end the (Kantian) dualism between consciousness and reality, Marx also wanted to avoid reducing thought to reality, or (as Hegel had

⁷⁰ Footnote this

done), reality to consciousness. How to sustain the independence of thought amid the primacy of being? This is key to understanding Marx's early work, and in the notion of *praxis* he found his answer (Larrain 1979).⁷¹ Rather than opposing thought to reality, as many before him had done, Marx sought to integrate the two through the mediation of practice. Human *being* was, Marx argued, fundamentally related to human *doing* and the latter always presupposed intentionality to make it quintessentially human; viz

what distinguishes the worst architect from the most expert bee
is that he has constructed the chamber in his head before
building it in the hive (Capital Book I VII: 1).

Intentionality means that unlike any other creatures, humans have the power to control their external environment and this massively increases their transformative capacity. Humans continually interact with nature (and each other) and this provides a powerful force for creating and molding the world around them. 'Objective reality' cannot therefore be treated as an external facticity, as man is part of this reality, and through his labour emerges the 'living, shaping fire' that forms and moulds historical society (Grundrisse: 265). Man's first (historical) act is always to provide his means of subsistence and in the act of achieving this; he himself is produced and reproduced as a social being. His 'nature' is thus socio-historically constituted as a product of his activity and this brings us to his objective being; as man obeys the laws of nature and evolves in an objective and contradictory world which determines the mode of satisfaction of his needs (Lipietz, 1993 :19). This objective aspect provides an appropriate object for social science, and this accords with Althusser's identification of science with structure. However, it in no way entails that man can be reduced to bearing such structure (RC: 180), for in his social subjectivity man is still a historical being liable to a future in which he is creatively present. *In short, subjects are never passive in relation to a wholly objective reality, nor do they create this reality in consciousness. On the contrary, they live within and transform themselves (and their environment) through practical intentional activity.*

⁷¹ Giddens (1976: 111).

While humans do indeed ‘make their own history’, it is important to note that this does not take place in a vacuum or in ‘conditions of their own choosing’. Intentionality is not, on this account, a free floating Cartesian ego, but rather is developed in the mediation between the existence of human needs and the institutional matrix that arises as part of their satisfaction. Humans are thus both *cause* and *effect* of their structural environment, for in their daily acts of *producing* their subsistence, humans necessarily *reproduce* social relations that crystallize into objective forces, which act back on them in the most important ways, viz;

The fixation of social activity, this consolidation of what we ourselves produce into an objective power above us growing out of our control, thwarting our expectations, bringing to naught our calculations, is one of the chief factors in historical development up to now (Marx and Engels in Larrain 1979: 42).

This thwarting of expectations is taken to the nth degree by Althusser as our very ability to engage in creative projects is largely written out of the picture. Interpellation by the structural environment dictates that subjectivity cannot carry within it, its own intelligibility, and Althusser thus assumes that the social sciences must relate to their objects much as the natural sciences relate to theirs as; as external facticity (Benton, 1984: 10). This is in keeping with our general theme. Indeed, Habermas has been quick to point out the big difference between positivism and the epistemology of Marx is that the knowing subject is no longer the system of reference. Objective science is now the reference point and the subjective aspects of the knowing person are treated with the greatest of suspicion (Larrain, 1979: 191). This is not, of course, to suggest that Marx would oppose the idea of an objective social science, but merely to suggest the key distinction that lies in the respective conceptions of the subject in relation to the object. Specifically, while Marx accepted that the structural environment could be taken as an *object* of investigation, he saw this very practice as part of the process it was investigating. Our thinking is bound up with acting and interacting in the world and while the fixation of social activity could well be investigated. It could never be expressed in terms of natural laws that opposed the individual in an objective fashion. In consequence, Marx avoids the temptation to absolutism in relation to social laws by establishing their

continual transformation through historical agency. For Althusser, on the other hand, the distinction between synchrony and diachrony (reflective of the langue/parole distinction) introduces a hierarchy of underlying structure over practice, as diachrony essentially derives from structural dynamics. From here an inevitable duality emerges between unconscious system and human practice, which explains the ‘human will’ by structural processes that operate outside of history. And as Larrain makes abundantly clear, this can only lead to an ideological conception of the social sciences;

A non-historical method applied to nature could discover its laws, in so far as they do not ultimately depend upon practice. The same method, applied to society, produces ideological deceptions in so far as it could only reduce social relations to the state of autonomous nature facing men from without (Larrain, 1979: 183).

