Marxism versus postmodernism

Thu, 30/01/1997 - 11:59

Postmodernism is not yet the dominant form of bourgeois thought. But it is, increasingly, the predominant form of critical academic thought. A Marxist critique of postmodernism has to challenge its intellectual core and uncover its material roots. The aims of this article are: to summarise the theory which underpins postmodernism; to offer a Marxist critique of that theory; and to explain the material roots of its plausibility.

The last few years have been marked by an inverted millenarianism in which premonitions of the future, catastrophic or redemptive, have been replaced by the end of this or that (the end of ideology, art or social class, the ?crisis? of Leninism, social democracy or the welfare state etc. etc.); taken together, all of these perhaps constitute what is increasingly called postmodernism.?(Frederick Jameson)

If there is a late 20th century zeitgeist ? a spirit of the age which pervades culture, academic thought and politics ? it is to be found in the ideas grouped under the banner of postmodernism. We could add to Jameson?s list the idea of ?post-industrial? society, chaos theories in science and, of course, the ?end of history?.

Postmodernism is not yet the dominant form of bourgeois thought. But it is, increasingly, the predominant form of critical academic thought. A Marxist critique of postmodernism has to challenge its intellectual core and uncover its material roots. The aims of this article are: to summarise the theory which underpins postmodernism; to offer a Marxist critique of that theory; and to explain the material roots of its plausibility.

In social science, cultural theory, politics and philosophy postmodernism?s enemy number one is Marxism. The old bourgeois liberalism ? while it retained its predominance ? lost its dynamism and coherence with the onset of the crises of the late 1960s and early 1970s. In the 1970s Marxism ? albeit in a variety of academic forms ? was the main methodological standpoint adopted by those searching for a coherent critique of modern society.

Today, in the English speaking world, Marxism has been virtually banished from the universities. A whole generation of academics has ?converted? to postmodernism. Among students there is little knowledge of Marxism, still less study of it, other than in the form of distorted summaries provided by its opponents.

So in anthropology, sociology, psychology, politics and philosophy postmodernism has almost become the new orthodoxy. That is to say nothing of academic disciplines such as ?post-colonial studies? ? where the word imperialism is banned ? whose very existence is premised on postmodernist methods.

If postmodernism were popular in universities but subject to a sustained challenge in intellectual life outside them, in particular by a vibrant workers? movement, the task of combating it would be less important. But its theoretical premises align fundamentally with the ?common sense? of a whole generation which has seen Stalinism collapse, Labourism commit suicide and popular radicalism fragment into a variety of single issue campaigns.

That is why fighting postmodernist ideas is of prime importance to Marxism.
It cannot be done by wearing a T-shirt bearing the slogan “bollocks to postmodernism”. Nor can it be done by bowing and scraping in front of the gurus of postmodernism, asserting that “at their best” they were really Marxists.

The works of the French post-structuralists – Foucault, Derrida, Lyotard and Baudrillard etc. – are the philosophical foundations of postmodernism.

Alongside them, reaching similar conclusions from different starting points, stand the “neo-sceptics” of modern American philosophy: Quine, Rorty, De Man and Stanley Fish. If this article deals predominantly with the European proponents of postmodernism it is because theirs is the standpoint generated specifically via a critique of Marxism.

Defenders of postmodernism often argue that it is impossible to lump all the postmodern thinkers together; that the weak points of one postmodern theorist were recognised and overcome by another; that there are important debates within postmodernism, and self-critical re-assessments within the works of its major thinkers.

All of this is true. But in the first five minutes of any argument between a Marxist and a postmodernist a set of common themes will emerge. These are:

- there is no objective truth to be comprehended by scientific thought;
- there is no pre-given human subject; the human individual is only a complex of interrelated outside influences and determinants;
- language cannot represent reality; therefore, the concept of ideology, where false ideas mask reality, is meaningless;
- the idea of historical progression and necessity is meaningless: social formations in history, sociology and anthropology must be “mapped”; not judged or categorised;
- all social movements or societies based on the possibility of scientific knowledge and objective truth rely on “grand narratives” rather than inner logic to legitimise them; these “meta-narratives” inevitably lead to the legitimising of oppression;
- the class struggle and socialism are precise examples of such meta-narratives; in any case they have become outmoded by developments in the modern world;
- the only form of resistance to oppression that does not lead to another form of oppression is limited, local, piecemeal resistance; the surest form of resistance is to change ourselves, aspiring ultimately to turn our own lives into a “work of art”.

Thus, philosophical postmodernism overtly rejects more than three hundred years of progressive thinking associated with the consistent rationalism of the 18th century Enlightenment. The attempt to think scientifically about society as well as nature and all systematic thought based on this endeavour is rejected by postmodernism as part of the “Enlightenment project”, a project which Francois Lyotard argues:

“...legitimates itself with reference to a metadiscourse – the dialectics of the Spirit, the hermeneutics of meaning, the emancipation of the rational or working subject or the creation of wealth.”

At the very heart of postmodernist theory lies the rejection of human thought’s ability to comprehend
objective truth. While they have expressed it in different ways, and with different degrees of confidence, the chief theorists of postmodernism all stand by a variant of philosophical scepticism: we cannot know anything for certain; even provisional theories about the world presuppose that there is an objective truth to be grasped. Jean Baudrillard quotes approvingly the words of the 19th century philosopher Frederick Nietzsche:

"Down with all hypotheses that have allowed the belief in a true world."

This view is, in turn, rooted in postmodernism’s rejection of the ability of language to represent reality.

The postmodernists found their way to this idea via a critique of the "structuralism" of the linguist Ferdinand de Saussure. Writing in the early 20th century Saussure sought to understand the structure of language by uncovering the relationship between a word and the idea it signifies (the signifier and the signified).

Saussure set aside for the purpose of study the relationship between the concept and the thing being conceptualised. He was concerned with the relative autonomy of the structure of language from the world it discussed.

Out of this specific line of investigation a whole methodology — "structuralism" — was evolved after World War Two. It was applied not just to the study of language but to society and culture in general, particularly in the social sciences.

A generation of radical intellectuals in the 1950s and 1960s became preoccupied with the problems of generalising structural linguistics into a "science of signs" — semiotics. Structuralism also found a voice in the writings of the most influential academic Marxist of the late 1960s and early 1970s, Louis Althusser. Meanwhile structural linguistics itself experienced a "crisis" during which many of its leading proponents began to reject any correlation between the sign and the real object being signified.

According to Foucault scholars, McHoul and Grace:

"In essence, theories of the relation between language and the "real" were abandoned in favour of theories relating linguistic element to linguistic element. Semiotics and structuralism, that is, moved towards the signifier side of things. Discourse, then, took on the guise of a relatively autonomous, yet quite material, sphere in its own right. This position became known as the "materiality of then signifier"."°

Out of the crisis of structural linguistics — "post-structuralism" — was born and it no longer confined its pronouncements to the sphere of linguistics.

