

A critique of the knowledge as production thesis

Michael Peters

Education Department, University of Auckland, Auckland, New Zealand

ABSTRACT

Michael Matthews and Kevin Harris have recently advanced a Marxist epistemology which trades heavily on an analogy with commodity production in Capital. In this paper I am concerned to examine the Marxist conception of knowledge as theoretic production from within the Marxist tradition; encouraged by Matthews' and Harris' avowed catholicity that I might be able to bring to bear on the discussion an opposing viewpoint which may, in true dialectical fashion, result in a strong synthesis. In this paper, first, I shall concentrate on Matthews' interpretation, briefly recounting his version of the knowledge as production thesis. Second, relate this interpretation to Althusser's, in order to bring out some of the essential features of the Althusserian position and thus provide a wider context for examining Matthews' claims. Third, I advance and consider a number of criticisms raised against the Althusserian position. Most of these originate with the inherent anti-humanism and idealism of the knowledge as production thesis. Finally, I make some moves towards a reconciliation of structuralism and humanism as they have surfaced in the related educational literature.

Marxism is no mechanical materialism that would reduce social consciousness, philosophy and art to 'economic conditions' and whose analytical activity would entail revealing the earthly kernel of spiritual artifacts. Materialist dialectics on the contrary demonstrates how a concrete historical subject uses his material-economic base to form corresponding ideas and an entire set of forms of consciousness. Consciousness is not reduced to conditions; rather, attention is focused on the process in which a concrete subject produces and reproduces a social reality, while being historically produced and reproduced in it himself as well.

Karel Kosik, *Dialectics of the Concrete*. (Boston: Reidel), 1976, Boston Studies in the Philosophy of Science, Vol. Lil, (eds.) R.S. Cohen & M.W. Wartofsky.

Introduction

The proposal of a general or global theory in one field may have ramifications or ripple effects throughout the social sciences. The field of education, like any social science, is open to theoretical developments in related disciplines. In playing host to such a global theory, however, educationalists must appraise its intellectual underpinnings as much as seeking to examine its specific applications.

Michael Matthews and Kevin Harris¹ have recently advanced a Marxist epistemology which trades heavily on an analogy with commodity production in Capital. It is a philosophically interesting idea in its own right but is has an added significance for the philosophy of education in

that the epistemological package they advocate and argue Faris-meant to be seen as a challenge to the Hirstian analytic theory of knowledge while at the same time providing an underpinning to the burgeoning radical critiques of mass schooling in capitalist society.

Their approach is an attempt to marry ingredients from two major philosophical traditions: that of science on the one hand, and that of Marxism on the other. Thus, following now commonplace arguments in contemporary philosophy of science, both Matthews and Harris reject the major tenets of empiricism and borrowing from the tradition of Marxist philosophy emphasize a conception of knowledge as a socio-historical product. They ultimately appeal to Lakatosian criteria of rationality to differentiate a degenerating analytic research programme in education from a progressive Marxist one.

In this paper I am concerned to examine the Marxist conception of knowledge as theoretic production from within the Marxist tradition; encouraged by Matthews' and Harris' avowed catholicity that I might be able to bring to bear on the discussion an opposing viewpoint which may, in true dialectical fashion, result in a strong synthesis. Elsewhere, in a review of Matthew's *The Marxist Theory of Schooling*², I pointed to the apparent circularity of appealing to Marxist-modified Lakatosian criteria of rationality to vindicate the choice of a Marxist research programme over an analytic one. While remaining sympathetic to Matthews' endeavour I attempted to raise some criticisms concerning his appraisal and commitment to a Lakatosian meta-methodology.

Both Matthews' and Harris' epistemology is heavily influenced by the work of W. Suchting and Suchting³, Matthews and Harris have closely followed the structural formalism of Louis Althusser.⁴ The reading of Marx on which Matthews and Harris base their account is accordingly both anti-empiricist and anti-humanist.

In this paper, first, I shall concentrate on Matthews' interpretation, briefly recounting his version of the knowledge as production thesis. Second, relate this interpretation to Althusser's, in order to bring out some of the essential features of the Althusserian position and thus provide a wider context for examining Matthews' claims. Third, "I advance and consider a number of criticisms raised against the Althusserian position. Most of these originate with the inherent anti-humanism and idealism of the knowledge as production thesis. Finally, I make some moves towards a reconciliation of structuralism and humanism as they have surfaced in the related educational literature.

Matthews' Knowledge as Production Thesis

Matthews' proposal is based on Marx's belief that the analysis of commodity production in *Capital* is applicable to mental production, that is, as Matthews explains, "the terms, concepts and scheme of the first can be used to explicate production of ideas and theories in society". He adds optimistically: "If this is successful then we have a new model for epistemological discussion; a model which will overcome many of the problems which plague standard epistemology."⁵

The strengths of this account are thought to lie in the fact that such an epistemology will be both materialist and historical.

