The Althusserian Moment and the Concept of Historical Time

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Contributors to this series have been invited to include ‘historical reflection’ on the emergence of the ‘moment of theory’, a period running from the late 1960s through to the early 1980s, as a component of their discussions. The greater part of my discussion focuses on Althusserian Marxism in Britain, using this case to add a further level of complexity to the schema set out in Ian Hunter’s invaluable ‘Notes for a Seminar’. However, I also want to use this opportunity to reflect on the emergence of something rather different. This is the form of historical understanding, and of the understanding of historical time in particular, in which such objects as ‘the moment of theory’, ‘the spirit of the age’ or ‘England in 1819’, to co-opt the title of a poem by Shelley and of a densely argued book by James Chandler¹, can appear as objects of historical enquiry.

The first section of this paper sketches some of the links between Althusserian component of the British moment of theory and this broader issue, and I return to the latter in my final section. The intervening sections examine the Althusserian component more directly. After presenting Althusser’s account of the concept of historical time I consider the ramifications of two features of his intervention in the realm of theory. One is that his distinction between Marxist science and the theoretical ideologies which threaten its existence cannot be sustained, and the other that, in spite of its manifest iconoclasm in certain respects, this intervention has a distinctly defensive character.

England in 1819, and other moments

The Althusserian component of the British moment of theory and the broader topic just noted are linked, most obviously perhaps, in the manner suggested by my opening paragraph, that is, in the manner of the general and the particular. The general, in this case, is the form of historical understanding in which the category of the ‘moment in which’ such and such an event happened occupies a central place. This category makes it possible to identify a plurality of potential objects of enquiry – the moment of the French Revolution, of the invasion of the Americas, and even the moment in which this form of historical understanding first appears. It could thus be seen as establishing a
conceptual space in which our particular, the place of Althusserian Marxism within the recent ‘moment of theory’, could itself be seen as an object of historical enquiry.

Yet there is also connection between these topics running in the contrary direction. Althusserian Marxism explicitly poses the issue of the conditions of possibility of historical reflection and passes judgment on the many unsatisfactory forms which, it claims, such reflection takes. The issue is addressed most directly in Althusser’s ‘The Object of Capital’, one of his two contributions to Reading Capital, and especially in the brilliant and misleading Chapter 4, ‘The Errors of Classical Economics: An Outline for a Concept of Historical Time’. Here Althusser argues that an adequate, scientific, concept of historical time appears only as a result of Marx’s scientific revolution. He argues further that Marx’s scientific work has been widely misunderstood, with the result that it has often fallen victim to Hegelian and other forms of ideological recuperation. In practice, he suggests, pre-scientific understandings of historical time continue to be influential even in the most sophisticated historical work. In spite of its qualities, it seems, the bulk of this work is nevertheless condemned to empiricism. Althusser’s interventions were explicitly intended to remedy this condition, to reaffirm the scientific character of Marxist theory and to clearly identify its fundamental concepts.

The authors of Pre-Capitalist Modes of Production made the mistake, in their Conclusion, of pushing this critique of history to an extreme, insisting not simply that non-Marxist history should be ‘consigned to the pre-theoretical domain’ but further that the study of history itself is ‘condemned… to empiricism’ and thus that it ‘is not only scientifically but also politically valueless’.2 This was a tactical mistake, given our objectives at the time, because it gave critics an easy target and alienated readers who might otherwise have been sympathetic to many of our arguments. It was also an intellectual mistake because it relied on a relatively crude account of the past, and thus of the history which claims to investigate it.3 Moreover, by suggesting that what

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3 Cf Tony Bennett’s discussion of this point in his Outside Literature (Lonndon, Routledge 1990), especailly pp.75-6.
remains is the scientific/political analysis of the current situation (the conjuncture), it pulled history back in through another door. The analysis of the current situation requires an account of its specificity, of the ways in which it differs from the situations which came before it and from apparently similar situations in other locations. Both James Chandler and Reinhart Koselleck have argued, as we shall see below, that the identification of the present moment as an object of analysis was one of the principal distinguishing features of the novel form of historical consciousness which emerged in parts of Europe around the beginning of the nineteenth century.

The work of Althusser and his followers thus presents a version of ‘theory’ which claims, _inter alia_, to establish the conceptual conditions under which worthwhile historical reflection can proceed. It also offers an account of the moment in which these conceptual conditions first appeared. ‘The moment in which…’ and other objects of historical enquiry can be properly identified, it seems, only on the basis of the earlier scientific achievements which this component of the moment of theory claims to have uncovered. It should hardly be surprising that the general understanding of historical time which Chandler and other commentators see emerging in the age of ‘the spirit of the age’ is reproduced in Althusser’s account of Marx’s scientific understanding of historical time.

Althusserian Marxism was an important component of the British ‘moment of theory’. It was also one of the least successful in the longer term. It is tempting to place the brief efflorescence of this version of theory in the context of the longer term collapse of European Marxism, and of European socialism more generally, and I will do so briefly below. Yet to follow that route would be to take us away from the concerns of this seminar. Even within the realm of theory, however, Althusserian Marxism faced serious problems, some of them, at least, arising from its own insistence on the importance of intellectual rigour. In their attempts to develop the Althusserian framework, the authors

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4 The issue of specificity leaves Althusser’s focus on the conjuncture open to much the same criticism as Levi-Strauss leveled, in the devastating final chapter of _The Savage Mind_, against Sartre’s espousal of the ‘progressive-regressive method’ in history.

