

Beyond Ideology: Althusser, Foucault and French Epistemology

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Abstract: The philosophy of Louis Althusser is often contrasted with the ideas of Michel Foucault. At first sight, the disagreement seems to be about the concept of ideology: while Althusser seems to be a huge advocate of the use of the concept, Foucault apparently dislikes and avoids the concept altogether. However, I argue in this article that this reading is only superficial and that it obscures the real debate between these two authors. Althusser, especially in his recently posthumously published *Sur la reproduction* (1995), appears to agree on many points with Foucault. The real dispute lies not in the concept of ideology, but in its connection with its counterpart, namely 'science'. Both Althusser and Foucault were in a way epistemologists, focusing on the question of how sciences develop and how scientific practice works. Focusing on their shared background in the French epistemology, with authors such as Gaston Bachelard and Jean Cavaillès, the real discussion appears to be about whether science can really be opposed to ideology or not. Focusing on these aspects of their works can shed new light on their oeuvre as well as on the nature of scientific practice.

I am trying to elucidate the mechanism which explains to us how a *de facto* result, produced by the history of knowledge, i.e., a given determinate knowledge, functions as *a knowledge*, and not as some other result (a hammer, a symphony, a sermon, a political slogan, etc.). (Althusser & Balibar, 1970, p. 69)

1. Introduction

Although Michel Foucault and Louis Althusser were personal friends, on the intellectual level they are known as 'theoretical enemies' (e.g. Resch, 1992, pp. 233-241; Ryder, 2013). During the 70s it was still reasonable to speak of a fundamental dichotomy in the intellectual landscape – one was either an Althusserian or a Foucauldian –, nowadays Foucault seems to be the only one still standing. Althusser's name, on the other hand, seems to have disappeared from the scene. How is this possible, that Althusser is forgotten, while Foucault seems to be more popular than ever? Is Althusser simply outdated due to his Marxist terminology and concepts? And does Foucault still remain relevant because he, in contrast with Althusser, never was a Marxist and started from radically different conceptual background? To find an answer to these questions it is necessary to clear out the difference between these two authors.

Firstly, I will briefly describe Foucault's position and the apparent critique one can give, based on his philosophy, of the philosophy of Althusser. However, if one looks at what Althusser himself has to say, this critique seems not to be the most profound critique of Foucault, because Althusser seems to be more in line with Foucault than at first sight. To

understand what really is at stake, it is necessary to go back to the tradition in which both authors intellectually grew up: the French epistemology or *épistémologie*. Only by keeping that tradition in mind, the most pertinent divergence between Althusser and Foucault can be seen.

2. The novelty of Foucault

The work of Foucault is particularly praised for its innovative approach to the phenomenon of power. He offers us a radically new analysis of power: power is not just something merely negative or repressive, but something positive and productive. Power structures are not all about prohibitions, but they do also actively create new things: knowledge, behaviour, structures. In *Surveiller et punir* (1975) Foucault illustrates this by focusing on the history of Western penal systems and related disciplinary institutions. These power structures do not only serve to repress and to confine certain elements in society, but do also produce multiple forms of knowledge by imposing a precise structure of rules and norms to shape the behaviour of individuals. In this sense, the subject and his desires, needs, et cetera, are the product of the power structures rather than a form of 'human nature' that is allegedly suppressed. Foucault writes:

The individual is no doubt the fictitious atom of an 'ideological' representation of society; but he is also a reality fabricated by this specific technology of power that I have called 'discipline'. We must cease once and for all to describe the effects of power in negative terms: it 'excludes', it 'represses', it 'censors', it 'abstracts', it 'masks', it 'conceals'. In fact, power produces; it produces reality it produces domains of objects and rituals of truth. The individual and the knowledge that may be gained of him belong to this production. (Foucault, 1977, p. 194)

This does, however, not imply that all knowledge is a result of power structures. What it does imply is that power and knowledge are related, influence and presuppose each other (*savoir-pouvoir*). An example can illustrate this, namely that of the police (power) and statistics (knowledge).¹ The police can only function efficiently if there is enough knowledge available about the population. This knowledge is delivered by statistics. However, statistics, in turn, requires social order to make information collection possible, which is delivered by the police. "Police makes statistics necessary, but police also makes statistics possible." (Foucault, 2003b, p. 315)

¹ The concept of 'police' refers to the police in the 17th century and not what we see as police nowadays. The police in the 17th century had different (more) tasks: it was the responsibility of the police to guard the quality of life of the population: hygiene, food safety, order, et cetera. (Foucault, 2003b : pp. 312-314).

