

Student notes on E. P. Thompson, Althusser, and positivism
(By Chris Wright)

Reading E. P. Thompson's *The Poverty of Theory*, his polemic against Althusser. A crushing demolition. I give Thompson credit for working through all the verbiage. He also draws some interesting parallels between Popperian positivism and Althusserian structuralism. –Let's talk about positivism for a minute, sometimes called empiricism. That word 'empiricism' has so many different meanings it can get confusing, but there are in fact connections between Karl Popper's positivism and traditional British empiricism. At least, they fit together well. Positivism, in a nutshell, means a rejection of 'deep theories' meant to explain social phenomena, theories, like structuralist [or 'institutionalist'] ones, that get below 'appearances' or unproblematic 'facts' and posit tendencies or structural dynamics or other things that aren't experimentally 'verifiable' or falsifiable. Positivism wants only to record discrete facts with the help of statistics, computers, experiments, data-collection, etc. Minimal theorizing to explain it all. Social reality just is this collection of isolated facts; *relations* don't exist, only individuals. This shares the spirit of nominalism, which likewise acknowledges only 'individuals,' concrete particulars, and not universals (relations, etc.) -- because if those 'existed' then we would have to deal with a "prodigiously teeming Platonic heaven" of abstract objects floating around everywhere, and, you see, we're committed to Occam's razor, to postulating only those entities that are necessary to account for our best scientific theories. And so on and so forth. I need not point out how incredibly silly this all is: yes, it's true that only 'concrete particulars' in spacetime exist and not abstract objects -- because existence just *means* 'having a location in spacetime' -- but in another sense 'abstract objects' do exist, insofar as we use words, numbers, etc. Sure, they're a 'fiction' strictly speaking -- the number 2 doesn't literally *exist* in some particular place; the relation between worker and capitalist doesn't exist in the sense that you can point to it like a tree -- but we have to assume them in order to talk. See [my paper on ontology](#). Popper denies the existence of any 'class' such as 'army'; an army is just a collection of soldiers, he says. Okay, brilliant, way to go. But what is a soldier? Someone who belongs to an army. Oops. I guess armies exist after all. (See Alasdair MacIntyre, "Breaking the Chains of Reason.")

You see how this is all very 'bourgeois,' by the way. Thompson says it well in the last sentence of this passage, in which he speaks in the voice of a positivist:

The discrete facts are all that can be known. 'History' is an improper holistic concept to cover a sequence of discrete facts as in fact they succeeded upon each other. If we introduce concepts, we introduce these as 'models' which assist us to investigate and organize these facts; but we must be clear that these models exist in our heads and not 'in' the history. And we must develop ever more refined, value-free, and preferably quantitative empirical techniques to enable these facts to disclose themselves as in fact they took place. Whatever happens, I [the positivist] will make sure that no facts escape from their discrete prison cells, enter into relationships, or hold mass meetings.

By drawing attention away from social relations and structures, shared interests, etc., positivists reinforce the hegemony of an atomistic, individualistic way of life and ideology, thereby helping undermine social movements. They're doing the bidding of the powerful (not consciously, though). It's an "open society," yes: no connections between groups of people in similar

structural locations, no solidarity, no mass fighting for a common cause. Incidentally, it's true that theories are 'models,' but they are supposed to be precisely models *of reality*. They're supposed to 'conceptually unpack' what is implicit in reality, the relations-between-elements that are implicit in reality. This is what the natural sciences do, and it is what the social sciences are supposed to do. It's harder in the latter, though, or less precise, unmathematical, because of (the mystery of) free will, human's undetermined nature (different from the determined nature of physical processes).¹

As for the affinity between traditional empiricism and positivism, it has to do with the fact that for empiricists humans bring nothing, or almost nothing, to experience; they just imbibe discrete events and inductively generalize from them, etc. Positivists try not to bring theories (a delusion), while empiricists deny that humans bring innate mental constructions. In both cases it's a matter only of 'registering' discrete events.

What are the parallels between Althusser and Popper? First of all, they're both confused. More interestingly, Althusser's 'system' is like positivism in discouraging an "arduous interrogation" of appearances, a grappling with evidence and theories, struggling to explain why a particular thing has happened. Althusser has basically no interest in history *as history*; he has his little system with all its peculiar concepts that he applies mechanically, ahistorically, being interested in history only insofar as it exemplifies 'Theory.' Both Popper and Althusser refuse to learn anything from history, deny that history can teach us anything meaningful. As two of Althusser's disciples write, "Marxism, as a theoretical and a political practice, gains nothing from its association with historical writing and historical research. The study of history is not only scientifically but politically valueless." It's as stupid as postmodernism, and revealingly similar.² (What an intellectual freak, a postmodernist Marxism.)

Althusser's idol, remember, is Spinoza, in whose system history can (apparently) not be accounted for (or so Alexander Kojève says). Spinoza modeled his philosophy, or at least his *Ethics*, on mathematics, and Althusser likes math because it 'proves itself.' In the same way, says Althusser, historical materialism proves itself, and it doesn't need to be confirmed by analyzing history. -If Thompson's characterization is accurate....wow. Breathtaking. Althusser manages to overlook the fact that historical materialism is an *empirical* discipline (or rather 'method') while math is not.

An ironic thing about positivism, given its emphasis on empirical evidence, is that the theories, or 'models,' with which it's associated, such as neoclassical economics, are flagrantly contradicted by the evidence. That shows -- doubly -- the essential dishonesty and hypocrisy of bourgeois intellectual culture. (Not just bourgeois, though. Any intellectual culture subordinated to power-structures.)

