

Book Review

LOUIS ALTHUSSER AND THE TRADITIONS OF FRENCH MARXISM. By William S. Lewis. New York: Lexington Books. 2005. 250 pp., \$70.00 (cloth) \$24.95 (paper). ISBN 978-0-7391-0983-0 (cloth) 978-0-7391-1307-3 (paper)

Louis Althusser is considered one of the most influential Marxist philosophers of the 1960s and '70s. During that time, his writings attracted a lot of attention and enjoyed an extraordinary dominance within Marxism not only as a philosophy but also as a research program in a wide range of social scientific fields. The quick rise to the top, however, was followed by a precipitous fall. The shortcomings that marred his initial attempt to reformulate Marxism in terms of its philosophy and science discredited his whole project. Those problems have already been well documented by, among others, Benton (1984), Callinicos (1976) and, most authoritatively, Elliot (1987).

Althusser was not oblivious to those problems. He revised parts of his theory (his metaphilosophy and ideology), he made his self-criticism (though it was not very detailed) and tried to regenerate interest in his approach. Nothing, however, was the same; the movement that he initiated, it seemed, had spent its force. And from November 1980 until his death in 1990, Althusser's fate oscillated between the incomprehensible and the tragic with the murder of his wife, his companion of thirty-five years.

Althusser never really followed through with reformulating his views after the self-criticism. It was left to his disciples to reconstruct his thought, especially his philosophy of the sciences. Suchting (1992, 1994, 1995) and Baltas (1986, 1992, 1993) were the two Althusserians who did the most to provide an Althusserian philosophy of the sciences as an alternative to the mainstream philosophy, based on Althusser's revisions. But Althusserianism, it seemed, had had its day.

However, in the past several years and the subsequent publication of hitherto unpublished essays,

a renewed interest in Althusser has surged; new book-length commentaries have been published by a new generation of Althusserians (Montag 2003, Ferretter 2006), and a re-evaluation of his work is under way. This is much needed for several reasons: Althusser's newly-published writings may shed a new light on his thought, and the old commentaries may have to be revised under these circumstances. In this sense, the publication of a new book that attempts to rethink and situate Althusser's work within its political and theoretical context, and, additionally, provide a reconstruction of his philosophy of the sciences, is very welcome.

William S. Lewis is one such thinker who attempts to re-evaluate and reconstruct Althusser's work. He is part of a generation that is sympathetic to Althusser, though he is not an Althusserian. He is Roy Bhaskar's disciple (p. 211, n. 39). Louis Althusser and the Traditions of French Marxism "seeks to argue that the work of Louis Althusser provides interesting solutions to problems of Marxism such that those solutions might hold contemporary relevance" (p. 15). This is attempted by showing "how his philosophy emerges out of the concerns of French Intellectual Marxism and of the French Communist Party" (p.15). It is "a narrative detailing the relationship between Marxist thought and Marxist politics" (p.16). The larger concern behind this endeavour is to "champion Marxism as a political philosophy with contemporary relevance" (p. 3), and the historical approach is employed in order to understand the theoretical and political errors that marked prior interpretations of Marxism, and, if possible, avoid and correct them. Althusser's work, it is claimed, will fit the bill. But not before it is reconstructed by Lewis who ventures to criticize

its original formulation in order to present a philosophy of science free of the past rationalist and conventionalist errors, a philosophy of science that will defend Marxism as a science and guide political action.

Lewis finds himself in the unenviable position of being measured against figures such as Benton, Callinicos and Elliott (among others) who provided detailed critical commentaries on Althusser's thought; or, against figures such as Suchting, Lecourt and Baltas (among others) who explicated and/or reconstructed Althusser's philosophy of science—works which he should have consulted more carefully (the first three), or should not have ignored (the last three).

The strengths of the book are that the author knows and explains a great deal. He is diligently detailed in his sources and presents the general outline of the theoretical positions of the French intellectuals with competence.

The weaknesses of the book are in the inadequate account he provides of the most central assertions of the argument: the potential of Marxist political philosophy after Althusser's intervention, the concern that animates the book; and the reconstruction of Althusser's thought in terms of its philosophy of the sciences which, allegedly, provides solutions for the central concern. One could say that where the thesis is at its most aggressive, it is least substantiated, in both the argument devoted to the points and in the lack of connecting arguments relevant to them.