Related to this, Foucault argues that the state should not be seen as a mere instrument that can be put to use to suppress pre-existing entities. This is also why the concept of ideology seems to be so problematic: speaking of ideology suggests that one is faced with a form of false consciousness, hiding some unrecognised reality. This suggests that there is some kind of *given* reality somewhere hiding beneath the layer of ideology. According to Foucault, there is no such pre-existing element, but the needs, self-images and conducts are 'produced' as well. Secondly, the notion of ideology seem to suggest a strong idealistic conception of power: ideology appears to be merely representations, ideas, thoughts, etc., while power is, according to Foucault, far more materialistic: it actively governs the conducts of the individuals. Not merely by acting on their ideas, but also by acting on their bodies. He uses the neologism of 'governmentality' (*gouvernementalité*) to describe this: the art to govern (for example) the population in a certain direction by a range of measures and tactics. This seems to go beyond ideology that appears just to be the application of a layer of false consciousness on an untouched reality. For example, in *La société punitive* (1972-1973) Foucault writes:

[I want to distinguish my own thinking from] the scheme of ideology, according to which power cannot produce in the order of knowledge anything but ideological effects, which implies that power either operates in a silent way by violence or in a discursive, talkative way by ideology. (Foucault, 2013, p. 236; my own translation)²

3. Althusser as a friend of Foucault

While elaborating his own views, Foucault seems to contrast his ideas against some unnamed adversary. But who can this be? Louis Althusser seems to be the likely candidate because Foucault often criticizes Marxism, and Althusser was one of the most prominent Marxists in the 60s and 70s. Also, Althusser is famous for his theory of ideology (Althusser, 1971, 2014). Thus, should we understand, the critique by Foucault of Althusser as an accusation that Althusser does not escape from a too rigid idea of the state, from the concept of ideology, and thus from a negative conception of power?

This idea seems unsustainable, because Althusser does not endorse these 'naïve' positions. First of all, Althusser's conception of the state is more complex than the idea of a

² « [Je voudrais me démarquer du] schéma de l'idéologie selon lequel le pouvoir ne peut produire dans l'ordre de la connaissance que des effets idéologiques, c'est-à-dire que le pouvoir ou bien fonctionne de façon muette à la violence, ou bien de façon discursive et bavarde à l'idéologie. » (According to a footnote added by the editors, Foucault had Althusser in mind as his opponent. (*Ibid.*: p. 245f9).

suppressing state. He makes the distinction between a repressive state apparatus (the police, the army, et cetera) and a plurality of ideological state apparatuses (the church, the family, the schools, the unions, et cetera). These apparatuses do not always form one solid front, centred in a sort of central state. Nor are they *either* repressive *or* ideological, but always a mix between both. At most, some apparatuses are dominantly repressive and other are dominantly ideological (Althusser, 2014, 169).

Also, the notion of ideology is, according to Althusser, certainly not equal to false consciousness nor located on the plane of 'ideas'. Ideology is always characterised by a certain material existence, embedded in certain practices and institutions, by which they affect individuals. Or as Althusser writes:

Ideology does not exist in the 'world of ideas' conceived as a 'spiritual world'. Ideology exists in institutions and the practices specific to them. We are even tempted to say, more precisely: ideology exists in apparatuses and the practices specific to them. This is the sense in which we said that Ideological State Apparatuses realize, in the material dispositives of each of these apparatuses and the practices specific to them, an ideology external to them, which we called the primary ideology and now designate by its name: the State Ideology, the unity of the ideological themes essential to the dominant class or classes. (Ibid., p. 208; see also pp. 236-238)

This is also clearly stressed by Warren Montag, who points at the Spinozistic background of Althusser. Althusserian philosophy is deeply materialistic, just as Spinoza's. The only reason why Althusser still uses the concept of 'ideology' is to undermine it from within, a similar tactic that can also be found in the work of Spinoza. "Althusser has preserved the language of interiority, the words 'belief,' 'consciousness,' in the very same sense that Spinoza preserved the concept of God, in order more effectively to subvert it." (Montag, 1995, p. 66)

Also, ideology isn't concerned with mere *false* ideas, but with conducting the thoughts and actions of individuals so that the reproduction of the existing relations of production is ensured. The crucial element is not the falsehood of the idea, but the fact that ideology encourages certain forms of behaviour to ensure the reproduction of existing relations. This is why Althusser also speaks about 'practical ideologies', which he defines as "complex formations which shape notions-representations-images into behaviour-conduct-attitude-gestures." (Althusser, 1990, p. 83)