Accordingly, Matthews begins his account by applying Marx's analysis of manual labour (based on Aristotle's fourfold division of causality) to intellectual production. The application can best be appreciated in terms of the following scheme⁶:

Production		
Cause	Manual	Intellectual
Material	raw materials, objects of labour	observations, experimental results, concepts, laws, problems
Efficient	technology, labour power	technologies, instruments, methods, scientific labour - the problematic
Formal	commodity, use values	higher laws, new concepts, theories
Final	schemes, plans, designs	mastery of situations, fulfilment of needs, goals and plans of procedure

The major connecting concepts on which the analogy trades are those of practice and work. Scientists, "like artisans", work on their raw materials (i.e., observations, concepts etc.) to transform them through use of certain techniques and by dint of scientific labour, into new products (i.e., theories) in accordance with certain goals. Matthews reminds us, that with any scientific study of production, Marx was insistent both that "production" has to be treated in historical terms (not as a general category), and that "the technologies and instruments of production available are the central determining forces for shaping the form of the productive process". Further, he adds that "any account of material production will need to incorporate details of the patterns of ownership and control which operate in the productive process".⁷ Given these caveats, Matthews begins to explore the limitations of the analogy.

In line with his anti-empiricism, Matthews draws the Althusserian distinction between the real object of science, (objects and events in the world) and the theoretical object of science, (formulae, descriptions, observations). This difference is crucial for, "Knowledge construction begins) with the latter and ends in the construction of a new theoretical object."⁸

It is alleged that not only does empiricism incorrectly conflate this distinction, but guided by a correspondence version of truth, it wrongly construes the relationship between them, for, according to Matthews' interpretation, science (i.e. theory) relates to the real world not in terms of simple correspondence, but rather in terms of utility. He maintains that the relationship is "one of control, effectivity, manipulation. The truth of the theoretical object is its power and instrumentality."⁹

Next, Matthews turns to a closer investigation of the process of simplification and abstraction in science by reference to Marx's "Method of Political Economy", which Matthews interprets as further sanctioning the distinction between the real and the theoretical object of science. He writes:

The 'Method' section is explicit about scientific knowledge being the effect, or product, of intellectual production. The raw materials for it are 'observations and conceptions', and the products are new 'concepts'...Science does not begin with real objects in the world but with intellectually constructed objects, with conceptions. The empiricist confrontation between a knowing subject and a real object is absent in Marx.¹⁰

If the knowing subject is extruded from theoretical production how then does Matthews account for the generation of new problems and solutions in science? His answer is given in terms of an Althusserian "problematic" - a term which encompasses, among other things, basic metaphysical and ontological commitments as well as directions about method and methodology. The problematic is the missing "machinery" which completes the picture: it is both objective in the sense that it is a social product which predates the individual's thinking, and determining in the sense that

it conditions the selection and specification of the problem, and the kinds of raw materials and productive activities that can be used.

In classical Marxist terms, Matthews is attempting to argue that theoretical or intellectual products are determined by the mode of theoretical production.

Althusser's Structuralism

For Althusser, Marxist philosophy provides the "deepening" of dialectical materialism on which the theoretical future of historical materialism depends. Dialectical materialism is "the theory of theoretical practice" and as such both embodies an epistemology, and is clearly distinguishable from historical materialism - the science of social formation. It is important to bear in mind here that the early Althusser's reading of Marx, and in particular his structuralism, was, in part at least, an attempt to combat the Hegelian influence in orthodox Marxism represented for example, in Stalin's *Dialectical and Historical Materialism*.

While he rejects the a priori metaphysics of dialectical materialism and the dialectical ontology it presupposes, he at the same time refuses to embrace the other pole - a purely materialist ontology which implies the primacy of matter. For Althusser, dialectical materialism is construed in epistemological terms. It is the doctrine that knowledge is of an independently existing reality, and it is founded on the primacy of practice".¹¹ The notion of practice, as we have seen from Matthew's adoption, is the process of transformation of a determinate raw material into a determinate product.

Althusser distinguishes four different types of practice or modes of production: those of theory, ideology, politics and economy.¹² Although each practice has an homologous form, each takes a different type of initial object. Further, these structures exhibit a relative autonomy from one another in the sense that they are determining as well as determined, although "in the last instance" it is still the economy which is determining."¹³

It is apparent, however, that the knowledges of both Marxist science and epistemology are, ultimately, located outside history altogether, and consequently also quite separate from the proletariat. Both of these consequences have led critics to seriously question Althusser's Marxism on grounds of its idealism, and political elitism.¹⁴ How, then, does this idealism in Althusser's structuralism come about? An answer to this question is fundamental to understanding not only the implications of Althusser's position but also the later criticisms of it (and Matthews' adoption) based on the near-elimination of the knowing subject.