5 The point of my qualification is not to suggest that it was unimportant elsewhere but rather to acknowledge the significance of the national intellectual context. There were important differences even within the English-language world, where the ‘moment of theory’ is most appropriately situated – see note 17 below. The American Althusser, like the American Foucault, was very different from his British counterpart and, unlike the American Foucault, he
of *Pre-Capitalist Modes of Production* soon established that, even in its own terms, the Althusserian distinction between Marxist science and the theoretical ideologies of its Hegelian and other predecessors could not be sustained.\(^6\) Michel Foucault made the point rather more succinctly, without reference to Althusser’s work, by insisting that Marxism introduced no real discontinuity; it found its place without difficulty, as a full, quiet, comfortable and, goodness knows, satisfying form for a time (its own)…\(^7\)

The differences between Marx and political economy, he adds, were but ‘storms in a children’s paddling pool’.\(^8\) A more fundamental shift in the understanding of historical time occurred, in his view, with the emergence of the human sciences in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The crucial epistemic development, in other words, took place some years before the epistemological break which Althusser claims to identify in Marx’s work. We might also note that the moment in which this fundamental shift took place is also, in fact, the era of the American, French and Haitian Revolutions, and of the first global conflict between European powers, but Foucault’s discussion does not dwell on these developments.

Foucault is one of many commentators who have identified this period as one in which ‘European intellectual culture underwent radical historiographical transformation’.\(^9\) Chandler notes that while their accounts ‘are quite divided about what that transformation actually amounts to’, they each locate this ‘change in the recognition and representation of historical time *in* a time that is either called ‘Romantic’ or dated to a period … that we otherwise associate with the advent of Romanticism in its early (i.e. British) phase’.\(^10\) Chandler is especially interested in the temporality of this “time in which” – that is, of the possibility, perhaps even the necessity, in the writing of history of locating a development or condition at a particular point in time or within a relatively discrete period – which he finds in all of these accounts. A central claim of his larger argument is that the emergence of this possibility can itself be located in the early Romantic period. It is an important component of the romantic historical sensibility of

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\(^{8}\) Ibid., p. 262

\(^{9}\) Chandler, *England*, p. 100

\(^{10}\) Ibid.
its own historical context which includes, as Chandler describes it, the consciousness that previous ages were not aware of themselves in this way.

Chandler’s discussion is significant here for several reasons. First, he presents the late twentieth century context for his own contextual studies of England in 1819 by introducing, in the title of Chapter One, the theme of ‘specificity after structuralism’. He elaborates this theme by suggesting not only that the moment of theory in literary and cultural studies has led to a particular concern with questions of what he calls ‘dated specificity’ but also that a closely related concern animates ‘the British discourse on the spirit of the age in writers such as Shelley, Hazlitt, Carlyle and Mill’. At least with regard to its understanding of historical time, it seems, the age of early Romanticism should be seen as a precursor of the late twentieth century moment of theory. Like Hunter’s ‘Notes for a Seminar’, Chandler’s analysis opens up a space in which the history of theory might be thematised for discussion. Where Hunter’s space is organised around the cultivation of a particular kind of philosophical ascesis and thus of a corresponding type of intellectual persona, Chandler’s is organised around the play of structuralism and nominalism which emerges from Claude Levi-Strauss’ critique of Jean-Paul Sartre’s historicism. The result is two very different, but certainly no less interesting, histories of theory.

Second, Althusser’s distinction between a Spinozist ‘structural causality’, which he sees as fundamental to Marx’s scientific revolution, and an Hegelian ‘expressive causality’ plays a small, but nonetheless important part in Chandler’s discussion of British romanticism, and of Shelley in particular. In some of the latter’s work, Chandler suggests, it seems

as if Shelley had glimpsed that profound lesson later articulated by Marx at mid-century, ... and then reworked into the ‘historicism’ Jameson fashioned from Althusser’s Spinozist principle of structural causality: that human beings make their own history, but not just as they please.

This passage raises a number of issues, but one is particularly worth noting here. It concerns the understanding of social causality which, as we shall see, Althusser

\[11\] ibid., p. 53
\[12\] I hesitate to suggest that these spaces might be seen as complementary, at least if this was taken to imply that they might simply be brought together to provide a fuller, more complete history. To follow this anodyne proposal would be to deny the seriousness and complexity of the problem of specificity as Chandler describes it.
describes as the key to a scientific concept of historical time. Althusser sees this understanding emerging, without always being clearly articulated, in some of Marx’s writings. Chandler, in effect, moves this process of emergence forward to an earlier part of the nineteenth century. The revolutionary understanding of social causality, it seems, was already present, but again without being clearly articulated, in Shelley’s work. With this move, Chandler both signals the decisive importance of Althusser’s Marx, and thus of Althusser’s specific intervention in the realm of theory, and undermines much of the force of this intervention by maintaining that the crucial shift in the concept of historical time can already be found in the early Romantic period.