Having rendered the masses into little more than knaves of interpellation, Althusser, like all determinists, is inevitably challenged with accounting for his own reflexivity and theoretical creativity. Elitism now seems the only escape route as the ‘philosopher kings’ alone, appear to have the necessary foresight to appraise the situation, and with this Althusser moves decidedly away from the scientific model envisaged by most Marxists. Can Bhaskar do any better? One may well be suspicious given the pervasive use of a transcendental as opposed to an historical method, but, in the main, we believe that Bhaskar can provide Marxism with a coherent methodological underpinning provided it remains a willing ‘underlabour’ receptive to continual insights from its ‘master’.

Agency and Structure in Bhaskar

In the *Possibility of Naturalism* (1998), Bhaskar argues for a (limited) naturalistic social science that is capable of supplanting the many dualisms he believes are characteristic of the human sciences.⁷² Intentional action⁷³ provides the entry point, and a further

⁷² In Norris (1999) Bhaskar lists these dualisms as principally between positivism and hermeneutics, but also between collectivism and individualism, structure and agency, reason and cause, mind and body and fact and value. Lawson (1997) adds voluntarism and determinism.

⁷³ As experimental activity is impossible in the social sciences, human intentional action functions as the entry point, as it the most widely accepted (and thus relatively unproblematic) criteria for phenomena regarded as social.

transcendental exercise reveals that social structures are both drawn upon and reproduced by human agency. Bhaskar's Transformational Model (TMSA) thus avoids the subject/object dualism, by providing an account of agency and structure based on their mutual interdependence and irreducibility. This then allows for a *purely analytical* dualism to take account of the radically different make up of societies and individuals, whilst sustaining the integrity of a social science premised in the main on objective structures;

For its part, the TMSA respects the methodological distinction between the social sciences, *which abstract from human agency*, studying the structure of reproduced outcomes: and the psychological sciences, which abstract from reproduced outcomes, studying the rules governing the mobilization of resources by agents in their everyday interaction with one another and nature (Bhaskar, 1989: 93 emphasis added).

Agents in their daily activity are continually (often tacitly) reproducing and occasionally transforming structures in an intrinsically dynamic process. Society pre-exists the agent and is causally efficacious in supplying the material conditions for intentionality to occur. It cannot, in light of this, be *created* by individuals, but rather emerges from their interaction before acting back in a recursive loop.⁷⁴ To concretize this, Bhaskar argues that while people exhibit significant amounts of intentionality through their ability to devise and live out personal projects (marrying and embarking on careers), their actions in the aggregate have the consequence of reproducing societal relationships (the nuclear family and capitalism) which have systemic influence for the next generation (people see the nuclear family as 'normal' and capitalism as inevitable). This is then significant for it

⁷⁴ Margaret Archer (1982) has best captured this idea of structure as both *medium* and *outcome* of action in her morphogenetic approach, where she elaborates the interaction in a three stage temporal model consisting in

(1) *Structural conditioning* (T1)-in this initial phase systemic properties or aggregate consequences of past actions not only shape social institutions or the context of action but also partly endow people with their interests. Action will therefore always be predated by forms of social conditioning.

(2) *Social interaction* (T2-T3)-agents while acting within structures in a socially conditioned manner also express their own irreducible emergent powers relating to intentionality, rationality etc. These powers mean that whilst agents are socially conditioned, their actions are never fully determined.