Dialectical materialism (i.e., "the theory of theoretical practice") and the idealism that springs from it can best be appreciated as a reaction against empiricism, and as thus attempting to overcome the traditional problems that plague empiricism. For Althusser, and the production theorists that follow him the basic and mistaken "problematic" of empiricism lies in the attempt to view knowledge as a relation between the beliefs of a subject (knower) on the one hand, and the real world (the object known) on the other. Empiricism, it is alleged, employs a methodology for the pursuit and attainment of knowledge involving a body of prescriptive - universal and fixed - rules which will guarantee this relation of "correspondence".

From the point of view of the production theorists this problematic is misguided on a number of counts. First, it misconstrues the importance and role of the individual knowing subject, for against empiricism the production theorists assert that knowledge is the result of certain processes of theoretical production in which the subject, strictly speaking, plays no active role at all. Althusser's "theoretical anti-humanism" rejects the status of the knowing human subject as nothing other than a "bearer of structural relations":

The structure of the relations of production determines the places and functions occupied by the agents of production, who are never anything more than the occupants of these places... The true subjects are...the definition and the distribution of these places and functions. The true subjects

are these definers and distributors: the relations of production... But since these are 'relations', they cannot be thought within the category 'subject'.¹⁵

Second, it is alleged that empiricism wrongly conflates the distinction between the theoretical object and the real object of science. This empiricist distinction allegedly leads to an equally false idealism of reductive materialism. By contrast, the production theorist affirms the existence of the real world, independently of thought, and distinguishes this "real object" from the "theoretical object" in a conception of scientific knowledge as a process of production "which takes place entirely within thought".¹⁶

There is, then, an irreducible gap between thought (i.e. theoretical practice) on the one hand and reality (i.e., the practices of ideology, politics and economics on the other).

Theoretical practice eventually achieves a cognitive grasp of reality by transforming the object of knowledge.¹⁷ That such knowledge is a product of the process of theoretical production presents no difficulties, but, as Althusser admits, exactly how such knowledge is produced is a problem - one to which Althusser does not claim to offer a solution.¹⁸ Thus Althusser does not provide a description or explanation of the actual working mechanism by which science produces knowledge of reality.

Criticisms of the knowledge as production thesis

My criticisms fall into two categories. The first set are specifically directed against aspects of the knowledge as production thesis, and focus on its idealism, its anti-humanism and its consequent inability to account for constructive change. The former inadequacy originates with the sharp separation between the theoretical and real object of science; and the latter, with the problems attendant on the near-elimination of the knowing subject (scientist), that is, the reduction of the subject in the knowledge process to that of a mere occupant within a structure.

The second set of criticisms revolve around Matthews' selective presentation of his position, which at the expense both of alternative Marxist epistemologies and of the complexity involved has tended to close off the debate in philosophy of education rather than open it up for discussion. Matthews presents in a mere sixteen pages the Althusserian core of his epistemology¹⁹ but he does so in a way which obscures the overall framework of Althusser's programme while repeating its mistakes in spite of the convincing criticisms raised against the early Althusser and Althusser's own reassessment and modification of his early work. While the first set of criticisms are dealt with directly, the second are implicit and emerge from a brief discussion of alternatives.

Althusser's idealism springs from the notion of practice, and his insistence that theoretical practice must have its own raw material and product which are distinct from reality. Given the primacy of practice, and its common essence revealed in his Marxist epistemology, Althusser is led to making a distinction between the theoretical and the real object, and to holding that the process of knowledge takes place entirely within thought.

A number of commentators have criticized Althusser on the basis of his idealism. Thus, Geras, having commented that Althusser's "failure to answer what is for him the real question gives his rejection (i.e. of empiricism) the mere status of a gesture", continues:

if he begins by affirming the universality of knowledge in its content, he ends by denying the historicity of its conditions and processes of production; their autonomy has become, quite simply, absolute.²⁰

Such idealism Geras traces through in Althusser's account of ideology and its radical separation from science; in his failure to provide any account of what distinguishes Marxist science from the other sciences; and, perhaps most importantly, in its "last hideout", the clear separation of Marxist theory from the working class movement - a criticism which ultimately becomes a charge of political and intellectual elitism.