Its basic tenet — that signs are more real than the things they represent — was codified into a world view, an anti-philosophy. The most radical proponents of this have been Jacques Derrida and Jean Baudrillard.

For Derrida all forms of language and communication are summed up in the word "text". And, in Derrida’s famous phrase, there is "nothing outside the text".° For Derrida, however, the lack of correspondence between language and reality does not absolve us from subjecting culture to criticism. This gives rise to one of postmodernism’s most important ideas: deconstruction.

All "texts", according to Derrida, are made up of metaphors and other linguistic devices which conceal the real meaning, often concealing the flaw in the logical structure. The task of a critical thinker is to deconstruct the text, reveal its inner meaning or lack of meaning through a "close reading". Like a psychiatrist who looks for chance remarks and physical twitches in the patient to uncover what is really the
cause of mental illness, Derrida sees the "marginal text" as the best starting point for a critique of a set of ideas.

Derrida's work takes the form of literary commentaries on various aspects of Western culture. He does not posit an absolute truth which the allegedly dishonest forms of language cover up: like all postmodernists he rejects the concept of ideology.

Since the role of the critic is not to analyse but to commentate, literary ramblings are just as valid as rigorous analytical presentations. The US writer Paul De Man, a follower of Derrida, wrote:

"Literature turns out to be the main topic of philosophy and the model of the kind of truth to which it aspires."

Jean Baudrillard poses the problem of the relationship of language to the real world in a different and more culturally specific way. He claims that mass communications, and the popular culture they have given birth to, make a nonsense of the question "does language reflect the real world?".

Traditional language, according to Baudrillard, tried to "represent" the real world, giving rise to the philosophical "problem of representation" (i.e. is the representation accurate?). The structure of knowledge in the late 20th century means that, for Baudrillard representation has given way to "simulation". Simulation "bears no relation to reality whatever: it is its own pure simulacrum."

Instead of reality we have "hyper-reality"? where signs are more real than the things they signify. As a result, Baudrillard too rejects the concept of ideology:

"Ideology corresponds to a betrayal of reality by signs; simulation corresponds to a short-circuit of reality and its reduplication by signs."

Television, for example, is more real than the world it represents. This outlook allowed Baudrillard infamously to predict, in January 1991, that the Gulf War could not happen. After it was over he wrote a book entitled The Gulf War Did Not Take Place.

Within postmodernism itself there is controversy over what the inability of language to reflect truth means. An obvious problem raised by Baudrillard's arguments for rejecting rationality is its historically specific and therefore limited premise. Whereas Derrida makes a general statement about knowledge, Baudrillard makes a historically specific one: for him it is the age of mass communications which has made truth impossible.

The clearest line is drawn, however, between Foucault and Derrida. Whereas Derrida denies that there is a knowable world beyond the text, Foucault sees ? in the hidden meanings uncovered by deconstruction ? a reflection of the power relationships in human society.

Postmodernists argue that any meta-discourse or meta-narrative, will legitimise political power and oppression. Enlightenment rationality gave rise to a number of such meta-discourses: liberalism, Marxism, fascism, Hegelian philosophy, Social Darwinism etc. The task, they say, is to subject rationality itself to a critique so that such abuses of social power cannot recur.

Michel Foucault, declared, "I am simply a Nietzschean." Postmodernism's views on the problem of "power"? social oppression and repression ? also owe much to Nietzsche. Nietzsche saw the class struggle as only one expression of a more fundamental struggle in human society ? what he called the "will to power". Foucault refuses to make a value judgement between repression and the "power" exerted
by social movements which resist it.

But Foucault refuses to order those power relationships politically, socially or morally. He refuses to write history? preferring genealogy? i.e. a temporal progression which does not suggest progress, lawfulness or necessity.

His three volume History of Sexuality provides a commentary on the historically changing and determined nature of this fundamental facet of human culture. But ? though its subject matter is the rise of capitalism and its effects on the pre-capitalist family ? he refuses to structure his investigations around that historical fact.

Both Foucault and Derrida have their quasi-Marxist followers. Derrida has claimed to see value in Marxist socialism as a form of resistance once it is shorn of its ?meta-narrative? and reduced to a utopian good idea.11

Foucault ? though avowedly anti-Marxist ? is seen by many as the more ?materialist?, because of his desire to explain unequal power structures as underpinning the hidden meaning of language, and because his subject matter has been the historically changing form social oppression.

But the arguments between the postmodernists only serve to underline the key points of agreement, all of which form the starting point for their critique of Marxism. Fundamentally, all of them reject the possibility of knowing the objective world.

When considering the social world, all reject historicism. All see modern philosophical thought ? from the Enlightenment of the 1760s to Marxism and beyond ? as rooted in an unjustifiable rationalism. They reject the specific value of philosophical thought over literature and commentary.

Finally, all reject the concept of the human subject. Western philosophy has been rooted in the concept of the individual human being (the subject) comprehending the outside world (the object) through thinking. According to Foucault:

"The individual is not a pre-given entity which is seized on by the exercise of power. The individual, with his identity and characteristics, is the product of a relation of power exercised over bodies, multiplicities, movements, desires, forces."12

While much of Foucault's work focuses on the creation of human subjectivity by society, postmodernism's attack on the subject has important implications for the theory of knowledge. We cannot know objective truth: not only because language cannot depict reality but also because there is no ?independent? human thinker to comprehend the truth.

The Marxist critique of postmodernism has to start with the epistemological questions ? i.e. questions about knowledge and how we know what we know.

Marxists defend science, rationality, the idea of an objective, knowable world and human subjectivity ? but we do so critically. We defend them from the standpoint of dialectical materialism.

Dialectical materialism sees all scientific thought as a series of successive approximations to the truth? (Lenin); it sees the subject/object model of knowledge as one sided because it presupposes an absolute opposition between the thinking mind and ?matter?.

In addition it is only revolutionary Marxism which can provide a coherent critique of ?meta-narratives? where they serve as justification for oppression, including where ? as in the case of Stalinism ? that ?meta-
narrative? is a degeneration originating in the Marxist movement itself.

Let us start with the arguments for and against an objective reality, whose laws of motion are real and discoverable.

Millions of people, every day, board passenger jets. They are prepared to believe that a machine based on the laws of aerodynamics can defy gravity. They believe, provisionally, that science has discovered a real objective law; they trust science?s prediction that the jet will fly. Aeroplanes work because their design is based on accurately observed and understood laws of nature.13

At a deeper level, however, some of the laws of physics on which aerodynamics is based ? essentially the physics discovered by the scientists of the much maligned ?Enlightenment? ? are called into question by modern scientific discoveries. Even the two great advances of 20th century physical science (the general theory of relativity and the theory of quantum mechanics) conflict with each other.

Because of this the most consistent scientific thinkers are forced to view their theories as provisional summaries of the truth; approximations formed in the human mind to the actual laws of the objective world.

**Scientific method**

Does the provisional and approximate nature of scientific theory mean that, ultimately, there is no knowable objective world?