Finally, it is possible to raise serious doubt whether Althusser's concept of power is really repressive. Althusser seems to be clearly aware that power can be productive too:

[We need to realize that] exploitation is not reducible to repression; that the state apparatuses are not reducible to the repressive apparatus alone; [...] we have to show how the ideology realized in the Ideological State Apparatuses works. It produces the following class result, which is astonishing but quite 'natural': namely, that the individuals in question 'go' [*les individus concrets 'marchent'*], and that it is ideology which makes them 'go' [*fait 'marcher'*]. (Althusser, 2014, p. 232-233)

Especially the last sentence is crucial: ideology is not merely repression, but encourages individuals to behave in certain ways. In this sense, Althusser seems to be a theoretical 'friend' of Foucault rather than a theoretical adversary.

4. Althusser as adversary of Foucault

There exists, however, a more profound critique by Foucault of the work of Althusser - a critique which can cast a clear light on the pertinent differences between both authors. The most profound disagreement between Foucault and Althusser is not concerned with the notion of ideology per se, but the connection between this concept and its counterpart: *science*. What is wrong with Marxism, according to Foucault, is not its critique of ideology, but its claim to be scientific. This is particularly clear in his lecture series *Il faut défendre la société* (1975-1976) in which he opposes Marxism to his own 'genealogical' approach:

Genealogies' or genealogists' answer to the question "Is it a science or not?" is: "Turning Marxism [...] into a science is precisely what we are criticizing you for. And if there is one objection to be made against Marxism, it's that it might well be a science. [...] When I see you trying to prove that Marxism is a science, to tell the truth, I do not really see you trying to demonstrate once and for all that Marxism has a rational structure and that its propositions are therefore the products of verification procedures. I see you, first and foremost, doing something different. I see you connecting to Marxist discourse, and I see you assigning to those who speak that discourse the power-effects that the West has, ever since the Middle Ages, ascribed to a science and reserved for those who speak a scientific discourse. (Foucault, 2003a, p. 10)

The main problem seems to be that, by connecting ideology with its counterpart science, one finds oneself necessarily in a certain power relation between different forms of knowledge. Even if ideological ideas are not 'false', by opposing them to science, you still ascribe to them an inferior position, simply by stating that they are 'non-scientific'. Claiming to be scientific is, first and foremost constituting certain power relations.

Althusser, indeed, might be the most clear example of someone claiming that Marxism is a science. There is hardly a text by Althusser in which this claim cannot be found (e.g. Althusser, 1969, p. 13; 2014, p. 41). One could even describe Althusser as *the* epistemologist

of Marxism. The central claim of Althusser is that in the oeuvre of Marx there is an epistemological break (*coupure épistémologique*) between the early, ideological Marx and the older, scientific Marx (Althusser, 1969, p. 33). Only by this break Marx's work became scientific. In an interview Foucault clearly states that he cannot accept this claim, and that it is this claim that distinguishes him from Althusser:

There remains, however, between Althusser and me, an obvious difference: he uses the term of epistemological break in connection with Marx, and I, on the contrary, affirm that Marx does not represent an epistemological break. (Foucault, 1994, p. 587(own translation).)³

So, the main difference seems to concern this concept of science and whether or not one can characterise Marxism as scientific and what this implies. It is important to notice that, in the case of Althusser, the claim of the scientificity of Marxism is not based on a naïve Positivism or Scientism. Althusser bases this claim on a specific French tradition, a tradition he interestingly shares with Foucault, namely French epistemology or *épistémologie*. So, to understand the claim Althusser is making and that Foucault is criticising, it is necessary to get a grip on this tradition first.

5. The forgotten tradition of French Epistemology

French epistemology is a tradition that is often overlooked in overviews of 20th century philosophy (but see Gutting, 2001). However, this tradition was crucial in the education of many French philosophers and its influence can be found in authors as diverse as Louis Althusser, Pierre Bourdieu, Michel Foucault, Jacques Lacan and Michel Serres. Also, it is important to notice that the term 'epistemology' differs from how the term is used in analytic philosophy: rather than the study of knowledge in general, *épistémologie*, in France, refers mainly to the study of scientific knowledge, and thus philosophy of science.