(3) *Structural elaboration* (T4)-action taken in T2-T3 can modify structural properties in line with the intentions of actors but in large part it is in the form of unintentional consequences emerging from conflict and concession between different groups. Agency does not therefore create structure but only reproduces (and occasionally transforms) it in any one generation. (Adapted from McNallulla, 2005, p.33-34).

allows one to sharply distinguish between the myriad influences on individual's intentional behavior (lying in their own personal reasons and plans of action) and the structures governing the unintentional reproduction of the social environment. As such, it is possible that certain structural relations will be systematically reproduced, and that this will often occur (partly) 'behind the backs' of intentional actors. Indeed, the fact is that most will take on this reality, and Bhaskar captures this with the idea of the *duality of praxis* wherein action is both motivated production and unmotivated structural reproduction.⁷⁵ Like Marx before him, Bhaskar is aware of the chasm that exists between individuals' going about their daily lives, and the continual reproduction of the social system. To mediate this relation, Bhaskar argues the need for a set of concepts that can capture the duality of praxis (conscious production-unconscious reproduction) and the temporal endurance needed for structural reproduction. This, he believes, is best achieved by the idea of positions that agents 'slot into' and of the practices that they can subsequently engage in by virtue of these positions (Bhaskar, 1998: pg). Such positions are inherently relational and within the social domain internal relationality is both the most pervasive form of positioned practices, and the most causally efficacious (as can be seen for example in the relations between capital and labour).⁷⁶ This not only facilitates the sublation of another traditional dualism (between individualism and collectivism) it also allows one to engage in critique, as historically there has undoubtedly been a systematic "disparity across individuals regarding the practices which are, and apparently can be, followed" (Lawson 1997: 163). Bhaskar (following Marx) argues that this is due to the persistent asymmetries of the relations into which individuals enter (or are placed), and this entails a radical analysis of the inherent asymmetries in the distribution of resources;

⁷⁵The TMSA model is related to Giddens model of structuration in that Giddens posits the duality of structure i.e. structures as both condition and consequence of action. While Bhaskar adds the duality of praxis in that the dual feature of action is both motivated production and unmotivated structural reproduction. However as Joseph (1998) explains social structures have emergent properties and so can not be reduced to particular practices and rules as in Giddens' approach.

⁷⁶ Two objects are said to be internally related if "they are what they are by virtue of the relationship in which they stand to one another" (Lawson, 1997, p.164). Examples include landlord and tenant, teacher and student, parent and child etc. While the most important relationship in a capitalist society is the one between the capitalist and the proletarian it is also useful to remember that each of these categories are what they are by virtue of the relationship in which they stand to a third referent, namely the means of production.

one advantage of the relational conception should be immediately apparent. It allows one to focus on a range of questions having to do with the distribution of structural conditions of action, and in particular with differential allocations of (a) productive resources... (b) persons to functions or roles....In doing so it allows one to situate the possibility of different and antagonistic interests, of conflicts within society, and hence of interest-motivated transformations in social structure (Bhaskar, 1998:42).

To sum up, Bhaskar is determined to sublimate the dualism between agency and structure, and this is achieved by thrusting the subject into a world made active by the creative force of historical practice. This largely mirrors Marx's intentions. Indeed, Bhaskar himself contends that his work is meant to flesh out a methodological fulcrum consistent with Marx's (scattered) musings on method (Bhaskar, 1991). Together with an emphasis on human action, Bhaskar remains committed to a depth ontology of underlying structures and this can now be extended to a relational sociology of positioned practices. Again the genealogical link to Marx is obvious, and this is confirmed by the necessity to scientifically interrogate the nature of the structural matrix. Finally, with the emergence of the possibility of antagonistic interests, Bhaskar is incorporating conflictual relations, and given that "social theory is blind without Marxism" (Bhaskar 1998: 44), and that the aim is a "socialist enlightenment which will stand to some future order of things as the bourgeois enlightenment stood to the American Declaration of independence" (Bhaskar, 1991: 1). We can be sure that Bhaskar is at one with the political aims of working for a future premised on structural transformation. Marxists have always recognized the unity of substantive engagement and philosophical reflection and critical realism can support this endeavour by furnishing powerful transcendental arguments in support of the Marxist framework. Giddens (1976) may be right to suggest that Marx's progressive preoccupation with capitalist society meant that his notion of praxis was never systematically elaborated. The TMSA can help in this regard and Bhaskar's concepts have the merit of being applicable to all of the sciences. Having said this, transcendental arguments cannot substitute for substantive engagement, and in the social sciences this must be achieved with a concrete engagement with social structures as they are

historically manifest. Only by this route will the promise of critical realism be fulfilled. Indeed, it must be remarked that whilst Marx may not have had the methodological rigor of critical realism, his ontology of *classes* and structural *contradictions* was much the richer for having been discovered through a substantive engagement with capitalist social structures.