The most influential modern argument in favour of this comes not from European post-structuralism but from North American ?neo-pragmatist? philosophy. W.V. Quine, in his essay ?Two Dogmas of Empiricism?14 argued that there are as many ways of describing an observed event as there are sentences held to be true at a given time.

For Quine even non-theoretical ?observation sentences? ? such as ?the jumbo jet is flying? ? are already value-laden, bound up in a pre-existing belief system (?It will fly?). For Quine, therefore, scientific statements and mystical statements have equal validity: they are all hypotheses. We may choose one set of statements to represent truth, says Quine, but in fact we are only choosing one set of metaphors for the world, one ?ontological scheme?.15

However, when Quine wants to cross the Atlantic he gets on a jumbo jet.

Faced with the choice of two sentences ? ?the jet will fly? and ?I could fly by flapping my arms? ? Quine chooses to act as if the second statement were false.

In doing so, he is not just exhibiting an urge to self preservation. Nor is he simply choosing an ?ontological scheme?. He is making exactly the same link between scientifically formulated laws and human action that forms the basis of so called Enlightenment rationalism.

It could easily be proved that Quine cannot fly by dropping him from a tall building. It can be proved that jumbo jets will fly by observing them. Ultimately the proof of scientific hypotheses lies in practice.

The physicist Stephen Hawking describes the way Einstein?s general theory of relativity was reinforced ? as against classical Newtonian physics ? by observing small movements in the path of the planet Mercury:

?The fact that Einstein?s predictions matched what was seen, while Newton?s did not, was one of the crucial confirmations of the new theory. However we still use Newton?s theory for all practical purposes because the difference between its predictions and those of general relativity is very small in situations that
we normally deal with.\textsuperscript{16}

Marxism shares with all consistent scientific method and rationalism the belief in the concreteness of truth, and the provisional hypothetical nature of scientific theory. But the revelation \textsuperscript{16} through scientific research that one theory is inadequate; its replacement by another; even a period of generalised scientific uncertainty such as our own; all of this does not add up to a case for rejecting the possibility of scientific truth.

In the late 20th century science is undergoing a massive historical transformation, in which many of the certainties and models of reality are being shaken up. The goal of the absolute majority of scientists is to re-order scientific thought at the end of this process. Hawking, for example, sees the possibility of current partial and conflicting theories giving rise to a \textsuperscript{17} complete unified theory that will describe everything in the universe.

A small minority of scientists have been influenced by postmodernism. But calls for a \textsuperscript{18} postmodern science based on chaos theory have received little support, even from those like Hawking who believe that theory \textsuperscript{18} exists only in our minds and does not have any other reality.

The postmodernist call for a \textsuperscript{19} re-enchantment of nature has produced little resonance precisely because science is a search for truth in the physical world.

Richard Appignanesi, a recent populariser of postmodernism, points out ruefully:

\textsuperscript{20}\textsuperscript{19}\textsuperscript{20} The emerging theories of chaos and complexity completely demolish the notion of control and certainty in science . . . Both theories promise a postmodern revolution in science based on notions of holism, interconnection and order out of chaos . . . While both chaos and complexity have forced us to ask sensible questions and to stop making naive assumptions, both are presented by their champions as new theories of everything.

Of course, under capitalist society scientific research is subject to many restraints. The scientific community is often, and increasingly, a handmaiden of business. The fracturing of scientific research into a series of overlapping but uncoordinated \textsuperscript{21} disciplines can hinder the search for truth.

But while science is hampered by the social relations of capitalism under which it is practised, and while many of the new disciplines of science have contributed buzzwords to the postmodern lexicon (chaos, fractals, Heisenbergian uncertainty etc.), not one of these scientific disciplines proceeds in practice from an absolute scepticism or relativism.

That is because scientific thought is not qualitatively different from the common, everyday thoughts of the air traveller checking in his/her luggage at the airport: it proceeds from practice and is verified through practice \textsuperscript{21} that is to say through our senses.

Materialist dialectics counterposes to all scepticism the historical fact that humanity has conquered nature through knowing it more accurately. The progress of the productive forces \textsuperscript{22} from stone tools to the internet \textsuperscript{22} has occurred because of the interaction between human thought, consciousness, and the objective world.

If the objective world were unknowable through our senses then this progression could not have taken place.

\textbf{Language and reality}
Postmodernism has adopted and reinforced the general philosophical relativism outlined above in its theory of language. Richard Rorty, the American postmodernist writes:

"To say that truth is not out there is simply to say that where there are no sentences there is no truth, that sentences are elements of human languages, and that human languages are human creations. Truth cannot be out there; cannot exist independently of the human mind; because sentences cannot so exist."

Postmodernist thinkers fall into two camps on the question of language:

? language cannot represent reality;

? language can no longer represent reality.

For both standpoints the problem of knowledge is shifted from sensation to consciousness. Whether or not we can see a true picture of the objective world we cannot think it; because the language in which we think cannot accurately comprehend that world.

Language is demonstrably a product of human history. Humankind?s interaction with nature, through practice, has produced successive linguistic structures. In Greenland there are more than twenty different words for snow; in the England of Sir Francis Drake there were over forty different words for a sailing ship.

For Marxists this history of language is a confirmation of the dialectical materialist assertion that being determines consciousness. A visit to any museum of antiquity shows that the rising level of human mastery over nature created ?languages? that described and comprehended the world with increasing accuracy: from hieroglyphics and crude human representations to the alphabet and unsurpassed sculptural realism.

Structural linguistics originated in an attempt to understand the inner laws of humanity?s successive ways of thinking expressed through language.

Its original focus was historic languages and the living languages of surviving pre-capitalist (often pre-class) civilisations. It attempted to look beneath conscious speech to the unconscious infrastructure of language. It searched for an inner structure or system in languages with the aim of discovering general laws of language itself. It focused not on historical change, but abstracted from the changes within language.

Many of structuralism?s insights were useful, both to the study of ?primitive? cultures and also the development of language in children. But generalised into a method of analysing all human society, most importantly in the work of the anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss, structuralism became a mixture of mechanical materialism and idealism.

Its mechanical materialism lies in its assertion that human subjectivity and action played no part in the ?structure? of society. We are simply the products of our circumstances. The analysis of a given social structure depends on taking a ?snapshot? of society and elaborating its general rules. The human subject is not free to think outside the language rules of the society in which they live. Because of this structuralism is unable to understand; and often uninterested in; the process of historical development.

At the same time, precisely because of its emphasis on language as the determining factor in consciousness (as opposed to practice), structuralism is a form of idealism.

It was out of the collapse of structuralism; its failure to hold up as a general theory of social reality; that post-structuralism and postmodernism were born.
Derrida and Foucault both began working within a structuralist framework. They shared with structuralism the idea that the human subject (what Levi Strauss called the "spoilt brat of philosophy") was merely the product of its surroundings and therefore, not valid as a concept. They also shared with Levi-Strauss his opposition to the idea of historical progress. His anthropology had rejected, as "Euro-centric? , the idea that modern capitalist society represented a form of progress over the pre-class societies he studied.