Before I turn to a more detailed consideration of the above points, I will offer some brief comments on Lewis' related theme—that Althusser responds to the French intellectual scene in general and to the Parti communiste française (PCF) in particular.

Lewis is clearly right in claiming that Althusser's work is a response to the debates within the PCF and the Marxist trends among the French intellectuals. Althusser (*Radical Philosophy* 1975 12:44) himself had already indicated that his work is a response to Stalinism and Khrushchev's right-wing destalinization, a humanist deviation. Lewis, taking his cue from this, shows that the former was the

creed of the PCF (and led to political disasters), while the latter ran rampant among the French intellectuals in the forms of Hegelian (Lefebvre, Cornu, see pp. 96-108 and 127-135) and Existential Marxisms (Merleau-Ponty, Sartre, see pp. 135-148). The author displays a balanced view, moving across the different positions of these forms of Marxism but the space devoted to this part as a whole is unnecessarily long; it occupies two-thirds (the first five chapters) of the text and is disproportionate to the part devoted to Althusser (the main figure of the text) which occupies one-third (the last two chapters). A good deal of it seems also unrelated to the main argument dealing with the origins and foundations of the PCF (pp. 29-47), while the rest is a routine exposition of the main features of those Marxisms and adds little to what is already familiar. Moreover, Lewis fails to show the historicist nature of those interpretations of Marxism and connect with Althusser's criticism of it—a criticism that is one of Althusser's legacies.

Lewis is most effective when discussing the theoretical and political positions of the PCF (the epistemological privileging of the working class, the inevitability of proletarian revolution, pp 54-65; the notion of 'two sciences', pp 122-126) tracing the theoretical roots to (Stalinist interpretations of) Lenin and Engels. Lewis, however, does not make this distinction and displays a particular hostility towards Lenin. This is quite strange given that Lewis adopts Althusser's revisions which come directly from Lenin (that is, philosophy as class struggle, spontaneous materialism of scientists). Nevertheless, the author is able to show the easy adoption by the PCF of the 'orthodox' Soviet Marxism. In consequence, what was hardly more than a sketch of a theory became effectively frozen in dogma, immune from the often facile but sometimes trenchant criticisms levelled against it, and impervious to theoretical elaboration or even clarification. Adopting Althusser's position, Lewis criticizes those Marxisms for being "empiricistic... ascribing laws to history and essences to historical 'subjects' (whether this be the party or Man);" those theoretical errors "also led to misguided political practices" (p.166).

Turning now to Lewis's treatment of Althusser, one can only be puzzled by the omissions in presenting the latter's positions and the unsubstantiated claims that Lewis makes. In the last two chapters of his text, Lewis focuses on Althusser's philosophy of the sciences aiming firstly at presenting it, detecting its errors, and criticizing them; and then secondly by reconstructing it. The discussion, however, raises certain aporiae because it is quite problematic. There are four such aporiae I would like to touch upon.

1. Althusser is taken to offer solutions to Marxist political philosophy (pp. 4, 15, 17, 158, 159, 190). The problems that plagued Marxism (for example, p.164 and alluded to throughout) have to do with (a) erroneous philosophy of science ('reflection' theory of knowledge (p.165), which, however, is never shown) that led to a false substantive theory (science) and, consequently, misguided political practice (the errors of the PCF); (b) lack of a viable philosophy of science to defend the scientificity of Marxism and guide political action (Hegelian and Existential Marxisms). The task Lewis sets for himself then is to show that Althusser does provide a sound philosophy of science, and to show how this could guide political action (these are also the tasks Althusser had set for himself, according to Lewis, p. 189). However, the second task is never really discussed; Lewis devotes only one page to it—the concluding sub-section of the last chapter—and never shows how Althusser could provide a guide to political action. The claim stands as if it is self-certifying. Such a strong claim requires some persuasive reason within the text to support it—which I do not deny it can be given in some form—but it is missing. Lewis simply states that new possibilities open up—which is true, but what are they? He fails to specify any possibilities and, in this sense, he is unable to deliver on the core claim of his text, that "Althusser's reinterpretation...resolves certain contemporary problems in political philosophy" (p.15).