Agency and Social Structures; Marx and Bhaskar

If securing subsistence constitutes the founding act of human history, this is never carried out by heroically free 'monads' as much bourgeois theory presupposes. Praxis is always rather social and material, presupposing as it does a certain level of human co-operation and a corresponding mode of technological intervention. The production of material life is fashioned amid our continual interaction with both nature and each other, and Marxist's generally believe that the duality of this relation is key to our historical development. For Marx a fundamental feature of human evolution has been the dialectic between our increasing ability to control the physical environment and the increasing complexity of our division of labour. Human being is inherently relational and this is mirrored in the distribution of labour as tasks become ever more differentiated with the development of our 'know how'. Underlying this specialization, there is, however, a fundamental cleavage as hitherto the outward division of myriad tasks has masked the existence of two principal classes that are internally related and stand to each other in a fundamentally antagonistic way;

Society has hitherto always developed within a framework of contradiction-in antiquity the contradiction between free men and slaves, in the middle ages between nobility and serfs, in modern times that between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat (Marx and Engels: 116).

We will return to the significance of contradictions below. For now though, the import of this statement lies in the fact that, with it, Marx moves from general anthropology (humans as social labouring beings), to an historical account of the central relations that have emerged as a result of the transhistorical need to subsist. This is absolutely fundamental as it affords the resources to develop a model of structural reproduction

permeated at every juncture by this relation. Indeed, the ontological significance of this move cannot be overstated as it allows Marx to foreground the causal significance of *classes in interaction* and of the *conflicts* and *contradictions* that subsequently emerge. From here Marx moves into a rich discussion of the myriad institutions that have hitherto developed and in this endeavour, he (and Engels) began a peerless research programme in terms of its depth, complexity and explanatory power. However, in keeping with our theme, we believe the historical richness of Marxist categories can be underpinned by critical realist insights, and we round out this discussion with a further exposition of Bhaskarian categories in relation to agency and structure, and subsequently to capitalism.

If Marx moves outwards from a class relational ontology, Bhaskar (and in must be said, Collier) take relationality steadily in the direction of structural emergence. Starting with an ontological hiatus between individuals and societies, Bhaskar argues that both are complex beings constituted by relational elements which themselves may be relationally structured. Collier adds to this by drawing on Spinozean insights to label society and individuals' composite *structurata*. This relay's the idea that individuals and societies are concrete entities made up of component parts to be counterposed to the *causal relations* between their parts-otherwise known as structures (Collier 1989:85). As entities that persist, *structurata* must contain what Collier (following Spinoza) terms a *conatus* (the ability to hang together). This ability is essential, as without it composite entities would simply decompose, and it follows that the *conatus of a structuratum is its structure*. Structural causality emerges from the interaction of the parts and this suggests that composite entities cannot be reduced to their components. There is rather, a real hierarchy of composition, as explanatory laws specific to each level must be respected. In consequence, the whole and the parts are mutually constitutive and we therefore have a depth ontology of stratified levels, wherein the whole continually emerges from its component parts only to act back on it in important ways.

Relating this to the duality of structure; Bhaskar argues that society is both the (ever present) material cause and continual outcome of human agency (Bhaskar 1998: 42). Being framed within structured relations (that result from their own activity), actors in