Structuralism had also gone a long way to undermining the possibility of language reflecting truth. It bracketed? (i.e. temporarily ignored) the thing, in order study the sign representing the thing. Thus it paved the way for its own self-destruction.

Derrida led structuralism? s movement to the ?signifier side of things? by asserting that since the relationship between word and concept were already arbitrary, language was nothing more than a ?free-floating collection of signifiers?.

At a theoretical level the most fundamental objection to this retreat to linguistic relativism is that it contains its own refutation. If language has no reference to the material world, if there can be no truth, then there can also be no coherent theory. The ?theory? that language cannot reflect reality is ? by its own criteria ? invalid, because there can be no theory.

This may seem like a cheap shot at postmodernism. But its validity has been recognised by the postmodernists themselves.

Alongside the retreat to linguistic relativism ? the idea that truth, in Nietzsche?s words, is just a ?mobile army of metaphors? ? goes a retreat away from attempts to theorise. In Derrida?s work the attempt to theorise is replaced by a fragmentary series of ?non-judgmental? commentaries.

This is also the method of Jean Baudrillard, but taken to extremes.

Baudrillard began as loosely committed Marxist in the early 1960s but developed a new, basically idealist explanation of mass production and consumption, in which the categories of Marxist economics are torn away and applied to semiology.

For Baudrillard commodities do not simply have use value and exchange value (as in the scheme outlined in Marx?s Capital23), they are also ?signifiers? in a language system.

And their signifying role is more important than either their use value or exchange value. Ultimately Baudrillard concluded that both use value and exchange value were merely ?alibis? for the sign. The whole ?system of signs? which Marxism calls ideology, the whole culture of mass consumption, advertising etc. was not the result of capitalist production but its prime cause.

As we have indicated, there is a logical contradiction between the generalised relativism of Foucault and Derrida and the historically specific relativism of Baudrillard. But what they share is a retreat from theory, justified by a retreat from linguistic meaning.

Marxists object to this: not because we believe that language reflects reality in a constantly ?true? and unmediated way, but because the linguistic ?problem of representation? can only be solved historically.

If there is ?only? language, and it bears no relationship to objective reality ? in Derrida?s version of post-structuralism ? then why does language change? If ?discourse?, as Foucault understands it, is not merely language but the means whereby power systems come into being and legitimise themselves, then what is the impulse which drives one power structure to be replaced by another? It cannot be the subjective action
of human individuals since the human subject is hopelessly trapped in the ?determined? language and the predominant discourse of its time.

There is no convincing answer to these questions in the work of Foucault and Derrida. The only consistent answer can be found in Marxism.

Dialectical materialism rejects the distinction between ?knowing? and ?doing?. The ?truth claims? and ?truth sentences?, derided by postmodernists on both linguistic and epistemological grounds, are always, in the first place, the product of human action not of thinking divorced from action. For Marxists knowledge is transforming action.

And this is not just a ?theory?, or rival speculation. It is provable with reference to every historical advance in knowledge. Every advance in knowledge is at the same time an advance in technique.

Until very recently human knowledge, of necessity, trailed behind technique. Hunting leads to language, the stone tool to drawing ? not the other way round.

The answer to all scepticism ? whether of the Quine, Rorty, Foucault or Derrida types ? was given by Marx as early as 1845 in the Theses on Feuerbach:

?The question whether objective truth can be attributed to human thinking is not a question of theory but is a practical question. In practice man must prove the truth, i.e. the reality and power, the this-sidedness of his thinking. The dispute over the reality or non-reality of thinking which is isolated from practice is a purely scholastic question.?24

**Ideology**

As we have seen, both French post-structuralism and American philosophical scepticism reject the possibility of ideology.

Ideology ? broadly speaking ? means a set of ideas arising from social conditions which serve to obscure the truth about society, legitimising a specific form of class society as the only ?natural? or inevitable social formation.

Marxism did not invent the concept: it was originated by the mechanical materialism of the Enlightenment and the French revolution, and taken up by Marx?s idealist precursor, Hegel. Even in Marxism there has been intense debate about the nature and role of ideology.25

Nevertheless, it remains a crucial concept for explaining the role of language and logic in comprehending reality; for explaining why humankind ? despite being engaged constantly in ?practice? ? comes up with false ideas.

In the earliest exposition of the concept, The German Ideology26, Marx and Engels start from the fact that, before there is thinking there is being: before mind there is matter. Matter existed for millennia before it produced a thinking animal. The human brain, where thinking takes place, is also matter. Human consciousness was produced, historically, by our interaction with the environment ? more specifically our attempts to change it.

This biological fact is at the same time a social fact: humans are social animals. In order to interact successfully with our environment we must do so in societies. Our social existence is crucial in producing our consciousness.
As soon as human beings raised their minds to questions of explaining the world around them they formed sets of ideas which were conditioned by their social and physical environment: seaboard societies worshipped sea gods.

But why did they worship gods at all?

The religious impulse appeared to the early materialists as an absence of reason: ideology was humanity’s substitute for not being able to know the natural world and thus control it. Marx and Engels went beyond this rationalist view of ideology by showing how false ideas, as well as true ones, have real material roots:

?We set out from real, active men and on the basis of their real life-process we demonstrate the development of the ideological reflexes and echoes of this life process.?  

But:

?If in all ideology men and their circumstances appear upside down as in a camera obscura [a pinhole camera], this phenomenon arises just as much as from their historical life process as the inversion of objects on the retina does from their physical life process.?

The act of subordinating nature to human control did not just push back the boundaries of ideology. It was done through society, and because all society until now has been systematically unequal ? class based ? social development created and reinforced ideology.

Ideology is formed not just by physical conditions but by social conditions. Specifically the most fundamental social conditions ? the way we produce wealth, what Marx called the economic ?structure? or base ? give rise to a whole series of social institutions and modes of behaviour which in turn condition human thought:

?The sum total of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society, the real foundation, on which rises a legal and political superstructure and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness. The mode of production of material life conditions the social, political and intellectual life processes in general.?27

The many-layered mediating process between economic production and social thought means that ideology can be varied within a given society. There can be ideologies of resistance as well as of reaction.

?The blacks are taking our jobs and destroying our national culture? is one example of ideology. So is the idea that fascist councillor Derek Beacon came to power in London?s Isle of Dogs by exploiting the magical power of a ?lay-line? which ran beneath his house.

For the same reason that we have jumbo jets that fly we can have ideas that challenge ideology. Science, applied to the physical world, produces hypotheses provable by interaction with that world. Social practice can equip us with the vision to see beneath the external appearances thrown up by social structures.

Anybody wanting to free humanity from the necessity of having to endure exploitation at work, to starve and suffer oppression has to identify the obstacles that stand in the way of freedom. Collective struggle has the power to blow away ideology ? maybe only partially but at least in the most crucial areas ? and allow those resisting oppression to come to a scientific view of their predicament.