2. The second aporia relates to the first task discussed above. In ch. 6, Lewis attempts to present Althusser's original philosophy of science and evaluate it. Remarkably, he ends up emasculating

Althusser: there is no mention of the distinction between theoretical/real object, 'knowledge effect,' problematic, open and closed problematic; no discussion of Althusser's notion of empiricism (though there are two references to it in the same paragraph on pp.165-6) which is different from the standard use in philosophy and includes both empiricism and rationalism; no discussion of Spinoza or Bachelard, some of whose ideas Althusser appropriated. Lewis constructs a straw-man in order to dismiss it (with no critical examination) as rationalist and conventionalist (pp.170, 175) because the criteria of scientificity are internal to a scientific discourse and there is no 'external check,' no 'external verification' (no extra-scientific guarantees?). But what did Althusser mean by 'internal criteria of scientificity'? Why did he reject any 'external check'? How did he define/demarcate science? What are the criteria for such a demarcation? What does Lewis mean by 'external verification/check'? How does this differ from positivism? And many other questions that are left unanswered. As a result, the author is unable to evaluate and discuss Althusser's original philosophy of science, unless we take the charge of conventionalism as a discussion of limitation. But this by itself will not be sufficient. The questions which the author should have been concerned with—'does Althusser provide criteria of demarcation?'; 'what are those criteria?'; 'do they demarcate science from ideology?'; 'what makes a theory scientific and what makes a theory ideological?'—these questions are never raised, let alone discussed. The author is unable to explain how Althusser demarcates science from ideology (and discuss, consequently, its limitations) because he never refers to what he has omitted from his presentation of that philosophy of science, that is, the distinction between an object constructed within a problematic (science) and a given object (ideology). As it stands, this presentation of Althusser's philosophy of science lacks any credibility.

3. The third aporia regards Lewis' attempted reconstruction of Althusser's philosophy of science and is deeper in significance for Lewis' text since the idea is to provide a firm scientificity upon which to base

political action. Right off the bat, he claims that Althusser, after the revisions he made, is “willing to promote the position that reality itself provides an external check on science’s findings” (p. 192). This corrects the conventionalist errors but it is not “the renunciation of conventionalism.” To begin with, the author fails to explain how those conventionalist errors are corrected; how conventionalism (even in a modified form) functions within a reconstructed theory of science; and if conventionalism is not renounced, why is it a charge? Moreover, Lewis is unable to provide any textual evidence to support his claim that Althusser changed positions regarding the notion of science, which leaves it suspended in the air. Did Althusser change his view of science? The materials we have at our disposal do not warrant such a claim. Althusser changed his metaphilosophy (from the ‘science of the sciences’ to ‘class struggle in theory’) and his theory of ideology (from the opposite of science to something that permeates everything, including science)—Lewis records those changes in ch. 7. Those revisions do affect the concept of science but Althusser did not say much about it. It was as if everything else remained the same. What science would look like and how it would be demarcated from non-science were left to his disciples to reconstruct. Moreover, there is evidence (in *Lenin and Philosophy*, in *Philosophy and the Spontaneous Philosophy of the Scientists*, and in *Essays in Self-Criticism*, based on the new definition of philosophy which cancels all guarantees of knowledge and, thus, affects the notion of demarcation) that Althusser is moving away from the traditional problem of demarcation (i.e., choosing between theories) to a new one (i.e., choosing between philosophies that foster the development of science and philosophies that inhibit the development of science) to completely abandoning it (i.e., choosing neither theories, nor philosophies but problems to be solved; in this sense, Althusser provides a problem-oriented philosophy of science that Lewis misses all together). Lewis simply ascribes a position to Althusser that the latter, it seems, did not hold—he provides no evidence to the contrary; the ensuing discussion regarding demarcation is confused and constitutes a throwback rather than

an advance. Lewis suggests (he provides no argument for his suggestions) that science is demarcated from ideology in terms of testability (p. 192, he gives reference to Resch but the problem is that the latter does not talk about testability there). This is an ‘objective’ criterion established independently of scientific practice, and applied to theories in order to evaluate them in terms of their formal characteristics. It is an Archimedian topos from which one could judge the merits of theories. And taken together with Lewis’ complaints about lack of ‘external verification/check,’ they point to a different direction: positivism. Now apart from the problems such a criterion poses (which are all too well known), Lewis manages to emasculate his own criterion, in the same sentence, when he states that it is “science...that uncover[s]” the difference between science and ideology, claiming in effect that one must be inside a theory, not outside it as testability suggests, in order to judge another theory! Philosophy of science, it seems, is not Lewis’ forte. To add to the total confusion, he claims that concept formation proceeds inductively: observation, abstraction, generalization (p.195)! In any case, some argument must be provided to substantiate those claims because they are not self-evident.