their daily lives are continually reinvigorating their structural environment. However it is important to note that societal reproduction occurs primarily at the structural level and so we need a differing set of concepts to distinguish the daily action of purposive individuals (desires, intentions, reasons) from those that account for structural reproduction (forces and relations of production, crises, accumulation, circuits of production etc) (Collier, 1989: 92). This is achieved with the duality of praxis, as agents continually fashion their own life projects and in-so-doing inadvertently reproduce their structural environment. However, as before, the gap between these two processes must be bridged and this can be achieved by focusing on the *institutions* that emerge as part of the daily interaction of purposive individuals. Institutions are, on this account, both complex entities of a like with other composites (spaces of interaction), and the regularized patterns of social norms that allow for routinized modes of social interaction (see Cohen 1989). As such, we have a taxonomy of institutions, as on the one hand they are foundational for interaction and so are structural in quality (language and social norms fall into this category). On the other hand, they frequently emerge as additional actors in the social space and as the sites of centralized resources; they are ontologically akin to *structurata* (corporations, political parties, trade unions etc fall into this category). We earlier pointed to a significant disjuncture between conscious production and (mostly unconscious) structural reproduction. With the introduction of institutional matrices, however, we can now see that the latter may not be quite as unintended as first suggested. Specifically, if one accepts that people's power to act (PTA) is at bottom, their ability to make a difference in the world, and that this generally entails drawing on resources that are centralized in institutional environments. One can see that structured institutions often serve as sites not only of centralized resources, but of power to influence others in terms of controlling and coordinating their forms of behavior. Power over someone (POS) is an important subcategory of PTA and frequently this is achieved through the 'dull compulsion' of routinized forms of praxis, undergirded by forms of supervision within particular physical spaces. This further suggests that while social systems engender structural effects quite apart from the action of its individual members, the forms of constraints (and enablement's) that actors face may be systematically unequal. Indeed, while all may be structurally compelled (at least to some extent) in their actions, this 'constraint' may well

be congruent with the interests of some groups, while for others *structural constraints* may be just that. Here again we turn to the concept of positioned-practices as the institutional roles that agents ‘slot into’ in their daily activities must surely be the bedrock of social life as experienced by social actors. Moreover, given the vertical nature of many of these roles, and of the systematic inequality that this implies (in terms of constraints and enablement’s); we have a prima facie case to expect that contradictions will emerge from conflicts of interest at the institutional level (after all one wouldn’t need resources of control without some conflict of interest). Giddens is therefore right to suggest that conflict is a property of interaction closely tied to interests and readily distinguishable from contradictions (Giddens, 1976: 125). He is wrong, however, to suggest that contradiction (understood as a property of structure) stands in a contingent relation to conflict (ibid). For as Collier points out, contradictions can emerge in either of two ways, both of which are in some sense connected to opposing interests. In the first instance conflicts between members are manifest as societal contradictions, as the conatus of (at least some) individuals are not congruent with the structural reproduction of the system at large (here the counter conative tendency would emerge as an adjunct of class conflict). In the second instance counter-conative qualities are often writ large into the structure itself (as opposed to merely a function of recalcitrant elements), as the relations themselves eventually exhibit tendencies to decompose under the weight of their own internal contradictions (here we may include issues of underconsumption, and the tendency of the profit rate to fall etc) (See Collier, 1989: 86-90). In any case we have now said enough about agency and social reproduction in abstract terms, and so we move in the final section to a brief discussion of the reproduction of capitalist social relations from a Marxian-realist perspective.

Structural reproduction in capitalism⁷⁷

While bourgeois economy begins with a disembedded atom in logical space-time, Marx begins his analysis of capitalism with the social-relations embodied in the commodity form. Drawing on his general anthropology Marx argues that the predominant form of social praxis must, in any society, be physical production. In capitalist societies this is

⁷⁷ This section relies heavily on Palermo (2007).

manifest in commodity relations that are premised on the interdependent institutions of private property and the capitalist market. Within capitalism, private property functions as a social relation defining a series of duties and rights, and their (legal) distribution among agents, while the market is the institutional site where these property relations interact (Palermo, 2007: 11). Private property is therefore an agential concept, in the sense that agents receive their power to act (PTA) via their ownership rights. However this ability (PTA) is ultimately dependent on the norms of capitalist interaction, and on the successful institutionalization of both the market and the legal framework. Indeed, capitalist forms of private property are simply unintelligible without prerequisites, and so we have a cogent example of individuals (in their daily interactions) as both *cause* and *effect* of the social relations that shape the nature of their daily existence. In a market based system, PTA is generally equated with purchasing power (power to buy), and with the emergence of commodified labour this power is absolutely foundational for those who can afford to wield it. Palermo highlights the asymmetric purchasing power of capital and labour in the following terms

The quantitative differences between agents purchasing power are a measure of the existing asymmetries of PTA in the economic sphere. In capitalism, these quantitative asymmetries produce an essential qualitative difference: on one side, there are people that, given their lack of purchasing power, must sell their labour; on the other side other people thanks to their purchasing power can buy this labour power and make a profit from it (Palermo, 2007:13).