It is a fact that the collective class struggle is the greatest counterweight to crude, overt and crippling racism of the kind quoted above. The active struggle can prove that fascists like Derek Beackon have no
power—magical or otherwise—to resist a mass, political and physical working class response.

Ultimately the working class will not dispel capitalist ideology—in all its forms—without uprooting capitalism itself. But the most collectively active section of the working class is able to see through the decisive parts of that ideology, especially when its spontaneous insights are combined with, and codified into, a scientific counter-argument for socialism.

Contrast all this with the views of post-structuralism and neo-scepticism.

Neither Michel Foucault nor Stanley Fish deny that our beliefs are conditioned by our surroundings. Both agree that we cannot escape such conditioning. According to Fish:

“That is the one thing a historically conditioned consciousness cannot do, conduct a rational examination of its own convictions.”

For the post-structuralists, while deconstructive criticism can unmask the logical flaws and sleights of hand in discourse, and even uncover the structure of an ideology, it cannot replace it. Unless it retreats to the personal, or the fragmentary, the critique of one ideology will only be done from the standpoint of another.

In one sense the postmodernists have grasped the truth here. They are rooted in the “Western Marxist” tradition which divides the revolutionary party into “intellectuals” and “masses.” No individual theorist, however erudite, can hope to escape ideology by theoretical practice alone. As individuals we all possess a consciousness that is more or less shaped by the predominant ideas of the ruling class. This is even true of revolutionary socialists.

But as a collective, through a party that unites our everyday experience as individuals with the historic experience of the organised working class, and is armed with a scientific understanding of the interests of the working class, we can combat ideology.

It was the experience of the Stalinist parties’ misleadership and betrayal of the working class which drove the French post-structuralists away from the concept of ideology and towards the concept that Marxism was just another “meta-narrative.”

The class struggle “taught” Foucault, Baudrillard and co that the working class could not rise to become a revolutionary subject. It could not learn collectively from practice. It was a short journey from this idea to the rejection of human subjectivity in general.

True to the influence of Nietzsche, Foucault in particular sees the class struggle as only one example of a more fundamental impulse in humanity, namely the “will to power.”

The first question a materialist must ask about the “will to power” is where does it come from? If it is a biologically determined trait of humanity, and it underpins all social conflict, then the human race is doomed genetically to suffer oppression. That would leave postmodernism as little more than a rehashed version of the religious theory of “original sin.”

If, on the other hand, the will to power has social roots then it is already called into question as the fundamental category. What in society produces and reproduces this will? What exists prior to it? Foucault’s investigations into “discourse” as a means of legitimising power structures, and into historically successive discourses, refuse to answer these questions. The history of society is reduced to the “power struggle” without any explanation of where the power struggle comes from.

Instead Foucault observes the effects of the rise of capitalism on human relations, not just at the level of
class struggle, but in the sphere of punishment, training, social oppression and sexual repression. He argues that, whereas feudalism had imposed a political power relationship from above, rising capitalism imposed “self discipline” through a variety of new social institutions:

“This new mechanism of power is more dependent upon bodies and what they do than upon the earth and its products. It is a mechanism of power which permits time and labour, rather than wealth and commodities, to be extracted from bodies. It is a type of power which is constantly exercised by means of surveillance rather than in a discontinuous manner by means of a system of levies or obligations distributed over time. It presupposes a tightly knit grid of material coercions rather than the physical existence of a sovereign. It is ultimately dependent on the principle that one must be able simultaneously both to increase the subjected forces and to improve the force and efficacy of that which subjects them.”

If these observations were allied to Marxism they would form an interesting and useful insight into the social effects of the rise of capitalism.

Instead they are raised to the status of a theory, specifically opposed to the class struggle as an explanation of historical change:

“One should not assume a massive and primal condition of domination, a binary structure with dominators? on one side and ?dominated? on the other, but rather a multiform production of relations of domination.”

In the first place, these two statements, taken from the same book of interviews, are materially at odds. Who is the “one” who must be able to increase the numbers of those subjected while increasing the force that subjects them? Who are the “subjected”? The answer is clear if we view history as the history of class struggle.

Rising capitalism required a new system of labour discipline, in which the worker was responsible ? within limits ? for the quality and duration of work. No longer to be ruled by the seasons and the sun, as agricultural labour was, but by the rhythms of the factory, the new working class had to be taught the “discipline” of the factory.

Foucault’s polemic against Marxism rests on the assertion that Marxism reduces history to just one set of power relationships ? class structure ? whereas “power” itself is a more fundamental category. But Marxism does not do this. For Marx the fundamental human category was not class struggle, nor power, but labour. Because humans have to labour in order to live, and because their labour is social, they create societies as a means to carrying out labour.

Marxism does not have to ignore or reject a relationship between power structures and human biology ? as the Foucault/Nietzsche model does. It sees human beings as “social animals” and is able to understand power relationships in connection to the most fundamental human activity ? social labour.

It is not true that Marxism reduces all power struggles to class. But we insist that the major social struggles can be defined in relation to class.

Women’s oppression emerges with the transformation of an accidental biological division of labour into a socially codified one. It does not happen until society is advanced enough to create a surplus and therefore a struggle over the surplus.

Racial oppression ? as opposed to simple and widespread prejudice against the outsider ? does not emerge until the rise of a specific form of class exploitation in early capitalism, namely chattel slavery, and
is systematised by the emergence of a specifically capitalist “power structure”, the nation state. Systematic oppression of lesbians and gay men emerges even later, with the imposition of the bourgeois family.32

Foucault’s “reduction” of all inequalities to the concept of power is not a reduction at all: it is a mystification. It cannot explain the reasons for power without reference to power. It is also self-contradictory, recognising oppressors and oppressed but refusing to recognise oppression. It also relies on an utterly one-sided understanding of human subjectivity.

An earlier generation of humanist French thinkers (e.g. Sartre) saw the human subject as capable of doing and thinking anything ? in defiance of its circumstances. Post-structuralism replaced this with an equally one-sided view of the human individual completely trapped by power structures and equally responsible for maintaining them, whether oppressor or oppressed.

Only Marxism can provide a coherent account of the power structures in society and of human subjectivity. Power structures reflect class interests. The state defends the property of the ruling class but petty theft in the inner cities does not summon many police sirens. A strike is an elementary form of power struggle between the working class and the bourgeoisie.

Only somebody who equated Marxism with Stalinism ? in particular with its economism and one-sided economic determinism ? could see social struggles beyond the workplace as proof of its invalidity. But that is exactly the kind of ?Marxism? which surrounded Michel Foucault as a member of the French Communist Party in the 1950s.

In the late 1960s an international working class offensive coincided with explosive struggles of women, youth, gays, black people and third world peasants. Foucault wrote:

“What has happened since 1968, and arguably what made 1968 possible, is profoundly anti-Marxist.”33

In the last part of this section we will try to explain how this judgement rests on a misinterpretation of the facts and a blatant misunderstanding of Marxism.

