Matthew Lampert  Dissertation Summary

Theoreticism and Ideology:
A Critical Reappraisal of the Althusser-Rancière Split

A standard problem within social and political philosophy has been the intelligibility of domination: how can one group of people repress, control, or exploit another group of people? The most obvious answers—while both true to a certain extent—seem yet inadequate: naked violence and coercive threats on the one hand, and the inculcation of beliefs among the exploited that are contrary to their own interests on the other. Simple reference to violence seems inadequate simply because of the striking lack of direct physical coercion in so many exploitative relationships. But likewise, critical theory has run time and again into the recalcitrance of domination in the face of “liberating critique” (i.e., critique that unmasks the falsity of the beliefs which supposedly sustain these relationships). In this dissertation I argue that exploitative relations of production are maintained and reproduced through institutionalized subject-statuses. Subject statuses—for example, “American,” “doctor,” or “married”—are ways of determining individuals within networks of social relations. These statuses are “institutionalized” to the extent that they are obtained and maintained through organized patterns of behavior that confer official recognition: the passage through academic institutions in the obtaining of degrees; the interaction between personal relationships and legal structures within marriage; etc. My dissertation argues that if relations of production are composed of subject statuses, and these statuses are reproduced through institutionalized patterns of behavior, then exploitation and oppression can be (and are) replicated in spite of our beliefs, morals, and political commitments. Domination is thus capable not only of surviving despite theoretical critique and denunciation, but even through it. The university, for example, as a “reservoir of negative thinking” (in Robert Paul Wolff’s words), can be the source of great critical analyses of the mechanisms of capitalist exploitation—even as it helps to perpetuate that exploitation by performing the function of sorting students into graduated job markets.

Within critical theory, the production of subjecthood and the reproduction of exploitation has been traditionally examined through the lens of “ideology theory”—with the result that the reproduction of domination has been explained through mechanisms like “the inculcation of false beliefs among the oppressed,” or “the reproduction of social relations through linguistic structures.” Rather than dismiss ideology theory in toto, however, I defend Louis Althusser’s radical redeployment of the concept: if subjecthood is formed through patterns of behavior rather than through beliefs and moral commitments, then “ideology” is better understood as a set of habits and behaviors, institutionalized within what Althusser calls “ideological apparatuses”—that is, organized structures of behavior and ways of interacting. “Ideology critique” then becomes the organized interruption of the institutions governing patterns of behavior, rather than the theoretical identification and denunciation or error (as “false beliefs,” etc.). As a further consequence, “ideology critique” is no longer a task for the lone theorist sitting in his study, but is rather a task for groups, reorganizing themselves together.

I defend my critical reconstruction of Althusser’s “apparatus theory” of ideology polemically, which leads me to refine and deploy the concept of theoreticism. “Theoreticism,” a term drawn from Althusser’s self-critical phase, is the avoidance of political practice via retreat into the realm of theory (under the guise of conceiving of theory as a form of political practice): Althusser charges that his own project of “reading” in the 1960s—a contribution to what he called “theoretical practice”—was in fact a way of attempting to “do politics” without having to leave philosophy. It was, at the same time, a defense of academic hierarchies and the philosopher’s privileged access to truth. In order to refine the concept of theoreticism for use in polemically defending Althusser’s late (post-self-critical) work, however, I turn to Jacques Rancière for a radicalization of the concept. Rancière’s criticism of Althusser, I argue, shows that Althusser’s “self-critique” of theoreticism amounts to a theoreticist account of theoreticism: Althusser treats his own “theoreticist deviation” as a philosophical blind spot and a methodological problem. He thereby seems to collapse back into a call for (better) “theoretical practice.” However, in my dissertation I argue that Rancière’s own political dead end (including his radical dualism of theory and practice) are a result of having attempted to avoid the criticisms he has leveled at Althusser’s work. The concept of theoreticism thus allows me to diagnose two different problems within
contemporary critical theory. The first, following Rancière’s trajectory, is the radical depoliticization of theory: one attempts to avoid “falsely politicizing theory” by drawing a firm line between politics and theory, with the result that so-called “critical” theory becomes meaningless for politics. (As Badiou has put it, Rancière’s work can tell us where politics has occurred—but not where it is currently happening, and still less what we might do to make it happen.) The second problem I diagnose—using both the examples of Althusser and of Judith Butler’s neo-Althusserian theory of subjecthood—is the collapse back into theoreticism. I show that the political deadlocks of Judith Butler’s conception of domination and political subjecthood are a result of her having put ideology “back in the head,” so to speak: by conceiving of ideology as a discourse, and thus understanding exploitative relations as being reproduced through the inculcation of beliefs and desires, Butler is left attempting to diagnose, denounce, and “work through” the illusions or false consciousness underwriting exploitation. I argue that her project is a stoic “ethics of resistance,” which throws the individual back upon him- or herself in the hopes that some future, critically-reconstructed subjects might be able to create new, less exploitative social relations. By contrast, by pulling ideology out of the head and locating it in material practices, Althusser’s late work provides us a model for a genuine politics of resistance, reshaping systems of domination through organized intervention. Critical theory thus plays a reflective, instead of diagnostic, role: it is the critical reflection upon political intervention, drawing lessons from politics as a form of experimental practice.