This complication aside, Chandler’s discussion is significant also because, along with the essays of Reinhart Koselleck14, it offers perhaps the most comprehensive analysis of the complexities of the new historical consciousness which he and other commentators see as emerging in this period. Chandler’s book is a remarkable tour de force, taking its title from a well known poem by Shelley and drawing on the debate over history between Sartre and Levi-Strauss, Althusser’s ‘structural causality’, Trotsky’s theory of uneven development, the histories of William Robertson, the novels of Walter Scott, and much else besides to address the question of how it was possible for Shelley to even conceive of the condition of England in 1819 as an object of analysis. The details of this analysis are not my concern here, although I hope to address some of them in a later paper. Here I want simply to register a second feature of this novel historical consciousness, which Chandler also notes. This is the idea of uneven development which, albeit without the term, Chandler finds in some of the novels of Sir Walter Scott. He finds it again, in another form, in the Scottish Enlightenment's 'dialectical sense of periodization in which particular 'societies' or 'nations', newly theorized as such by just these writers, are recognized as existing in 'states' that belong at once to two different, and to some extent competing, orders of temporality’.15 Societies, and elements within the one society, are seen both as belonging to diverse historical stages and as sharing the same calendrical time.

13 ibid., p. 554. See also p. 80, n. 70
Chandler’s point is that the idea of the ‘time in which’ and the framework of uneven development are interdependent, not simply that they coexist. The former, as he describes it, belongs to the broader framework of a periodization operating on diverse scales – the year, the decade, the century, etc. This is the framework which Levi-Strauss identifies with ‘the historians chronological code’. Thus, summarising the relationship between these two frameworks, he tells us

that the regularities of the code make the perception of developmental unevenness possible, while the unevenness of the development makes the perceived regularity of the code necessary.¹⁶

Koselleck agrees, listing as one of the criteria that distinguish modernity from earlier forms of historical consciousness the perception:

of the nonsimultaneity of diverse but, in a chronological sense, simultaneous histories. With the opening up of the world, the most different but coexisting cultural levels were brought into view spatially and, by way of synchronic comparison, were diachronically classified. World history became for the first time empirically redeemable; however, it was only interpretable to the extent that the most differentiated levels of development, decelerations and accelerations of temporal courses in various countries, social strata, classes, or areas were at the same time necessarily reduced to a common denominator.¹⁷

The suggestion is that along with the appearance of such objects as ‘the moment of theory’, ‘the spirit of the age’ and ‘England in 1819’, we find the perception that at least some types of difference are a matter of distinct levels of development, and thus require diachronic classification.

We might note, finally, that uneven development also suggests a sense in which the temporality of the ‘time in which’ is associated with a peculiar spatial or social dimension. It suggests, in fact, that modernity, the age of ‘the spirit of the age’ and other such moments should be seen as encompassing only those who fully inhabit the time in question, and thus as not encompassing many of their chronological contemporaries who, in other places or social strata, still belong, in some sense, to the past.¹⁸ I return to the question of uneven development in the final section of this paper.

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¹⁶ Ibid., p. 155.
¹⁷ Koselleck, Conceptual History, p. 166
¹⁸ I describe this spatial dimension as peculiar because it is also seen as intrinsically temporal in character. There may be other spatial dimensions to the ‘time in which’, that do not have this temporal aspect. If we date the moment of theory, for example, to the period running from the late 1960s through to the early 1980s then it is best seen as a phenomenon of the English language academic community, as is the contemporaneous, but rather different moment of the alleged ‘return of grand theory’ in the social sciences (Skinner ref). While this temporally
Althusser's intervention

‘The Errors of Classical Economics: An Outline for a Concept of Historical Time’ begins with Marx’s complaint that the classical economists treated ‘the relations of bourgeois production, the division of labour, credit, money, etc., as fixed, immutable eternal categories…’.¹⁹ Althusser maintains that here Marx grasped a fundamental point but failed to clearly formulate it – just as Chandler was later to suggest of Shelley. As a result, his declared critique ‘went only half-way with his real critique’.

This is one of the strategic points in Marx’s thought – I shall go so far as to say the number one strategic point – the point at which the theoretical incompleteness of Marx’s judgment of himself has produced the most serious misunderstandings…not only among his opponents, who have an interest in misunderstanding him, but also and above all among his supporters.²⁰

These misunderstandings centre on the relationship between Marxism and history and, most especially, on the concept of historical time. Althusser’s discussion sets out to remove them by establishing a contrast between the Hegelian concept of time, which is ultimately empiricist, and the scientific concept of time which Marx employs but does not always clearly articulate. Hegel, he tells us, ‘defined time as “der dassiende Begriff”, i.e., as the concept in its immediate historical existence’. It simply ‘reflects the essence of the social totality of which it is the existence’.²¹ He goes on to describe the Hegelian conception of time as having two fundamental characteristics: continuity, which reflects the development of the Idea, and contemporaneity, the category of the historical present. The latter is the central focus of Althusser’s critique. If historical time is the existence of the social totality, and if this is but a moment in the development of the Idea then, Althusser argues, it follows that the elements of the whole always co-exist in one and the same time and are therefore contemporaneous with one another. This means that the Hegelian social totality is open to what Althusser calls an ‘essential section’

an intellectual operation in which a vertical break is made at any moment in historical time, a break in the present such that all the elements of the whole revealed by this

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²⁰ Ibid.
²¹ Ibid., p. 93.
section are in an immediate relationship with one another, a relationship that immediately expresses their internal essence.22

The lesson Althusser would have us draw from this caricature (see below) is that the structure of the social whole is the key to ‘the conception of history in which the “development” of this social whole is thought’.23 A scientific conception of history requires a scientific conception of the social whole, and this, Althusser tells us, is provided by Marx’s account of the social formation as an overarching structure in which the non-economic structures are determined ‘in the last instance’ by the economic structure.24 It is no longer possible, on this view, to see the different levels of the whole as developing ‘in the same historical time’.