Fighting oppression

Marxism lays claim to be the only scientific form of thought about society precisely because it uniquely combines a search for totality with the realisation that thought is provisional and reality is in a constant process of change.

Marxism was able to stand on the shoulders of three strands of the Enlightenment ? utopian socialism, Hegelian idealism and classical bourgeois political economy ? only because it was able to see what was unscientific about them. It saw their tendency to present truth as a closed system and reality as a finished evolution.

For Lyotard the meta-narrative is defined by its “great hero, its great dangers, its great voyages, its great goal”.34 Marxism arose by subjecting every one of these elements, in what have become known as its “three sources and component parts”, to a scientific critique. Did it replace them with heroes, dangers, voyages and goals of its own? In the sense Lyotard means, it did not. The working class ? which would constitute the “hero” if Marxism were a meta-narrative ? is destined to abolish itself in the process of liberating humanity. The “great danger” in the Marxist theoretical scheme ? society’s collapse into barbarism ? does not come from outside of its historical scheme: it is a possibility built into capitalist
Hence Marxism’s ?goal? is completely different to that of rationalism, Hegelianism and classical political economy: it is not assured by the rationality and all-knowing totality of the theoretical system. It is only one possible outcome of the inner laws of society. And in Marxism of course the ?goal? is not merely socialism or communism but the total emancipation of the human individual from need. Our goal is to start human history, not bring it to a conclusion.

Marxism is a synthesis of all that was progressive in early 19th century philosophy, economics and utopian socialism, made possible only by an attack on their one sided and false ?totalising? claims.

As for the reactionary meta-narratives of the 20th century ? Social Darwinism, national chauvinism, fascism, Cold War liberalism ? revolutionary Marxism has been the only theory that did not give an inch to them, and the only force which combated them effectively in practice. There is no more cogent theory of fascism, for example, than that of Marxism: it was and is the politics of counter-revolutionary despair. Fostered by big business, but rooted among the middle class victims of capitalism, it was to do the job that the state apparatus could not ? destroy the organised workers? movements.

To the list above we should of course add Stalinism. Leon Trotsky, the last of the great ?classical? Marxists, fought a long battle against the rise of Stalinism. When we survey that battle from the standpoint of the current debate what is striking is just how sensitive Trotsky and his followers were to Stalinism?s corruption of Marxism as a theory.

From the struggle against proletkultism and the effects of bureaucratism on social life in the early Soviet Republic right through to the defence of dialectical materialism against the Stalinist professors, real revolutionary Marxism saw and resisted every attempt to turn Marxism into a ?meta-narrative?.

When Stalin declared that ?socialism? had been achieved in pre-1939 Russia, and that ?communism? was only years ahead, it was Trotskyists who held this up to ridicule. Meanwhile the liberal intelligentsia of the West crawled at Stalin?s feet.

The Trotskyists treated Stalin?s claim for Russia just as Marx treated Hegel?s claims for monarchic Prussia, Adam Smith?s claims for the capitalism of the 14 hour day, Robert Owen?s claims for New Harmony. They refused to accept it as the end of history. They roused the masses to struggle against it. They exposed the legitimising theory as ideology.

This was not the case with the precursors of postmodernism. All accepted Stalinism as Marxism. Thus they experienced the crisis of Stalinism as the death of Marxism.

In 1968 French workers launched the biggest general strike in history. It was sparked into life by a political crisis arising from a student uprising, at a time when a majority of university students could have legitimately been described as middle class. It took place against a backdrop of the rising women?s struggles and black struggles of the late 1960s and a near universal youth radicalisation.

Postmodernist psychologists Deleuze and Guattari argue that ?May 68 in France was molecular . . . irreducible to the segmentarity of class?.35 Refracted through three decades of defeat, the working class seems to disappear totally from today?s postmodernist accounts of the 1968 events:

?Paris was in riot. In France 10 million people went on strike. Non-violent marches became pitched battles ? the tools were barricades, burning cars and Molotov cocktails. Even Baudrillard?s faculty was disrupted for two months. Who was responsible? Students known as the Enragés ? maniacs ? and some were
taught by Baudrillard. But they drew their inspiration from the Situationist International ... The revolution failed. Some historians think it expired because the students went on summer holiday.\textsuperscript{36}

In fact the 10 million strikers were workers. The majority of student radicals drew their inspiration not from the artistic poseurs of the Situationist International but from Maoism, Stalinism and Trotskyism. The revolution failed because of the strength of Stalinism, which demobilised the workers and tried to divide them off from the student uprising.

Within a decade the majority of French intellectuals had abandoned Marxism and openly embraced French capitalism. Those who wanted to maintain a critical stance towards capitalism without Marxism had to evolve structuralism into the anti-rational orthodoxy that is the subject of this discussion. Sebastiano Timpanaro\textsuperscript{37} has explained the crucial role of Louis Althusser — the influential academic Marxist, who sought to fuse Marxism with structuralism — in precipitating this transition (see box).

Today the only revolutionary critique of capitalism and Stalinism is Trotskyism. Contrary to McHoul and Grace you will see revolutionary Marxists fighting for leadership on every contemporary barricade: the picket line, the black self defence group, the women’s campaign against domestic violence, the struggle against imperialist war. But you will not find many postmodernists there. Hampered by scepticism, paralysed by fear of the meta-narrative they retreat into the local and fragmentary. But it is to a local and fragmentary world far removed even from the vision of Foucault, who at least immersed himself in the struggle for the rights of prisoners.

Today’s postmodernists are more at home in the polite protests of middle class environmentalism; the ritual conflicts of the anti-road movement; the hand-wringing anti-humanism of animal rights; and of course in the ultimate form of postmodern protest — to dress outrageously and stay at home.

Postmodernism is part of the ideology of decaying capitalism. Like all ideology it does not spring up instantly and unmediated out of its economic roots. Its process of formation occurs in the world of ideas. Only after this, under the impact of events, do the ideas assume a mass character and therefore become a material force themselves.

In turn its arguments, proofs, methods and metaphors are drawn not just from culture, but from changes in the economic base itself. What follows is a brief attempt to explain that process.

There are many sources of postmodernist ideas: we have already discussed the crisis of Structuralism, and the so-called crisis of Marxism. Another strand is the crisis of artistic modernism.\textsuperscript{38}

Modernism in art helped to define an important aspect of the ideology of the big bourgeoisie in the imperialist epoch. The very small upper layer of the bourgeoisie (and their later corporate equivalents) were able to persuade themselves of the dynamism of their system and the liberalism of their politics through their patronage of progressive artistic creativity.

After 1945 it experienced a ?golden age?. Not just tolerated but actively promoted by the US imperialist establishment — including the CIA — post-war modernism was meant to adorn a booming, technologically progressive capitalism plucked from the ashes of World War Two, and to act as a siren call for dissident intellectuals in the Stalinist states.