4. The fourth aporia is related to the role philosophy plays in Althusser’s writings after the revisions he made. Lewis attempts to explicate this role but, remarkably, manages to obscure it. It is clear in Althusser’s later writings that philosophy (as class struggle in theory) does not intervene in science and thus, is not responsible for demarcating it from ideology (*Philosophy and the Spontaneous Philosophy of the Scientists*, pp. 99, 141-2). Lewis, however, claims that its role is both to demarcate science from ideology (pp. 192, 193, 194, 195, 196, 197) and demarcate the ideological appropriations of science from non-ideological ones (pp. 193, 194, 195); sometimes the two notions occur in the same sentence and are employed interchangeably. Those two notions of demarcation are neither equivalent nor complementary; the first takes place in science, the second in philosophy. The author simply (con)fuses them and uses them interchangeably.

In effect, he fails to explain the difference between ‘science’/‘the scientific’ and ‘ideology’/‘the ideological’ that Althusser makes (*Philosophy and the Spontaneous Philosophy of the Scientists*, p.107) according to which, the terms in each pair are not identical. This leads him to mistake philosophy as providing the foundation (the role of a referee, p. 197) to guarantee the scientificity of a theory. Moreover, philosophy is endowed with the capacity to transform class relations (p.194), and this is how, Lewis claims, it intervenes politically—an idealist lapse.

The topic of the book is certainly interesting but the treatment of it is not. The first five chapters are quite long with a good deal of it unrelated to the core claims while the rest consists of summaries of standard accounts of French Hegelian and Existential Marxisms. The last two chapters on Althusser do not provide an adequate account of Althusser’s notion of science and consist of claims that are not substantiated. It is quite legitimate for Lewis to claim that Althusser’s thought should be reconstructed in terms of testability and verification, but a persuasive argument must be provided for this. As they stand, they are arbitrary and open to any interpretation.

Hristos Verikukis

References

- Althusser, Louis
 1975. Dr. Althusser. *Radical Philosophy*, 12:44.
 1990. *Philosophy and the Spontaneous Philosophy of the Scientists*, trans. W. Montag. *In Philosophy and the Spontaneous Philosophy of the Scientists and Other Essays*, London: Verso, 69-165.
- Baltas, A
 1986. Ideological Assumptions in Physics: Social Determinations of Internal Structures. *In P.S.A.*, vol. 2. A. Fine, A. and P. Machamer, eds. East Lansing, Michigan.
 1992. Shifts in Scientific Rationality and the Role of Ideology. *In Historical Types of Rationality*. M. Assimakopoulous, K. Gavroglou, P. Nikolacopoulos, eds. Athens: National Technical University.
 1993. Louis Althusser’s Philosophy and the Spontaneous Philosophy of the Scientists and Other Essays. *Philosophy of Science*, 60.
- Benton, Ted
 1984. *The Rise and Fall of Structural Marxism: Althusser and His Influence*. New York: St. Martin’s Press.
- Callinicos, Alex
 1976. *Althusser’s Marxism*. London: Pluto Press.
- Elliot, Gregory
 1987 *Althusser: the Detour of Theory*. London: Verso.
- Ferretter, Luke
 2006. *Louis Althusser*. Oxford: Routledge.
- Lecourt, Dominique
 1975. *Marxism and Epistemology*. London: NLB.
- Montag, Warren
 2003. *Louis Althusser*, New York: Palgrave MacMillan.
- Suchting, W.A.
 1994. Notes on The Cultural Significance of The Sciences. *Science and Education*, 3(1).
 1995. The Nature of Scientific Thought. *Science & Education*, 4(1).
 1992. On Some Unsettled Questions Touching the Character of Marxism, Especially as Philosophy. *Graduate Faculty Philosophy Journal*, 14(1).