Callinicos arrives at a similar criticism - the impossibility of avoiding idealism - but from a consideration of the basic underlying ontology of practice:

To assert the autonomy of theoretical practice without establishing the specific character of the relation it enjoys with the social whole, is to transform the sciences into an instance above and cut off from the social process. This unquestionably is the result of an epistemology according to which the relation of theory to the other social practices rests purely on their common structure, and the preservation intact of this relation is the prerogative of a philosophy whose only relation beyond itself is with the sciences.²¹

Glucksmann also concentrates his criticism of Althusser on the disguised but underlying ontology of practice. He claims that Althusser assumes a categorial correspondence between the practice of theoretical production on the one hand and that of the various historical productions on the other, such that it guarantees the truth of the former and provides the "absolute reference point" for its object of knowledge. Althusser's theory, then, is 'ventriloquist' because in it "the ostensible duality between knowledge and the real is a disguise: in the puppet of theory, only one voice speaks, the general conjuror of the world, the 'common essence of production'".²²

It is interesting to note here that the editors in an introduction to Glucksmann point out that his critique has never been answered in France, and that "a large number of key passages in *Lire Le Capital* cited by Glucksmann to drive home his attack were removed from the 1969 French edition (of which the English *Reading Capital* is a translation)."²³

Given that Marxist epistemology (itself theoretical) becomes "the theory of theoretical production", also determined by the elements of its own theoretical process, the knowledge as production thesis is self-stultifying. The inherent structuralism of the thesis confounds the possibility of and need for any independent assessment of it (or the grounds on which it rests) as the thought creation of any one individual. In other words, the production theorist has contrived an epistemological defense against the possible falsity of his/her own thesis, in a sense, by disowning it, and requiring it to be true of the way things are.²⁴

Althusser is apparently aware of this problem, and he seeks to overcome it by proposing a theory of reading which is based on an explicit rejection of an "innocent" reading of Marx and the complicity it assumes between subject and object - both allegedly features of the problematic of empiricism:

that the precondition of a reading of Marx is a Marxist theory of the differential nature of theoretical formations and their history, that is a theory of epistemological history, which is Marxist philosophy itself; that this operation in itself constitutes an indispensable circle in which the application of Marxist theory to Marx himself appears to be the absolute precondition of an understanding of Marx and at the same time as the precondition even of the constitution and development of Marxist philosophy...

But the circle implied by this operation is, like all circles of this kind, simply the dialectical circle of the question asked of an object as to its nature, on the basis of a theoretical problematic which in putting its object to the test puts itself to the test of its object."²⁵

The hermeneutical problem, thus, returns Althusser to the notion of the problematic, and, in particular, to that of Marxism. Only if one already knows that knowledge is production - something which is part of the problematic Marxism - is it possible to give the appropriate "symptomatic" reading of Marx which, in turn, locates the underlying structure of his thought. Althusser argues on the basis of his symptomatic reading, that there exists a radical/ break between the early Marx of the manuscripts and the later Marx - a break representing a clear epistemological separation between a science (based on the concepts of historical materialism i.e., the relations and forces of production), and its humanist ideological predecessor. Althusser's rejection of the early Marx as ideology with its humanist or anthropological problematic, then, is the source of his theoretical anti-humanist bias (1969 p. 224). For Althusser, the later Marx's greatest theoretical debt to Hegel is not a simple inversion or the dialectic, but the notion of history as a process without a subject - one

powered by its own internal contradictions.²⁶ Thus, the problematic in Marx's philosophy is attributed those functions normally assigned to the knowing subject in other epistemologies. The effect of this theoretical anti-humanism is to eliminate the activity of the knowing subject in a way which precludes the possibility of constructive change. For in Althusser's account it is structures themselves, without the aid of human agency, that lead to theoretical transformations. Yet, as we have seen, Althusser does not give us a working explanation of the mechanism of the process. It should be noted that Althusser's denial of an essence of human-kind - part of the anthropological problematic of the early Marx - as Callinocos reminds us, is, however, not an argument "that there is no such thing as the individual as such, but that each mode of production produces its own mode of individuality in accordance with its specific character".²⁷ Althusser writes: The whole process takes place in the dialectical crisis of the mutation of a theoretical structure in which the 'subject' plays, not the part it believes it is playing, but the part which is assigned to it by the mechanism of the process".²⁸

Ideology, for Althusser, is a complex set of practices (as opposed to a set of ideas) which has a material existence in the social formation. These lived practices structure the consciousness of the subject.

Althusser's account of ideology reflects a basic tension between the indispensable yet mystificatory role it plays in any society for on the one hand, he maintains it plays an essential function in any society of accommodating individuals to the roles demanded of them - of "the way they live the relation between them and their conditions of existence" - and, on the other, he asserts its function in masking the real relation: "In ideology the real relation is inevitably invested in the imaginary relation, a relation that expresses a will (conservative, conformist, reformist or revolutionary), a hope or a nostalgia, rather than describing a reality."²⁹ This is so because ideology, though it does designate a set of existing relations, unlike a science, it does not provide us with a means of knowing them. Humanism, then, is an ideological concept - one that operates by making "the man the principle of all theory"³⁰ - and by using the category of subject such an ideology can adapt individuals to the roles demanded of them by society. Marx's alleged epistemological break from his pre-1845 ideological humanism to his post-1845 anti-theoretical humanism is thus seen as Marx's scientific discovery but of the actual mechanism whereby this break occurred we are left wondering.