we have to assign to each level a peculiar time, relatively autonomous and hence relatively independent, even in its dependence, of the ‘times’ of the other levels…. For each mode of production there is a peculiar time and history, punctuated in a specific way by the development of the productive forces; the relations of production have their peculiar time and history, punctuated in a specific way; the political superstructure has its own history….; philosophy has its own time and history….25

Nevertheless, the fact that these times and histories are relatively autonomous should not be taken to mean that they are independent. There can be no question, Althusser insists, of relating

the different temporalities to a single ideological base time, or of measuring their dislocation against the line of a single continuous reference time, remaining content, therefore, to think these dislocations as backwardness or forwardness in time….26

This is not, Althusser tells us, to deny the importance of such notions as ‘unevenness of development, of survivals, of backwardness (in consciousness) in Marxism itself, or the notion of under-development in contemporary economic and political practice’.27 Quite the contrary. The different temporalities can be related to a single base time but only, he maintains, through their fundamental relation to the determining structure of the social formation. It is this structural determinism which stops them being seen simply as variations on an underlying (Hegelian) continuity.

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22 Ibid., p. 94.
23 Ibid., p. 97.
24 Althusser’s argument that the social formation takes this form is presented in ‘Contradiction and Overdetermination’, pp. 87-128 in his For Marx (London, New Left Books, 1969).
25 Althusser, Reading Capital, p. 99.
26 Ibid., p. 105
27 ibid.
Althusser’s discussion of this issue tells us two things. One is that uneven development, in which there is no essential section, can also be understood in Hegelian fashion. Thus, contrary to his argument a few pages earlier, the essential section is not the key to Hegel’s understanding of historical time. Nevertheless, in Althusser’s view, it is because Hegel and Marx have radically opposed understandings of the structure of the social whole that they differ also in their understandings of historical time. The other lesson is that uneven development, properly understood, is an integral part of the scientific concept of time, just as it appears to be of the distinctly modern historical consciousness which Chandler and Koselleck see as emerging in parts of Europe around the beginning of the nineteenth century.

Althusser claims, as we have seen, that while the scientific concepts of the social formation and historical time play a fundamental part in Marx’s work, they are not always clearly articulated. The result, in his view, is that they have been frequently misunderstood, not only by Marx’s opponents but also by his would-be supporters, and even by Marx’s closest collaborator, Friedrich Engels. Moreover, to misunderstand these scientific concepts is to confuse them with their ideological counterparts. Althusser thus presents his own intervention in the realm of theory as an effort to defend Marx’s fundamental scientific discoveries from ideological recuperation. This last point takes us directly to Althusser’s understanding of the task of Marxist philosophy, which is to defend Marxist science against the ideological opponents who surround it and threaten to subvert its political significance. Philosophy is seen here as a sphere of intellectual conflict in which the integrity of the sciences is at issue. When it relates to the social sciences, it is a form of class struggle in the realm of theory.

My discussion of the Althusserian moment in Britain focuses on two features of Althusser’s intervention. One concerns the point, noted earlier, that neither his nor any other version of the familiar distinction between Marxist science and the theoretical ideologies which threaten its existence can be sustained. While many discourses can survive such problems without difficulty, Althusser’s insistence on theoretical rigour made it an especially serious issue for his analysis. The other feature concerns its defensive character. For all of its apparent iconoclasm and its insistence on the

\[\text{28 ibid., pp. 110 f.}\]
\[\text{29 See especially, the title essay in his Lenin and Philosophy (London, New Left Books, 1971).}\]
importance of epistemological breaks, the fundamental aim of Althusser’s intervention was to hold the line. I address these issues in the following two sections.

**Science and theoretical ideology**

The concern to establish a clear distinction between Marxist science and the theoretical ideologies which surround it and continue to threaten its integrity runs throughout Althusser’s contribution to *Reading Capital*. It plays a central part in his chapter on the concept of historical time where, as we have seen, the argument turns on a contrast between Marxism and Hegel. We might begin our discussion of this contrast by noting that Althusser’s depiction of the latter’s understanding of time is a vulgar caricature, as even a cursory reading of Hegel’s work would reveal. The phrase, “der dassiende Begriff”, to which Althusser refers is taken from Hegel’s Preface to *The Phenomenology of Mind*.30 It appears there less as the definition which Althusser’s discussion invokes than as a brief and undeveloped counterpoint to the merely quantitative notion of time which Hegel sees as belonging to mathematics. Hegel argues that this has little to offer history, the history, that is, of the movement of spirit. It ‘degrades what is self-moving to the level of mere matter, in order thus to get an indifferent, external, lifeless content’.31 Yet it is this lifeless, quantitative notion that underlies the essential section which Althusser misleadingly ascribes to Hegel’s understanding of historical time.

We might note, secondly, that Hegel’s historical writings present different moments of the development of the Idea as coexisting in his present.32 The essence of the spirit, he tells us,

its supreme imperative, is that it should recognise, know, and realise itself for what it is. It accomplishes this end in the history of the world; it produces itself in a series of determinate forms, and these forms are the nations of world history. Each of them represents a particular stage of development, so that they correspond to epochs in the history of the world.33

30 G. W. F. Hegel *The Phenomenology of Mind* (London, Allen & Unwin, 1949). The translation given here (at p. 104), ‘the notion itself in the form of existence’, is slightly different from the one appearing in *Reading Capital*.
31 Ibid., p. 105.
32 See the excellent analysis of Hegel’s understanding of history in Ranajit Guha’s *History at the Limit of World History* (New York, Columbia University Press, 2002). Althusser’s crude portrayal of Hegel might usefully be contrasted with Guha’s sensitive, and no less critical, discussion.
33 G. W. F. Hegel *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1982) p. 64
The nations of history are spiritual forms but they are also, in Hegel’s view, natural entities. ‘Accordingly, the various patterns they assume … exist perennially’. The coexistence, in geographically distinct regions, of these different stages is the external aspect of Hegel’s version of uneven development, and it allows him to present his disparaging perceptions of non-Western peoples as reflecting a kind of historical necessity. A second, internal aspect of uneven development arises from the difficulties the spirit faces, within each of these forms, in realising its own concept. It is always ‘divided against itself … [and] has to overcome itself as a truly hostile obstacle to the realisation of its end’.

