

CONTEMPORARY MARXIST THEORY

Week 5. Structuralist Marxism and Its Critics

1. Blackburn and Jones discuss Althusser's interpretation of Marx in terms of his opposition to "humanism" and "historicism," his rejection of the problematic of "alienation," and his insistence on the "scientific" character of Marxism. Summarize Althusser's views on these key points and contrast them with the theories advanced by earlier Western Marxists such as Lukacs, Gramsci, and members of the Frankfurt School. Defend or criticize Althusser's views in comparison with these other Western Marxists.

2. Blackburn and Jones say that "the Hegelian totality implies a simple and original unity of the concept in which different social realities are phenomenal expressions, mere exteriorizations of the auto-development of the Idea. . . . For Marxism, the 'totality' has a quite different meaning. It is, by definition, a complex structure of objective and specific levels that are not equivalent and are relatively autonomous within a historically determined social formation" (pp. 369-370). How does Althusser (in *For Marx*) develop the concepts of "contradiction," "overdetermination," and "structure in dominance," to differentiate the Marxist concept of totality from the Hegelian concept. Give a specific example to illustrate the differences between Hegelian and (Althusserian) Marxist concepts of totality as they might be applied to a particular area or problem of sociological explanation.

3. Summarize the main differences between "instrumentalist" and "structuralist" views of the state as expressed in the debate between Poulantzas and Miliband. Assess the relative merits of each view and pick the one theory that you find superior and defend it with reference to concrete issues of sociological explanation or political practice.

4. Clarify the concepts of "structure" and "agency" as they are used in Althusser-Thompson-Anderson debate. What are the problems involved in trying to reconcile structural determination with human agency in sociological theory? Critically evaluate the relative merits of Thompson, Althusser, and Anderson on these issues. How does Porpora propose to reconcile social structure with human agency? Are you persuaded by his argument? Why or why not?