Althusser's anti-humanism fails on a number of counts. First, as we have seen, his epistemological programme is built upon the tacit assumption of the "common essence of production" - an outcome, in part, of his idealism - yet he does not acknowledge this underlying ontology let alone offer grounds for it. Why should we accept this implicit ontology over one that is based on an "essence" of humankind? Even if we accept that the mode of production determines its own mode of individuality does it necessarily follow that there is nothing common between such modes? Althusser, for instance, wants to argue that there are different modes of production yet he assumes that there is a common essence.

Second, Althusser's antihumanist interpretation is inconsistent with the analogy he employs between theoretical and manual production. If the analogy is to hold, as Cohen³¹ points out, the former "must be involved in the reproduction of many similar units of theoretical production" for Marx's analysis of commodity production under capitalism necessitates that many units be involved "for otherwise no labourer-capitalist relations can exist", yet the theoretical labourer is involved in producing "only one new theory as a result of his labour process activity." Cohen suggests that the theoretical labourer more appropriately should be compared to "the inventor of a single new product, the prototype of the new commodities which the labourer will reproduce for exchange or sale." He continues:

Now, just as the invention of the prototype of a new material object (commodity) is an act of creation of something materially new (it serves new functions, satisfies new needs) so is the creation of a new theory from raw theoretical materials an act of creation ... Something new has

been created for the first time, not out of nothing but through a dialectical recasting of the raw materials. This activity requires a thinking person, a subject. It cannot be accomplished by some routine 'labour process' for experience shows that the production of theories involves a complex of cognitive activities some of which may be said to constitute elements of general method and others of which are specific to the person involved, such as intuition, imagination, creativity."³²

Althusser's structuralism would seem to deny the scientific achievements of Galileo, Newton, and Einstein as distinctly individual achievements not to mention those of Marx himself.

Third, it is unclear what role if any the knowing subject has in bringing about the transformation of an old problematic or the origination of a new one. If Althusser is to remain consistent in his structuralism he must also deny the role of agency of the knowing subject in this realm also. To do so is to rob structuralism of the possibility of accounting for constructive change initiated and carried out by the activity of a knowing agent.

Fourth, and more generally, Althusser's structuralism leads him to make a distinction that radically separates science and ideology, theory and practice, in a way that accords both philosophy and science a special epistemic authority. His "theoreticism" in science, which is difficult to sustain in Marxist terms, accords philosophy (as the theory of theoretical production) the dubious status of an autonomous meta-theory that performs the role of both underwriting the claims of Marxist science, and adjudicating on what counts as knowledge for ultimately, on this view, philosophy distinguishes science from non-science (i.e. ideology). Althusser's epistemology against the current historicist notions of philosophy and rationality, resurrects an absolutist philosophy that is prone to all the justificatory shortcomings inherent in such a conception. Further, his radical separation between science and ideology leads him to ignore the unity of theory and practice, or at least to provide a purely theoretical solution where in traditional historical-materialist terms theory and practice are part of the same organic unity. His analysis of the science/ideology distinction precludes the possibility that social interests or values may have any bearing on either how a theory develops or on its cognitive content and in the last instance, as Edgeley³³ has commented, Althusser embraces "a familiar article of bourgeois philosophy" for he depicts science as descriptive and value-free, while ideology is seen as value-laden (i.e., prescriptive) and practical.³⁴

Having sundered theory from practice, and science from ideology, Althusser's structuralism has seemingly robbed both Marx of his individual insights, and his own structuralist theory of the motive power to explain real change, while reducing or obliterating the elements of personal intuition or creativity in theory construction.

What is surely needed is an account which, while preserving aspects of the structuralism advocated by Althusser and his followers, recognises the dialectical relation between science and ideology, theory and practice, and, at the same time, allows for the active contribution of the subject, at least at the epistemological level.

To recognise the importance of the role of the knowing subject in the process of theory production is neither to deny the Marxist tenet that consciousness is necessarily and essentially social, nor is it to fall back on the empiricist position.

While it is true to say that orthodox empiricist epistemologies have interpreted the problem of knowledge as one of how the subject can arrive at truths or knowledge individually, and thereby have neglected the social character and dimensions of knowledge and criteria of validity, it does not necessarily follow that, therefore, the subject has no role to play in the knowledge process. Indeed, the arguments of the later Wittgenstein³⁵ and Chomsky³⁶ outside the Marxist tradition, and those of Sartre³⁷ and Habermas³⁸ within it, are designed, in part, to show how language and knowledge are fundamentally social, while preserving the "creativity" of the individual subject.