There is no place for the essential section in Hegel’s understanding of history. But perhaps this demonstration is beside the point. Althusser acknowledges, as we have seen, that the Hegelian understanding of historical time allows for the possibility of uneven development. The figure of the essential section functions less to characterise the Hegelian understanding of historical time, as Althusser’s presentation suggests, than to introduce his more fundamental point (which is also, in fact, Hegel’s) that our perception of historical time must depend on how the social whole itself is understood. Althusser’s insistence on this point allows him, first, to develop some powerful, and still very pertinent, arguments about methodologically unsophisticated forms of Marxist historiography, many of them directed against poor old Engels. It allows him, secondly, to argue that the difference between the Hegelian and the Marxist concepts of historical time reflects the difference between an Hegelian, expressive causality, in which the elements of the whole are seen as ‘the phenomenal forms of expression [of] … the inner essence of the whole’, and a scientific, structural causality in which the structure is conceived ‘as a cause immanent in its effects’.

Pre-Capitalist Modes of Production argued that we need only write ‘structure’ for ‘inner essence of the whole’ in Althusser’s discussion to reveal structural causality as just another version of expressive causality. The full implications of this point were not immediately apparent to those who made it but, over the next few years, they led many who had once been persuaded by Althusser’s arguments to abandon any pretence,

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34 ibid., p. 128
35 ibid., pp. 126-7.
36 Althusser, Reading Capital, pp. 186-7, 189.
Althusserian or otherwise, that there could be a scientific Marxism to set against the theoretical ideologies of the non-Marxist social sciences. At least in this context, the Althusserian insistence on intellectual rigour was also its undoing.\(^{38}\)

However, this critique of Althusser’s distinction between science and the theoretical ideologies which surround it did not lead us to question the content he ascribes to the concept of historical time. Nor, in particular, was the problematic notion of uneven development brought into question, as the title of *Pre-Capitalist Modes of Production* makes clear. The critique led, rather, to a softening of the claim to novelty. It suggested, in fact, that Marx’s understanding of historical time was not substantially different from those of Hegel and many other of Marx’s theoretical opponents. If a relatively novel understanding of historical time can nevertheless be identified in Marx’s work, then it should also be found somewhat earlier, precisely as Chandler and many others have suggested. Turning these points around, we might say that if there were problems with the understanding of historical time in the writings of Hegel and pre-Marxist political economy – for example, in the cluster of ideas surrounding the notion of uneven development – then we should expect many of them to have carried through not only into Marxism itself but also into the particular post-structuralism which emerged out of the collapse of Althusserian Marxism. I return to this issue in my concluding section.

*innovation and defense*

The second feature of Althusser’s intervention to be considered here concerns its defensive character. While the invocation of Marx’s fundamental breakthrough

\(^{37}\) *PCMP*, pp. 271f.

\(^{38}\) I stress the context here since ‘rigour’ is clearly a term of art, with diverse and often conflicting significations, even within the academic arena. Those who saw Althusser’s work as providing the foundations of a truly ‘scientific’ social science understood rigour rather differently from those who saw it as an instrument of critical purchase, providing novel resources for literary and other forms of interpretation. Chandler’s revealing discussion of Shelley, for example, uses Althusser in this way. The failure of Althusser’s distinction between science and theoretical ideology had an importance for one camp which it simply did not possess for the other. I should also note that there was a second, and only slightly later, Althusserian moment in Britain especially in sociology and cultural studies, which followed the appearance of Althusser’s ‘Ideology and the ideological state apparatuses’ (in his *Lenin and Philosophy and other essays* London, New Left Books, 1971). The work of Stuart Hall and of the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies was of central importance here. While Hall engaged with the arguments of *For Marx* and *Reading Capital*, Althusser’s ‘Ideology…’ essay could be, and frequently was, read independently of his earlier works.
occupies a central position in Althusser’s argument, an equally powerful theme concerns the need to hold the line against ideological contamination. I stress this second theme, not only because it played an important part in Althusserian Marxism but also because it raises an aspect of the moment of theory which is not entirely captured by the framework for the history of theory provided by Ian Hunter’s invaluable ‘Notes for a Seminar’.

Hunter argues that that the various contributions to the moment of theory were unified not by a common object or theory but rather by participating, albeit to different degrees, in an intellectual attitude or comportment whose twentieth-century variants were promoted by transcendental phenomenology and its successors. This involved a skepticism towards empirical experience and a priori formalisms and thus the cultivation of an ‘openness to breakthrough phenomena of various kinds’. The place of phenomenology in these developments indicates that the poststructuralist phase of the moment of theory did not follow, as the prefix ‘post’ might seem to suggest, the discovery of epistemic or other weaknesses in structuralism itself. It was not, we might say, an event in the history of structuralism. Rather, Hunter suggests,

it was an event wholly internal to the phenomenological regimen, where it signifies the intellectual performance of putting formalised knowledge under suspension in order to prepare the theorist for the irruption of something entirely other.