For the capitalist, the worker becomes little more than a commodity to be used in the process of production. Selling one's labour-power is, on the other hand, an act of supreme alienation as the worker categorically transfers ownership of a segment of their life in exchange for a wage. Thus conceived the relation is both extremely unequal and conflictual. After all, the capitalist can live off his capital, while the worker is compelled to give up their labour power in order to survive. Power to act is therefore (at least partially) premised on one's structural position, and in capitalism, positioned practices are (asymmetrically) distributed in such a way as to ensure that workers repeatedly offer

their labour-power under the compulsion of economic necessity.⁷⁸ Capitalists obviously have an interest in the continuance of such unequal relations, and this coupled with the need to effectively transform *labour power* into *effective labour* drives them to centralize the labour process. This enables them to regulate numerous aspects of workers activity, specifically by providing an institutional space for coordination and control. In consequence their power to act becomes power *over* labour (POS) expressed authoritatively in relation to the fruits of their labour and manifest as hierarchy in the internal division of capitalist enterprises. Despite compulsion, monitoring, and a level of socialization (born of familiarity with capitalist production relations), workers inevitably sense a level of unfairness and they often organize to redress some of the power asymmetries at the heart of this relation. However in the main structural reproduction takes places *relatively* unimpeded and even when they do emerge, conflicts are rarely of the sort to challenge the forms of property rights at the heart of capitalist society.

Addressing the mechanisms of reproduction means addressing the dialectic between labour and capital, and while the site of interaction is often some structurata (viz. capitalist enterprises, product markets, labour markets); the underlying dynamic is undoubtedly relational (competition). Competition is omnipotent in capitalism and it is manifest in numerous ways. Class conflict is pervasive, and this ‘between class competition’ stems from the antagonism of standing in opposing positions with respect to production. The stronger class (capitalists) generally holds the upper hand (although never absolutely) and this form of competitive conflict provides the central mechanism of capitalist reproduction.⁷⁹ However this interclass competition is always mediated in important ways by competition *between* capitalists to sell products and *between* workers to gain jobs and a standard of living. In the neoliberal era, one might also mention the competition *between* Nation-States to attract foreign capital and this competition to ‘flexibilise labour markets’ (among other pro capitalist policies) helps to highlight the fact that while heightened competition within either class can strengthen the hand of the other, there are a number of asymmetries which must be appreciated. Firstly while it is

⁷⁸ Reference this-workers free in a double sense etc.

⁷⁹ Giddens dialectic of control

true that capitalist competition can have direct effects in increasing wages (by reducing the reserve army etc), it also has the indirect effect of giving individual capitalists the incentive (Marx would say compulsion)⁸⁰ to immiserate workers. Secondly while most commentators fasten onto competition within the capitalist class, Palermo points out that given the relative (hegemonic) strength of capital it is hardly surprising that historically, it is within the proletariat that competitive struggle has been fiercest. As such there are three separate tendencies which work to ensure the continued position of capitalist strength (1) superior resources initially foster a position of strength, (2) competition within their own class has an ambiguous effect on the strength of labour (3) competition is, in any case stronger within the proletariat class (competition for work can mean struggle for survival) and this has the unambiguous effect of reinforcing the power of capital. Given the tendential effects of competition as the *main* mechanism of class reproduction, Palermo offers the following model as a first approximation of the structural dynamic of capitalist production relations;

Consider first the transformation and reproduction of purchasing power and authority. At time t, under pressure from competition and because of the asymmetric distribution of power in society, K buy's L' labour power (i.e. he/she exercises his/her purchasing power) and acquires authority (the right to command over L for period t, t+1). During this period by virtue of his/her authority K extracts as much labour as possible from L's labour power. At time t+1, K sells the product and recovers the purchasing power he/she had anticipated (and probably more) at the same time L spends the purchasing power gained with the sale of his/her purchasing power without in general accumulating enough to become independent of wage labour. This process is *relatively* stable and tends to reproduce the initial class division" (Palermo, 2007:17 emphasis added).