But as capitalism’s long boom drew to a close modernism underwent another crisis of direction. It seemed to collapse in fragmentary directions. Where modernism had been put to functional use — most famously in architecture — its confidence was even further dented as, one after the other, the ?cities in the sky? turned to slums and many were dynamited.
The inner contradictions of a modernism almost wholly divorced from any belief in social progress? capitalist or socialist? ultimately produced an art that reflected this growing pessimism. At first, few of those now acclaimed as postmodernists recognised themselves as such. Some still refuse to do so.

For the majority, however, it has become a convenient label to justify an art that denies or ignores the human subject; that refuses to comment on suffering; that maintains an ironic coolness towards all serious questions; that absolutely refuses to be associated with progressive movements; that is constantly pastiching itself.

The most fundamental ideological change however is the crisis of belief in the progressiveness of capitalism itself. Postmodernism is just one product of this. We also find it echoed within all mainstream bourgeois thought, as well as the ?common sense? of a generation that can see no future other than one relentlessly like the present.

In this sense postmodernism stands firmly within the irrationalist tradition which formed the counterpoint to bourgeois rationalism ever since the Enlightenment itself.

We can trace a line from Schopenhauer, via Nietzsche to the gurus of postmodernism which asserts that rationalism is only the tool of power or the will, and that human life is meaningless. Alongside this philosophical tradition go various artistic expressions of it, all of which are characterised by a reactionary romantic opposition to capitalism.

In the 19th century, when capitalism was a relatively progressive system, this tradition remained on the sidelines of bourgeois ideology. In the 20th century, as capitalism begins to go rotten, it grows in strength. It is manifested not just in the desolate thoughts of adolescent poets but in the ideology of dictators. But still it does not achieve predominance.

Bourgeois liberalism remains the dominant ideology, and is given a new lease of life by the post-war boom.

Only in the last 25 years has the irrationalist streak of bourgeois thought seriously contended for dominance. And that is because of the coincidence of circumstances accumulated over three decades: the end of the post-war economic boom, with no return in sight; the defeat of working class struggles? many of them strategic defeats with long-term implications; finally the collapse of Stalinism.

These fundamental, developments in the economy and the class struggle unleash new developments in both base and superstructure: the destruction of traditional productive industries in the imperialist countries, the collapse of the ?state capitalist? model in the third world and the resultant break-up of multinational states, the fragmentation of the political establishments of most of the imperialist countries as Cold War priorities receded.

Frederick Jameson has argued that postmodernism is the ?cultural logic of late capitalism?. While Jameson never succeeds in specifying what exactly this late capitalism is he is correct in his insight that postmodernism is a spontaneous ideological reflection of capitalism in a period of decay, compounded by working class defeat.

And the fact that the champions of postmodernism in the English speaking world have originated in the left tells us that postmodernism reflects the particular outlook of a whole generation of disillusioned left intellectuals.

Alex Callinicos goes further, attempting to root postmodernism in the specific outlook of the ?new middle class? ? a concept originated by sociologist Eric Olin Wright and imported into Marxism by Callinicos.
himself. This is unconvincing, both because the new middle class analysis has serious flaws and because even if we accept its existence, it existed before postmodernism.

Postmodernism may have originated in the intelligentsia, it may be transmitted via the middle managerial and technical strata, but then again this is true of religious fundamentalism, Blair-ite Christian socialism and a whole host of ideologies in the late 20th century.

A materialist explanation of postmodernism does not need to situate its material roots in an intermediate stratum of society.

The immediate material impulses are economic stagnation, Stalinist collapse and working class defeat.

But the historic roots of postmodernism are the same as those of all post-1789 irrationalism: irrationalism with its emphasis on the individual will and power is the guilty self-hatred of the capitalist system. It is not a critique of capitalism, only a more desolate attempt to justify it.

Instead of enslaving millions in the factories in the name of ?liberty, equality and fraternity? the irrationalist tradition says clearly that modern society is just the survival of the fittest.

Not even thought itself escapes this process: reason and theory are only tools to the competitive human will.

Whereas Nietzsche celebrated this will to power the proponents of postmodernism can only bemoan it ? while accepting that there is no alternative.

Some, like Derrida, clearly recoil from this world without hope, and turn pleadingly back to Marxism for a radical theory: if only Marxism could shed itself of its ?scientific? illusions and promote itself as a new utopianism then it could provide a point of light, Derrida believes.

Others, like Rorty, passionately embrace the new reactionary reality, urging us to accept modern day America as ?an example of the best kind of society so far invented? and expressing the hope that ?America will continue to set an example of increasing tolerance and equality?.

With views as divergent as these underpinning the most fashionable form of theoretical critique it is no surprise that, in the 1990s, we have started to hear about the ?crisis of postmodernism?.

In this respect Jean Baudrillard has performed sterling work in pointing his followers towards the utter futility of postmodernism as a world view:

?Postmodernism is a regression. It?s the most degenerate, artificial and eclectic phase. It doesn?t have a meaning. It?s impossible to define what?s going on now. There?s a void which I analyse?.

Marxists should view the crisis of postmodernism not with passive satisfaction but as an opportunity to intervene into the political crisis of a whole new generation which has grown up knowing only defeat.

Our aim is to convince today?s followers of postmodernism that the only healthy scepticism is dialectical materialism; the only coherent critique of Enlightenment rationality comes from the tradition which synthesised it and overcame it; that there is an alternative to a future of endless Bosnias and Rwandas.

The possibility of that future exists because of one product of the late 18th century that has not gone away: the organised working class. It is a growing class. It has suffered retreat and defeat across the developed world ? particularly in the English speaking countries ? but will recover its confidence and strength for new
rounds of struggle. Elsewhere it is already on the offensive. It is the only social force left in the world with the power to impose a progressive order against the onset of barbarism.

Its theoretical expression ? Marxism ? is the only product of the ?Enlightenment tradition? which still thinks the Enlightenment was a good idea.

Postmodernism is the ideology of dying capitalism. Revolutionary socialism is the only guide to survival for humanity. And Marxists are not ashamed to say to the postmodernist generation: choose life!

**Althusser’s Marxism**

In the 1970s, the French philosopher, Louis Althusser, influenced a generation of Marxist intellectuals and professional academics in the social sciences and cultural studies.

Until his death in 1990 he was, for most of his adult life, a member of the French Communist Party (PCF). Like many he was deeply effected by Khruschev?s speech at the 20th Congress of the CPSU in 1956 which revealed the crimes of Stalin. His attempts to make sense of Marxism in the aftermath of this make up Althusser?s work.

During his ?re-reading? of Marx in the 1960s the key influences on his thought were writers such as Derrida, Lacan and other structuralists. By contrast Althusser showed no interest in studying or learning from the left?s anti-Stalinist critique of the degeneration of the Russian revolution. Indeed, he defended most of the political and social results of Stalinism?s bloody counter-revolution against the Soviet working class.

His reflections were philosophical in nature. He concentrated his fire upon what he saw as alien influences on Marxism that had led to Stalinism?s deviations, namely a view of history that emphasised the forces of production and technology as the key to human development. This he termed ?economism?.