Two observations might be noted here. First, the invocation of two different histories here, the one internal to structuralism and the other to phenomenology, illustrates a difficulty facing a merely quantitative understanding of historical time, and one which Althusser, along with Hegel, Marx and many others before him, had sought to address. Second, the suggestion that poststructuralism was ‘wholly internal to the phenomenological regimen’ may be a little overstated. What distinguishes poststructuralism from, say, the phenomenology of Alfred Schutz or Thomas Luckman is precisely its initial engagement with structuralism. It is less the product of one history than of its intersection with another.

This point aside, Hunter’s case is certainly persuasive, and it captures much of the appeal that I and many others initially found in Althusser’s work. Many of Althusser’s most powerful points carried a significant phenomenological undertow, although few of

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39 Hunter, ‘Notes’, p. 3
his supporters in Britain realised it at the time. Indeed, his critiques of humanism, empiricism and even of Western philosophy in general, can be read as virtuoso adaptations of fundamental Heideggerian and Husserlian themes. What was seen by his British readers as iconoclastic, and thus in some quarters as liberating, would have seemed only too familiar to Althusser’s intellectual audience in France and much of continental Europe. This, I suspect, accounts for an important part of the difference in the responses to Althusser’s work in the two contexts.

Yet there remains a sense in which Althusserian Marxism does not quite belong in the space provided by Hunter’s framework. The idea of a major intellectual breakthrough – subsequently buried under a mound of ideological misrepresentations then employed by Lenin, if only in a ‘practical state’, and later revealed in all its theoretical glory by the prophet himself – occupies an important place in Althusser’s rhetorical strategy. However, the intellectual comportment which this strategy seeks to cultivate is not one of openness to breakthrough phenomena but almost the reverse. The role of the philosopher here is not to cultivate an attitude of openness but to hold the line, to defend breakthroughs established in other areas of intellectual work against ideological attack.

Nor are the breakthrough phenomena themselves presented as the province of philosophy, and still less as the product of an attitude of openness to being. Rather, Althusser insists, they should be seen as products of a process of production which takes place in the realm of theoretical practice. The parallel here between the production of knowledge and economic production is itself an important part of Althusser’s anti-humanism – which, as an anti-humanism with historical heroes, provides a textbook illustration of the problem of the role of the individual in history. What matters, this analogy suggests, are the means of production, the raw materials, and the work of transforming these materials into a finished product. As in capitalist manufacture, the

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40 ibid., p. 15.
42 This wondrously flexible interpretative formula plays a central role in the arguments of Althusser’s *For Marx*, especially in ‘On the Materialist Dialectic’, pp. 163-218.
consciousness of the worker is not the origin of the process but the bearer of functions which are determined by the worker’s position within it. If an intellectual comportment is fostered by this analogy, it is one of subordination to a larger, encompassing development. Yet, unlike Heidegger’s preferred attitude of openness to Being, which might also be seen as a kind of subordination, this comportment is both interventionist and strictly focused, directed through the influence of the means of production.

I suggest two ways in which we might think about the discrepancy between the Althusserian component of the moment of theory and Hunter’s framework for a history of this moment. One is to add to this framework a level of complexity which is suggested, but not really brought out, by Hunter’s account of transcendental phenomenology as a successor to the discipline of university metaphysics. The other is to invoke a prominent theme in Althusser’s work, and in the broader Marxist tradition on which he draws, by suggesting that the moment of theory is overdetermined. Like other historical moments, it appears at the intersection of distinct histories and temporalities. This observation returns us, yet again, to the issue of historical time.

Let me begin by presenting a slightly different, complementary take on the disciplines of university metaphysics and transcendental phenomenology. First, its main concern, as Hunter describes it, has been ‘to forestall the autonomy of positive knowledges by tethering them to philosophical reflection on [the] relation of finite to infinite being’. This suggests that if the cultivation of an attitude of openness to breakthrough phenomena has a place here, it is certainly not for everybody. Quite the contrary: the university metaphysician appears as an intellectual specialist, not as a model for intellectual work in general. Second, both university metaphysics and transcendental phenomenology are disciplines: they are products of intellectual breakthroughs, the instruments of their routinisation, not of their cultivation. Thus, while they certainly require an attitude of openness on the part of privileged individuals, the intellectual comportment they cultivate is organised around the acknowledgment of breakthroughs which have already taken place. Like Althusser’s theoretical practice, they are disciplines with few heroes and a mass of mundane practitioners. The latter train their

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43 Ibid., p. 18.
44 Ibid.
pupils, as they have been trained themselves, to transcend their natural forms of consciousness and to open themselves to transcendental phenomena whose irruptive presence has already been tamed. Except in the work of the heroes, and perhaps even then, novel breakthrough phenomena are as much a threat to these disciplines as they are, on Derrida’s account, to any structuralism.

These disciplinary characteristics can be found in the more successful brands of poststructuralism and they are especially prominent, albeit with some modifications, in Althusserian Marxism. Like university metaphysics and transcendental phenomenology, the latter cultivates the belief that the crucial breakthroughs have already taken place. It identifies crucial breakthrough phenomena in the works of Marx and Lenin and celebrates them, and it draws on the breakthroughs of transcendental phenomenology, but pointedly does not celebrate them. However, where these disciplines see the task of philosophy as being to regulate the claims of the positive knowledges, Althusser takes the contrary view. The crucial breakthroughs appear in the positive knowledges themselves, not in philosophy, and the task of Marxist philosophy is to defend these breakthroughs against ideological recuperation.