Returning to the duality of praxis makes it clear why this process can only ever be relatively stable, as unmotivated structural reproduction always holds within it, the possibility of motivated structural transformation (Marx would term this form of praxis-

⁸⁰ Hence Marx's suggestion that "looking at things as a whole, all this does not indeed, depend on the good or ill will of the individual capitalist. Free competition brings out the inherent laws of capitalist production, in the shape of coercive laws having power over every individual capitalist" (Marx, 1967, p.270).

revolutionary). Defending the importance of human intentionality on the one hand, we cannot turn agents into structural dupes on the other, and so while society is indeed a structured system. This system must be considered open by virtue of the fact that there are features of its components (individuals) which are underdetermined or even undetermined by social structure (Collier 1989: 90). Openness is further secured by the numerous mechanisms at work in each society (political, legal, ideological, along with economic) and so the circuit of production (outlined above) must be seen to exist within larger sets of social relations that inhibit or reinforce the process in numerous ways.⁸¹ Indeed, the process can only begin to approximate a successful circuit when it is underpinned by all manner of structured institutions including;

- A functioning labour market
- A complex and unequal division of labour
- A functioning capital market
- A functioning final goods market
- Ideological consciousness born of a class divided society
- A system of authority premised on property rights and supposed expertise
- The valorization of ‘risk taking’ by elite groups
- The pervasive acceptance of the idea of ‘a fair day’s work for a fair day’s pay’
- The materialization of such ideas in institutions such as the media and the school system.
- The general establishment of private property underpinned by juridical and coercive institutions

Not to mention a State apparatus that continually intervenes across the process in an attempt to close what is an open and contradictory system. State strategies underpin the regulation of capitalist relations in ways that stretch from the buying of large quantities of goods and services, to securing private property and the initial socialisation of the workforce. Occasionally though, such interventions are not enough and the conditions for

⁸¹ Collier usefully distinguishes these two sources of openness as emanating from vertical emergence on the one hand and horizontal emergence on the other.

crises become evident. While such crises can, in principle, be based around agential conflicts (as in the case of large numbers of workers choosing to challenge the authority of capital or indeed the state apparatus). They are frequently more structural in nature, as contradictions owing to the conflictual nature of capitalism emerge *in absentia* of the individual decisions of any particular agents. Here we may think of the Keynesian crises tendencies, just as readily as the Marxian ones, for there can be no doubt that the speculative demand for money, along with the special features of capitalist labour and investment markets must render the system prone to crisis merely by dint of the radical uncertainty of future oriented decisions, the perverse incentives of financialization, and the conflictual nature of the wage agreement. Indeed Marx's insistence on the tendency for the profit rate to fall is more than congruent with Keynes account of the speculative motive, as the stock market (casino), must seem an attractive alternative if profits on real investment are falling. Moreover, Keynesian 'underconsumption' is merely another way of phrasing the problems referred to by Marx as 'overproduction', and so we have a further similarity in terms of the interrelation of production, income distribution and effective demand. Here though, is where the similarities end. For while both men knew that such contradictions were written into the (competitive) nature of the structures themselves. Keynes was willing to defend them, while Marx was adamant that they must be transcended. Post-Marxist commentators such as Laclau and Mouffe (1985) have fastened onto the means by which this transcendence occurs, as a site of contradiction- this time within the Marxist theoretical framework itself. This centers on a tension between the structural and class struggle dimensions of Marxist theory, which supposedly originates in a fundamental ambiguity in Marx's own writing's on the political. In particular, whether the latter constitutes an arena of contestation or whether it is merely a reflection of an underlying economic logic. With the benefit of the foregoing discussion such concerns become less than groundless. For while it must be affirmed that action always occurs in contexts structured by the outcomes of previous struggles, and that structure is emergent and causally efficacious in significant respects. Structural contradictions are, at base, resultant from the vast array of human interactions in a society riven by conflict and competition. According to Marx it is only by virtue of our historical practice that such oppressive structures emerge, and in consequence, it will only be

through our collective labour that will they be transformed by (revolutionary) praxis in, and on, our structured environment.