The notion of a predominant philosophy - although in keeping with the tendency in Western marxism to emphasize the philosophical component in marxism³⁹ - is not matched in Marx's own writings.

There is a difficulty here for Marx 's conception of philosophy is not easy to establish clearly. Not only was it subject to change throughout the development of his thought, but also Marx presented little in the way of a detailed epistemology.⁴⁰

Given this, philosophical efforts to "go beyond" Marx cannot be condemned out of hand, for it is important to regard Marxism as an open tradition – as a tradition open to possible future theoretical development. In this respect Althusserianism represents a novel interpretation with many useful theoretical insights especially in the difficult area concerning ideology. However, the borrowings and adaptations by educators of an Althusserian interpretation must be set against other Marxist traditions as much as against contemporary historical developments.

In this regard, the debate between the humanist (Luckacs, Gramsci, Sartre) and the structuralist (Althusser, Poulantzas) versions of Marxism should be recognized as the appropriate theoretical background against which educationalists can locate their problems in an effort to transcend or overcome them, rather than simply applying a thesis and repeating its mistakes.

Towards a Reconciliation of Structuralism and Humanism

While this paper has so far only attempted to point out the shortcomings of the structuralist position, these criticisms should now ideally provide the ground for overcoming them and advocating an alternative suggestion. In this final section I will concentrate on the possibility of effecting a theoretical reconciliation between structuralism and humanism. Such a reconciliation, I want to suggest, might preserve the importance of the notion of structure at both the epistemological and social level, whilst allowing for the possibility of change framed within terms of human agency and resistance I do not have the space to develop this conception of a possible reconciliation in detail, but I shall attempt to broadly sketch the sort of argument that I favour with recourse to some developments within the sociology of education.

In terms of the present discussion it is profitable to compare the move in Marxist epistemology made by the Althusserians, with that made in "Marxist" sociology by Michael Young and his associates. Where the former has reacted against the traditional role assigned to the individual by empiricism in the production of knowledge, in order to emphasise the importance and relative autonomy of the structure of knowledge; the latter has, in fact, made exactly the reverse move.

The "new directions" sociology reacted against the older structural-functionalism, which in its focus on social systems as the main unit of analysis, stressed an overly passive and deterministic view of human beings. The new sociology is surely correct in pointing out such limitations, for as Giddens reminds us, the older approach failed to treat social life as actively constituted. In particular, it failed "to make conceptually central the negotiated character of norms as open to divergent and conflicting 'interpretations' in relation to divergent and conflicting interests in society",⁴¹ and, accordingly, reduced human agency to the "internalization of values." By contrast then, the new sociology emphasizes an "activist" as opposed to a passive and deterministic conception of human beings. The guiding thought behind the new approach seems to be that if we see social reality as the result or product of "men's active engagement in their history", if we see "knowledge as constituted by the actions of men in educational and other settings...located in our history", then "we can attempt to understand the origin of the present in the past, a present which thus becomes potentially transcendable through our actions with others".⁴²

It is not my intention to rehearse here the theoretical guidelines set Down for the new approach in sociology or to examine its credentials, but simply to note that the sort of move made by Young and his colleagues is the inverse of that made by the Althusserians, Matthews and Harris, even though they share similar commitments and hold certain fundamental beliefs in common.⁴³

The inversion might be carried further for just as the usage of the notion of structure has led the Althusserians to conceptually obliterate the active subject, and consequently left them unable

to account for constructive change, so too the usage of the notion of an active human agency has led the “humanists” optimistically to over-estimate the possibilities for change while neglecting structural constraints. While one approach stresses the way in which we as human-beings are determined, the other stresses the way in which we are determining. Suspicious as I am in general of attempts to reach middle ground, surely what is needed here is an account which recognises the extent to which human beings are determined as well as determining in both the production of knowledge and society, and their reproduction.

Just how a theoretical reconciliation might be brought about is, of course, the difficult question. Can Young’s sociological humanism admit some notion of structure? Can Althusserian structuralism accommodate some notion of human agency and yet remain theoretically coherent? Certainly, while Young⁴⁴ has come to recognize structural constraints to change and the naivety of his early assumption that re-definitions of school reality would somehow result in a redistribution of power and wealth, he has yet to produce a framework which successfully combines notions of structure and human agency. For the structuralists to reintroduce a notion of human agency would be to repudiate Althusser’s reading of Marx, but it would appear that such a notion is necessary to make sense of the temporal dimension of problematics - their origination, transformation and dissolution. Giddens in his appraisal of the concept “structure”, as is used by both the structural-functionalists and the French structuralists, retains the notion of structure as essentially “subject-less” while arguing for a view which neither of the above approaches can handle adequately: the constitution of social life as the production of active subjects. Giddens asserts that where the philosophy of action mistakenly treats the problem or “production” only, and therefore omits structural analysis: “the limitation of both structuralism and functionalism, on the other hand, is to regard ‘reproduction’ as a mechanical outcome, rather than as an active constituting process, accomplished by, and consisting in, the doings of active subjects.”⁴⁵ He attempts to overcome these pitfalls by introducing the notion of structuration as the “true explanatory locus of structural analysis”:

Interaction is constituted by and in the conduct of subjects; structuration, as the reproduction of practices, refers abstractly to the dynamic process whereby structures come into being. By the duality of structure I mean that social structures are both constituted by human agency, and yet at the same time are the very medium of this constitution.⁴⁶

I shan’t pursue Giddens’ formulation any further here, but interestingly he attempts to track out his own view by reference to the exemplar of language and Wittgenstein’s notion of rule-following. The position he adopts is but one attempt to preserve the promise of structural analysis while retaining a notion of human agency.

It is a moot point, however, whether the conceptual exercise of preserving aspects of both structuralism and humanism, and the attempt to successfully re-combine them into a theoretical whole, can take place without detailed case-studies of the actual process involved. Although such case-study work is itself theory-laden, and continually in need of revisable theoretical guidelines, it is only within the dialectical and piece-meal process whereby practice informs theory, and theory guides practice, that any progress on this question is likely to be made.

The sort of case-study I have in mind is that represented by Paul Willis’⁴⁷ study of “the lads”. It seems to me that Willis’ study of how British working class kids get working class jobs demonstrates the contribution of ethnographic study to testing theoretical structures, and resolving or refraining theoretical problems.

In particular, Willis’ study sheds some light on the actual processes involved - where notions of structure and human agency, equally, have interpretive validity and applicability in understanding complex and lived situations.

In this connection it is interesting to note that in his investigations of counter-school culture Willis came to view the “cultural”:

not simply as a set of transferred internal structures (as in the usual notions of socialization) nor as the passive result of action of dominant ideology downwards (as in certain kinds of marxism), but at least in part as the product of collective human praxis.⁴⁸

While Willis recognizes that the counter-school culture and its processes are in some sense determined, the recognition of this determination does not dismiss creativity.⁴⁹ Cultural forms, Willis argues, are not produced simply by outside determination. They are produced from “the activities and struggles of each new generation” and include creative “penetrations” “of the conditions of existence of its members and their position within the social whole”.⁵⁰ He continues: “It is these cultural and subjective processes, and actions which flow from them, which actually produce and reproduce what we think of as aspects of structure”.⁵¹ The contradiction Willis attempts to present and explore is the moment in working class culture,

when the manual giving of labour power represents both a freedom, election and transcendence, and a precise insertion into a system of exploitation and oppression for working class people. The former promises the future, the latter shows the present. It is the future in the present which hammers freedom to inequality in the reality of contemporary capitalism.⁵²

Notes and references

1. Matthews, M. (1980) *The Marxist Theory of Schooling: A Study of Epistemology and Education*, Harvester Press, Brighton.
Kevin Harris 1979 *Education and Knowledge*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London.
2. Peters, M. (1982) “Review of Matthews ‘The Marxist Theory of Schooling’”, *Access*, Vol. I, No. 2, pp. 64-9.
3. See Suchting, W. and Curtheys, J. (1970) “Feyerabend’s Discourse against method: A Marxist Critique”, *Inquiry*, Vol. 20, No. 2.
4. Althusser, L. (1969) *For Marx*, Penguin, Harmondsworth; and (1970) *Reading Capital*, New Left Books, London. It is noteworthy that Althusser in his more recent work has changed his views considerably. See (1972) *Lenin and Philosophy and other Essays*, New Left Books, London and (1976) *Essays in Self-Criticism*, New Left Books, London. In these works Althusser has attempted to correct his earlier “theoretical deviation” with its emphasis on science as “theoretical practice” and on philosophy as “the theory of practice”. He has adopted a position which stresses both Marxist science as revolutionary science, and the distinctive philosophy underlying it (i.e., dialectical materialism) as class struggle in the field of theory.
5. Matthews, *op. cit.*, p. 97.
6. Compiled from Matthews, *ibid.*, pp. 98-9.
7. *ibid.*, p.99.
8. *ibid.*, p.100.
9. *ibid.*, p.103.
10. *ibid.*, pp.106-7.
11. Althusser, *Reading Capital*, *op. cit.*, 58.
12. Andre Glucksmann (1977) criticizes Althusser’s fourfold classification of social reality as both arbitrary and empiricist. See his “A Ventriloquist Structuralism” in *Western Marxism: A Critical Reader*, NLB, London, pp. 282-314.
13. For an amplification of this point see Althusser’s account of the notion of overdetermination and structural causality in *Reading Capital*, *op. cit.*, pp. 220-24 and pp. 180-93 respectively.
14. See Geras (1977) “Althusser’s Marxism: An Assessment”, and Glucksmann, *Op. cit.*, both in *Western Marxism: A Critical Reader*, *op. cit.* These criticisms have been recently reiterated by Jim Walker (1983). See his “Ideology, Educational Change and Epistemological Holism: A Critique of some Marxists and their Critics”, *Access*, Vol. 2, No. 1, pp. 1-21. Walker argues that Althusser’s idealism leads to a split