Althusserian Marxism both displays the disciplinary characteristics of university metaphysics and rejects its central claims concerning the unity of knowledge. These disciplinary characteristics are in turn compounded by the location of Althusserian Marxism in a different history. I noted earlier that the moment of theory could also be seen, at least in its Althusserian aspects, as a moment in the disintegration of European Marxism, which was itself an element in the broader decline of European socialism. To place Althusserian Marxism within these longer term developments is to suggest a frame in which debates between Marxist academics were of relatively little consequence. It is to suggest, in fact, that the Althusserian impact was less significant than Althusser’s erstwhile supporters, and many of his opponents, imagined at the time. More importantly for the present discussion, it suggests that significant features of the Althusserian moment can be understood only in the context, more so in Britain than in America, of a sectarian academic Marxism. Thus alongside and in tension with its apparent iconoclasm, one of the attractions of Althusserian Marxism in Britain was its appeal to the Leninist formula, which appeared on the cover of the short-lived
Althusserian journal *Theoretical Practice*, ‘without revolutionary theory there can be no revolutionary movement’.\(^{45}\)

Something was needed to revitalise a faltering socialist project and, Lenin’s formula asserted, a powerful way to do this would be to affirm and to advance the scientific character of Marxist theory. In this respect, the Althusserian intervention displayed its own brand of orthodoxy, promoting study groups which returned to selected texts of Marx, Lenin and Mao, and even Stalin, in an effort to identify the elements of science ‘in a practical state’ which they were thought to contain. This commitment to the political significance of establishing the correct understanding of Marx, which was shared by most diverse versions of Marxism, accounts for much of the vicious and destructive character of conflicts within British academic Marxism around this time. Those who survived this period well enough to write another day – and there were many who did not – learned a lesson in the academic virtue of toleration.\(^{46}\)

The final point to notice here is that, precisely because of its insistence on intellectual rigour, the failure, as it seemed to many of us, of the Althusserian project was experienced as a broader failure both of Marxism and of the methodological claim, which is by no means peculiar to Marxism, that it is possible to establish an unambiguous distinction between science and theoretical ideology.\(^{47}\) This in turn opened the way for the sympathetic reception of other, poststructuralist components of the moment of theory. In this case, at least, it was the apparent failure of one position which opened the way for an acceptance of the other.

**Conclusion: the ‘moment in which’ and the problematic temporality of uneven development**

Along with the Althusserian moment of theory in Britain, this paper has addressed the understanding of historical time in which ‘the moment of theory’, ‘the spirit of the age’, ‘England in 1819’ and other such moments appear as potential objects of historical


\(^{46}\) There are interesting parallels here with Ian Hunter’s account of the emergence, in parts of sixteenth and seventeenth century Europe, of the perception of religious toleration as an important civic virtue. See his *Rival Enlightenments: Civil and Metaphysical Philosophy in Early Modern Germany*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2001.

\(^{47}\) I outlined the failure of this claim in the final chapter of *Philosophy and Methodology in the Social Sciences*. Hassocks, Sussex, Harvester, 1977.
enquiry. These topics are connected in several ways. First, and most obviously, the latter provides the conceptual conditions in which the former can be identified as an object of study. Second, James Chandler’s examination of the broader theme – which, along with some of Koselleck’s essays, offers the most comprehensive recent treatment of the issue – also presents an impressive history of the moment of theory in English-language literary and cultural studies. Finally, the concept of historical time was itself a central concern of the Althusserian intervention in the moment of theory. My concluding discussion reflects on aspects of this broader theme.

I begin by noting that my last section considered two examples of the intersection of distinct histories or temporalities in the moment of theory. One is Hunter’s account of poststructuralism as arising, not from the history of structuralism but from that of phenomenology, and the other, my own account of the Althusserian moment in Britain as belonging to at least two different histories, and thus as severely overdetermined. In neither case is there any suggestion of uneven development and thus of a temporal order in which one history is seen as belonging to an earlier time than the other.

This is a useful point with which to start because it shows that analysis of the moment of theory in terms of the intersection of distinct temporalities need not entail diachronic classification. Yet Althusser’s discussion of historical time, and the rather different analysis presented by Chandler and Koselleck, insist that the identification of the present moment as an object of analysis (and thus also of various moments in the past as objects of historical inquiry) somehow goes together with a diachronic analysis of different elements of the present. The implication is that analysis of particular moments requires the identification within them of elements which belong, in some sense, to their past and also, perhaps, of elements which belong to their future. The moment, in other words, is structured by the temporally uneven development of its parts. This perception has always been an important feature of Marxist historiography and, in this respect, Althusser’s own particular Marxism is hardly distinctive. Chandler’s and Koselleck’s careful and comprehensive analyses suggest, correctly in my view, that this perception is a more general feature of modern historical consciousness. I want to insist not only that there is no necessary connection between the understanding of the moment as an object of analysis and the view that it is subject to uneven development but also that the latter perception is deeply problematic.
The final section of a paper is hardly the place to address this issue, and it will have to be left for another paper. Let me bring this discussion to a close with a point of clarification and a few observations. First, the clarification. In asserting that there is no necessary connection here, my point is not simply that we need to explain why uneven development or some such notion appears so frequently in works which, from the late eighteenth century onwards, take the present or some earlier moment as an object of analysis. In most cases, the reasons are clear. In Hegel’s case, for example, time is the immediate historical existence of the idea and the elements which resist the realisation of its determinate form are earlier determinate forms of the idea itself. The perception of the present as structured by the uneven development of its parts is thus an integral part of Hegelian historiography and the image of an essential section, which Althusser mistakenly ascribes to Hegel, has no place within it. Or again, in the works of, say, William Robertson, Adam Smith or Karl Marx, it would not be difficult to find reasons to account for their perception that the present also contains elements that belong in the past.