Conclusion

In attempting to elucidate the links between Althusser and Bhaskar, this paper has defended a vision of Marxism that would in all likelihood be acceptable to both. Specifically, it argues that Marxism gains scientificity by virtue of its search for underlying structures, and that Marxist theory is a *practice* initiated on the basis of antecedent theoretical materials used to furnish novel understandings of our world. At bottom, social structures are relations, and when all is said and done, the key distinctions between Althusser and Bhaskar come down to their respective understanding of such relations as those between subjects and objects; agents and structures; capital and labour. Positivists by their own admission conceive relations in atomistic terms, and so their ontology is one of external elements opposing each other in Newtonian space. For Marxists, on the other hand, such relations are mutually constitutive and the causal dynamic is often writ large into the relationship itself. On the face of it, Althusser was virulently anti-positivist. He did after all problematise empirical reality, whilst critiquing empiricism as no more than a bourgeois ideology. He also rejected the (bourgeois) subject as heroic investigator, and yet he ultimately replaced this with a *relation of objects* that mirrors that of his opponents. As an autonomous practice, science is radically distinct from the object it investigates and this foregrounds both the 'problem of knowledge' and the form of articulation that Althusser relies on to transcend it (viz. correlation between externally articulated elements). Lacking a conception of praxis, Althusser also defines social structure in positivistic terms (external and oppressive), and this results in a (hyper) structuralism that impacted negatively in two decisive ways. In the first instance, ideology becomes all pervasive and so science must be pushed into a space where it is uncontaminated by empirical reality. In the second, Althusser is categorically without an agent for social change, and so we are left with little hope, beyond the vague possibility of structural disarticulation under the weight of their own (supra-structural) contradictions. In short, Althusser purchases science at the cost of experience, and structure at the cost of social change, and so his framework is bankrupt

from a Marxist point of view. In stark contrast, Bhaskar foregrounds the possibilities inherent in human praxis as *we* continually reproduce our social environment through all manner of interrelated practices. Subjects act *in* and *on* an objective world and so the possibilities of intervention (the power to make a difference) are always present, even if they are made unlikely by the monolithic power of capitalist structures. Science is but one practice among many, and while it is important to authentically understand our world (and the potentials for change that this entails) this condition is neither sufficient nor even primary in terms of reorienting the world. Natural science has intervened practically in the world and in-so-doing it has prepared the way for emancipation, but in the end only revolutionary praxis will actually deliver this. This brings us to the relations between our various categories. Science and ideology are not antithetical, as ideology is not merely cognitive error, but rather is the manifestation of real contradictions in the world as it stands. Ideas cannot be detached from the material conditions of their production, and it is only through a change in these material conditions that a real transcendence of ideology can occur. Scientific understanding can help in this regard, but only if it is rigorously subsumed under an emancipatory programme. Similarly philosophy must now accept its role as mere underlabourer (to the underlabourer).

In the final analysis Althusser was right to argue that important theoretical developments generally occur when people stop giving alternative answers to old questions but abandon such questions as illegitimate.⁸² Here Marx's example is instructive as he long-ago moved beyond the presuppositions that led other thinker to the perennial 'problem of knowledge'. Althusser's questions, unfortunately, were not nearly as novel, and as he asked them from within the old (positivist) problematic he never moved beyond his own 'non-vision in vision'. Indeed, Althusser believed that Marxism had the unique ability to solve this 'problem' through (his own) internal philosophical intervention. For Bhaskar on the other hand, the very idea of a *Marxist* philosophical intervention would be oxymoronic, but he is for all that, the most important *philosopher for Marxism* of the last twenty five years.

⁸² Kolakowski ()