between theory and practice which not only entails the undesirable political consequence of elitism - where Marxist theory must be imported by intellectuals into the working class movement - but ultimately defeats "the Althusserians (and all marxists') purposes: epistemic and social progress".

15. Althusser, Reading Capital, op. cit. p.180.
16. *ibid.*, p.42.
17. Significantly Matthews op. cit., deviates from Althusser here for he, drawing on a pragmatism Althusser explicitly rejects, construes the relation between thought and reality - between the theoretical and the real object - in terms of utility.
18. See Althusser, *ibid.*, p. 61.
19. op. cit., pp. 97-113.
20. op. cit., pp. 263-4.
21. Gallinocos, A. (1976) Althusser's Marxism, Pluto Press, London. p. 77
22. Glucksmann, op. cit., p.275.
23. Western Marxism: A Critical Reader, op. cit., pp.279-80.
24. Matthews, op. cit., unsuccessfully attempts to overcome this problem by invoking the allegedly self-reflexively consistent criteria of rationality proposed by Lakatos.
25. Althusser, For Marx, op. cit., pp. 38-9.
26. Althusser proposes a notion of structural causality where a cause is immanent in the totality of its effects, in part, as an attempt to counter the notion of linear causality characteristic of empiricism, and thus avoid a predeterminism in history.
27. op. cit., p. 70.
28. Reading Capital, op. cit., p.27.
29. For Marx, op. cit., p.234.
30. *ibid.*, p.237.
31. Cohen H. (1980) "Countering the Revision of Marxist-Leninist Philosophy" In Marxism, Science and the Movement of History, (ed.s) A. Burger, H. Cohen and D. Degrood, Gruner, Amsterdam.
32. *ibid.*, pp. 128-9.
33. Edgeley, R: (1979) "Marx's Revolutionary Science" in Issues in Marxist Philosophy: Epistemology, Science and Ideology, (eds.) J. Mepham and D-H. Ruben, Vol. 3, Humanities Press New Jersey, p 17.
34. Although Matthews, op. cit., also wants to preserve the science/ideology distinction he recognises that the latter does impinge on the cognitive claims of science (p. 130), but having made this observation he offers no clear account of how the distinction might be maintained.
35. Wittgenstein, L. (1953) Philosophical Investigations, trans G.E.M. Anscombe, Blackwell, Oxford.
36. Chomsky, N. (1976) Reflections on Language, Fontana, Glasgow.
37. Sartre, J.P. (1976) Critique of Dialectical Reason, NLB London.
38. Habermas, J. (1971) Knowledge and Human Interests, trans. J. Shapiro, Beacon Press, Boston.
39. See Anderson, P. (1976) Considerations on Western Marxism, NLB, London. He argues that Western Marxism, since the 1920's, has been preoccupied with abstract and theoretical questions concerning philosophy and methodology, thus isolating itself from working class interests.
40. For a recent brief account of Marx's conception of philosophy see McLennan, G. (1981) Marxism and the methodologies, Verso, London, p. 38-44.
41. Giddens, A. (1976) New Rules of Sociological Method, Hutchinson, London, p. 21.
42. Young, M.F.D. (1975) "Curriculum change: limits and possibilities", Educational Studies, Vol. 1, pp. 6-7.

43. Both, for example believe that education is an inherently political activity, and both level similar criticisms against the analytic paradigm represented by Peters, Hirst et al. in the philosophy of education.
44. See Young, M. F. D. & Whitty, G. (1977), *Introductions to Explorations in the Politics of School Knowledge*, Driffield, Wafferton Books and Scoeity, State and Schooling, Ringmer, The Falmer Press.
45. *ibid.*, p.121
46. *ibid.*
47. Willis, P. (1977) *Learning to Labour: How Working Class Kids Get Working Class Jobs*, Saxon House, Farnborough.
48. *Ibid.*, p.4.
49. *Ibid.*, p.120.
50. *ibid.*, p.119.
51. *ibid.*, p. 51.
52. *ibid.*, p. 52.

Acknowledgements

This paper is a revised version of a paper presented at the Annual Conference of the Philosophy of Education Society of Australasia, Massey University, August, 1983.

I am grateful to Jim Marshall for his many helpful criticisms and suggestions.