My concern, at least in this paper, is rather different. It is to question the claim of Althusser, Chandler and Koselleck, to name but a few, that uneven development or some such notion must be contained within the perception of the present as an object of analysis. At first sight, Althusser might seem to reject this claim with his argument that while there are different temporalities in the present, their dislocations should not be seen as a matter of backwardness or forwardness in time.48 However, as we have seen, his real concern is less to object to this temporalising practice than to insist that it follows from the overarching structure of the social whole, which governs the relations between its subordinate parts. Once this structural determinism is understood then the temporal ordering of elements in the present appears as an integral part of the scientific concept of time. In effect, then, Althusser’s treatment of historical time simply accepts without question that the historical moment is structured by uneven development. This perception continued into the post-structuralism which emerged out of the collapse of Althusserian Marxism.

48 Althusser, Reading Capital, p. 105
On this point, Chandler’s and Koselleck’s discussions are not much better. They observe, reasonably enough, that the idea of uneven development or some equivalent was a common feature of the historical understanding, which they describe as emerging in parts of Europe around the end of the eighteenth century. It is in this novel form of historical understanding that the present moment appears for the first time as an object of analysis. They also assume that these two features, the idea of uneven development and the awareness of the present moment, go together, that the relationship between them is relatively unproblematic.

In fact, it is not difficult to bring this assumption into question. We might note, for example, that the human body involves a number of different temporalities: breathing, circulation of the blood, sleeping and waking, the ageing, at different rates, of various parts of the body, sexuality and reproduction, and so on. Yet we can register these differences without implying that some parts of the body are backward or forward in time compared with the others. One could make similar points about a manufacturing plant or hospital – I hesitate to use the example of a university – or even, as we have seen, of the moment of theory itself. If examination of the present condition of such unities does not require us to postulate relations of relations of backwardness and forwardness between elements in their present, it is not clear why societies, social formations or humanity in general should be seen as requiring a different approach.

Now to my closing observations. One is simply that, far from being a general feature of the temporality of the ‘moment in which’, the idea of uneven development has a more parochial character. It rests not just on the idea of development, which Koselleck describes as central to the modern understanding of historical time, but also on the conceit that the development of Western Europe (and now also America and a few other places) provides the standard against which the development of the rest of humanity should be compared. On this view, those who do not measure up to this standard must be seen as lagging behind. Yet even in Enlightenment Europe, as the examples of Diderot and Herder show, a developmental view of humanity need not be seen as legitimating this particular conceit.

49 I should add, though, that this imagery is sometimes employed: for example, in relation to different parts of the brain, or when a 30-year old is said to have a mental age of 6 or the body of a teenager.
Second, unlike the idea of the ‘moment in which’ that of uneven development appeared in Western thought well before the eighteenth century. It can be found in some of the writings of Western classical antiquity, for example, in Herodotus’ account of Kambyses’ expedition against the Ethiopians, in which the conduct of the expeditionary forces is described as regressing as they move further away from civilisation. An important impetus behind its specifically modern elaboration was the European attempt to make sense of what was reported to exist in the Americas. Systematic comparison between the customs of the New World and those of the ancient peoples of the Old can be found in the work of European writers as early as Las Casas’ Historia de las Indias (1527- ). A century or so later, the stronger claim of an isomorphism between them seems to have been well established, appearing, to take an example that will be only too familiar to political theorists, in John Locke’s assertion that, ‘in the beginning all the World was America, and more so than it is now’. The idea of uneven development emerges, at least in part, out of the early history of modern imperialism.

The final observation concerns my earlier comment that the identification of elements of the present as remaining in the past should be seen as deeply problematic. This is not to suggest that the practice should never be employed – we might notice that a person is wearing last year’s fashion or that a colleague does not do PowerPoint – but rather that it should be used with care. The example of European colonial government, which plays no significant part in Chandler’s and Koselleck’s analyses (or, for that matter, in Althusser’s) shows that the practical consequences of identifying whole peoples or ways of life as belonging in an earlier time, and thus as not possessing the rights and capacities of those who truly belong to the present, can be extremely destructive. Post-colonialism is the one component of the moment of theory which has seriously attempted to challenge the Eurocentric conceit which Althusser, Chandler and Koselleck, along with all too many others, present as an integral part of the modern understanding of historical time, and its influence in certain areas of academic life has been immense. Nevertheless, as we can see from the negative example of Chandler’s

51 Locke, Two Treatises of Government (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1988) 2, #49
52 See for example, Guha History and Dipesh Chakrabarty Provincialising Europe: postcolonial thought and historical difference (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2000). This conceit has also been challenged in anthropology (e.g. Fabian, J. Time and the Other. How anthropology makes its object. New York, Columbia University Press, 1983) and development studies (e.g.

\footnote{Compare Carol Breckenridge and Peter van der Veer's observation that the social sciences 'have been particularly recalcitrant when it comes to self-reflection on their representational strategies in respect of the non-western world'. *Orientalism and the Postcolonial Predicament* (Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993), p. 16.}