Thompson points correctly to a tension in Marx's thought between his empirical open-mindedness, his realistic grappling with actual events, and his 'systematic,' 'idealistic' political economy which is almost Hegelian in its pretensions to tracing the 'immanent self-development' of capital from its most primitive forms to the final collapse of the society that has capital as its basis. This second side of Marxism arguably leads to the excesses of Althusser's Spinozistic, self-enclosed structuralism. But Thompson fails to see that this tension in Marxism is actually present to some degree in many theories: they try to explain the world, which means they have to be tested, but at the same time they have an internal logic that unfolds the theory out of itself, so

¹ As Thompson says, in history there are necessary causes but not sufficient causes.

² [I suppose I was referring there to its opposition to rigorous materialistic empirical investigation, its self-referentiality, its concern with language or 'Theory,' and other such things.]

to speak. They aspire to be ‘transformed copies’ of reality, but to the extent that they ‘generate themselves’ out of an internal logic they’re stepping away, at least temporarily, from the world -- though not really, because they think that the world follows the same logic. Anyway, Thompson’s injunction to stay close at all times to the evidence is well taken. Marx’s semi-Hegelian method in the *Grundrisse* is dangerous: society isn’t a closed theoretical system, and even if it were, the method of ‘pure thought’ might well get it wrong. The theorist could take a wrong turn somewhere, which he might have avoided had he paid closer attention to empirical data. On the other hand, I think Marx is right that there *is* an ‘inner logic’ of some sort to capitalist economic development. But to what extent? What’s the relation between the ‘inevitable’ unfolding of inner dynamics and contingent external factors (which are *everywhere*)? How do these interact? We’ll never fully know; reality is too complex. But maybe we can *approximate* the truth. I don’t know how, though. I guess it’s a matter of examining the history of capitalism and seeing where it accords with and diverges from the most plausible ‘pure’ theories of capitalist development -- just using good sense to judge when there are extra-theoretical ‘interventions from the real’ and when, on the other hand, real events result from internal systemic dynamics. Actually, I suppose it’ll always be a combination of both. Like with the Irish potato famine: no theory of capitalism could deduce from its own premises that there would be an Irish potato famine, but given certain natural conditions in Ireland in the mid-19th century (a potato blight), the internal dynamics of capitalism³ exacerbated the famine and turned it into a catastrophe of Biblical proportions. There is always this interaction between the contingent (the external) and the systemically determined (the internal). --But I shouldn’t forget that ‘the economy’ isn’t the only ‘system’ in society; there are all sorts of institutions influencing each other, social structures with their own dynamics. The economy ‘overlaps’ with them, determines and is partly determined. And everything is a big goddamned mess.

Thompson’s book is a useful warning to me not to get *too* structuralist [or ‘institutionalist’]. But I think he takes his criticism of Althusser a bit too far (*occasionally*). Human behavior is conditioned to a *huge* extent by roles, institutional structures; somehow we just have to navigate between ‘structuralism’ and ‘humanism’ (individual agency, etc.). They’re both necessary, and with a little good sense they can be reconciled in the practices of history and sociology. Thompson would surely agree with that. But my greater commitment to so-called structuralism (than his) is revealed in the fact that I’m not convinced the ‘stages’ of a given process of social development -- the stages in a very broad sense, not in their specific, concrete, multitudinous manifestations -- are not in some way ‘determined’ from the very beginning. The process in question has to be very general, on a broad ‘systemic’ level, not some little concrete series of phenomena. I grappled with this issue a bit in the Conclusion of [my M.A. thesis on worker cooperatives](#), and it’s sort of what I was referring to above. Marx and Engels were too teleological at times, but Thompson is perhaps not ‘teleological’ enough. But it’s hard to navigate in this way between teleology and complete non-teleology. It’s hard to find a middle ground. But look, if you go through history from the onset of capitalism to the present day, looking only at the most significant ‘systemic’ ‘outlines’ -- and not even the Russian Revolution qualifies as that; I’m talking about things like the development of the liberal state in the 19th

³ As enforced by a British government unwilling to interfere with the ‘free market,’ which ensured that the Irish didn’t get the food they needed. (Ireland was actually exporting potatoes to England during the famine. Elsewhere in Europe that year, governments took anti-free-trade measures to prevent starvation -- and they largely succeeded -- but the British government was under the sway of free-market economists.)

century, the state-capitalist state in the 20th, the incorporation of the working classes into society (think 'hegemony,' etc.), major military clashes between advanced European nation-states sometime around when they occurred (early to middle 20th century), neoliberalism in the late 20th century -- you'll see that it all seems pretty darned probable, almost inevitable. Each 'stage' emerges out of the previous according to what appear to be 'logical' systemic dynamics, not contingent concrete events. And so, proceeding into the future, it seems that even though we can't predict with any certainty what will happen, in retrospect it'll be seen to be nearly inevitable. 'Nearly.' What does that qualification mean? Just that you can never rule out some massive external event, whether a nuclear war or a viral pandemic that destroys civilization or whatever.

I don't mean to imply that there's a rigid succession of stages. I use the word only in a metaphorical sense.

In any case, my point is that Thompson underestimates the importance of 'extra-human' institutional dynamics. In historical evolution on a grand scale, they're overpowering.