But he rejected the ?liberal? critique of Stalinism after 1956, which he labelled ?humanism?:

? . . . a profound ideological reaction . . . ethical in tendency which spontaneously rediscovered the old philosophical themes of ?freedom?, ?man?, ?the human person? and ?alienation?.? (L. Althusser For Marx)

Both economism and humanism were products, according to Althusser, of the Second International?s reformist ?Marxism? and had to be rejected. But the Second International did not invent them; rather, they were to be found in the early writings of the young Marx.

Althusser pointed the finger of blame for this type of Marxism at Hegel. Hegel was the one who bequeathed Marx a false view of history whereby history unfolds automatically to a pre-determined goal (teleology); this could be due either to objective economic laws (economism) or, alternatively, to the working class becoming more and more class conscious of its own destiny (humanism).

Marx?s early works were tainted with these views, according to Althusser, but, through an ?epistemological break? around 1845, were gradually thrown off in his later works, above all, in Capital.

In short, Althusser set himself the task of redefining historical materialism and rescuing Marxism. He did neither. To rid Marxism of its Hegelian ?defect? it was necessary to junk the idea of history or society as ?an expressive totality?, that is, a combination of forces and relations of production in which the economic
determines the legal, cultural and ideological. In its place Althusser argued, following the structuralists, that history and society were not in a contradictory movement towards a goal but were, rather, a series of structures or "instances" within the social formation which were relatively autonomous and moved in different "timeframes". While the ideological spheres were "ultimately" determined by economic forces, this time "never arrived".

This threw up the banal conclusion that economics, politics and culture affected each other equally. Causality and hierarchy were rejected, rendering historical materialism useless as an explanatory tool. These separate structures may or may not collide and a specific society at a specific point in time may be burdened by too much history to the point where the social formation is "overdetermined" and revolution breaks out. Structures may change but they may or may not effect consciousness. None of these influences can be compared, generalised or quantified; in short, they cannot be foreseen.

Althusser's concept of science was another victim of his "re-reading". In the first place, science was not about understanding the real, objectively existing world, but only the concept of that world. In contrast, empiricism opposes "a given subject to a given object and calls knowledge the abstraction by the subject of the essence of the object?", a view of science Althusser completely rejected. Theory could not generate knowledge of the real world and nor could this world be the source material for theoretical reflection.

In a manner analogous to Derrida and his view of "texts" Althusser saw the raw material of science as the key works of Marx and his job, as a scientist, to "deconstruct" them. The task was to "discover" the "scientific problematic" buried within the text, and reject concepts used by Marx (even if he used them consciously) which were inconsistent with this problematic. Naturally, all Hegelian concepts were purged.

Science, for Althusser, was not the servant of the real world, rather it is a separated-off sphere of social practice. The hole in Althusser's argument is clear. If the real world is not the legitimate starting point for the generation of theoretical knowledge then what is? For Althusser it was nothing other than a "reading" by the dispassionate scientist, hence its idealism.

But Marx in contrast started from certain real premises, from which it is not possible to abstract; namely, that humans are purposive and social by nature. This nature is constrained and alienated by the class exploitative social relations within which labour is carried out. Capitalism produced the first society in history where the potential existed for humans to free themselves from this historical constraint by overthrowing capitalism and class society in general.

Althusser managed the remarkable trick for a Marxist in sundering theory from the real world and offered no account of how theory could guide practical intervention into the world in order to change it. In short, he reverted to a form of rationalist idealism in which the truth was a series of internally coherent imposed logical constructs within the body of a work.

It is clear that Althusser, like the postmodernists ended up with a belief that the objective world, and an account of its contradictory movement in thought, is not possible. Indeed, all that is open to mere humans is ideology. Ideas generated by individuals and classes and how they see their place in the world (a "system of lived relations") are the stuff of ideology. From Lacan, Althusser borrowed the idea that the real world cannot be known consciously and hence people can only be trapped in an imaginary understanding of that world and their place within it.

Althusser began his search for an authentic non-Stalinist historical materialism by rejecting a meta-theorist, Hegel. Unlike Marx he did not just reject Hegel's idealism, but rather Hegel's comprehensive and systemic account of history. He ended up gutting Marxism of its coherence, its materialist premises and the
central notion that conscious human beings are the active agents of social change.

By the 1980s many ?Althusserians? went beyond his structuralism altogether. They realised that you could not hope to savage Hegel and leave the Marxist ?meta-narrative? standing. Without history as a process with a determinate direction, without humans as conscious social agents of transformation, without science as a series of mental approximations to the real objective world, then, quite simply, there is no Marxism.

Footnotes
1. F. Jameson Postmodernism or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism, London 1991
4. A. McHoul and W. Grace A Foucault Primer Melbourne 1993
5. J. Derrida Of Grammatology Baltimore 1976
7. J. Baudrillard op cit.
8. J. Baudrillard ibid.
10. Quoted in L Ferry and A Renaut, La Pensee 68 Paris 1985
13. Even where they do not work the problem can generally be solved according to the same scientifically formulated laws.
14. W.V. Quine From a Logical Point of View New York 1953
15. i.e. a theory of being or existence
17. S Hawking ibid
18. ibid
22. R. Rorty Contingency, Irony and Solidarity Cambridge 1989
23. K. Marx Capital (Vol 1) Harmondsworth 1973
25. For a well documented, if inconclusive, discussion see T. Eagleton Ideology ? an introduction London 1991
27. ibid
29. G. Deleuze and F. Guattari, (in Anti-Oedipus Minneapolis 1983) do advocate to a form of psycho-biological determinism, declaring ?desire? to be the source of power.
31. ibid.
34. J-F Lyotard The Postmodern Condition Minneapolis 1984
35 quoted in A. Callinicos Against Postmodernism op cit.
36 C. Horrocks and Z Jevtic Baudrillard for Beginners Cambridge 1996
38 In this article ?art? refers to the whole of artistic creation in both ?high culture? and ?popular culture? ie music, film, literature etc. It is not the task of the revolutionary party to offer a unified ?critique? of such art. We stand in the tradition of Leon Trotsky (Literature and Revolution Ann Arbor 1975), who vilified nascent Stalinism?s attempt to impose a ?party line? on art. To the question ?what does Marxism oppose in postmodern art?? we answer: nothing. Of course individual Marxists whether they be professional art critics or amateur thrash-metal guitarists have a right to their own critical views. Many of them have disliked modernism, let alone post modernism. In the conflict between the modernist cultural establishment in the West and its postmodern critics the revolutionary party should be strictly neutral.
40 See G. Hyle in Trotskyist International op cit
41 R. Rorty op cit
42 in M Edmundson Wild Orchids and Trotsky New York 1993
43 quoted in C. Horrocks and Z Jervin op cit.
44 L Althusser, For Marx, p10

Source URL: https://fifthinternational.org/content/marxism-versus-postmodernism