The French tradition of philosophy of science is especially notable for its focus on the history of science when outlining its philosophy of science. In fact, the tradition can be traced back to the work of Auguste Comte, who stressed that one should not study the mind by reflecting on it, but by looking at its history, i.e. the history of the sciences (Comte, 1998, p. 33-34). In order to learn how the mind works, you should look at how it develops itself through

³ « Il reste cependant, entre Althusser et moi, une différence évidente: il emploie le mot de coupure épistémologique à propos de Marx, et j'affirme inversement que Marx ne représente pas une coupure épistémologique. » However in *L'Archéologie du savoir* (1969) Foucault is more nuanced, but still critical (see Ryder, 2013).

the ages. Comte's law of three stages is an example of an hypothesis of how the (scientific) mind works. Of course, many criticisms are formulated against the original Comtean project, but there is a whole tradition who kept loyal to the general program, i.e. studying the mind through its history, but not to the Comtean answer.

This tradition succeeds in getting institutionalised in the French academic circles at the beginning of the 20th century. In this sense one can speak of a 'first wave' of authors, still relatively loyal to the Comtean project. Examples are Gaston Milhaud, Pierre Duhem, Abey Rey, Émile Meyerson, and Léon Brunschvicg (see Chimisso 2008). However, more important here, is the next generation or the 'second wave' of philosophers which followed this first generation. These authors are somewhat more known, although still often neglected: Gaston Bachelard, Alexandre Koyré, Jean Cavailles and Georges Canguilhem. What distinguishes these authors from the first is that they formulate a more profound critique of the positivist and continuist program of the earlier authors. Instead they reinterpret the history of the sciences as a discontinuist history, i.e. a history of ruptures, breaks and revolutions. These leaps in the history of the sciences can reveal the structure of our minds.⁴ According to these epistemologists science is not completely independent from ideology and culture, but is nonetheless somehow different from other social and cultural spheres as well. Science typifies itself, as Bachelard puts it, by an epistemological break (*rupture épistémologique*) with ordinary thinking and the subject:

We believe, in fact, that scientific progress always manifests a break, perpetual breaks, between common knowledge and scientific knowledge, as soon as one touches on an advanced science, a science which, by virtue of these breaks, bears the mark of modernity. (Bachelard, 1958, p. 207(own translation))⁵

There are two (connected) arguments to give for the necessity of these breaks. The first can be found in the work of Bachelard, who tries to argue for the fact that ordinary, common knowledge only results in epistemological obstacles (*obstacles épistémologiques*): the

⁴ This is of course a simplification. Earlier authors, such as Lucien Lévy-Bruhl and Hélène Metzger seem to fit more to the project of the second generation. Metzger, for example, speaks of 'mental a priori's' who can differ from period to period. By these ideas she influenced Thomas Kuhn in his thought, a fact he recognises in the introduction of his most famous book (Kuhn, 1970 VI f1). However these mental a priori's seem to resemble Foucault's notion of *épistémè* as well, but studies concerning the relation between Metzger and Foucault seem to be non-existent.

⁵ « Nous croyons, en effet, que le progrès scientifique manifeste toujours une rupture, de perpétuelles ruptures, entre connaissance commune et connaissance scientifique, dès qu'on aborde une science évoluée, une science qui, du fait même de ces ruptures, porte la marque de la modernité. »

imagination of the mind is spontaneously tempted by certain images that block all further scientific progress. The mind is inclined to see the sun as moving or heat as some hidden substance in the object. It is overtaken by these images and does not pursue any further inquiry. The objective of science can thus never be the immediate objects of ordinary thinking, but it has to detach itself from them. Based on this, Bachelard states in his *La formation de l'esprit scientifique* that "it must therefore be accepted that there is a very real break between sensory knowledge and scientific knowledge." (Bachelard, 2002, p. 237)

A second argument can be found in the work of Jean Cavaillès. In his posthumously published *Sur la logique et la théorie de la science* (1947), he states that if scientific rationality is completely attributed to the subject, for example by stating that there are certain timeless transcendental categories that explain all scientific knowledge, then there is no room for any radical novelty or dynamism in science. All 'new' things, then, should in fact already be hidden somewhere in the mind and are not really 'new'. However, according to these French authors, the history of the sciences demonstrates such novelty and radical breaks. Or as Cavaillès writes it himself:

If there is consciousness of progress, there is no progress of the consciousness. However one of the essential problems of the doctrine of science is that, in fact, progress itself may not be augmentation of volume by juxtaposition, in which the prior subsists with the new, but a continual revision of contents by deepening and eradication. What comes after is more than what existed before, not because it contains it or even because it prolongs it, but because it necessarily departs from it and carries in its content, every time in a unique way, the mark of its superiority. There is more consciousness in it - and it is not the same consciousness. (Cavaillès, 1960, p. 78(own translation))⁶

Scientific development would otherwise consist in a mere accumulation of facts, by a timeless subject. This seem to presuppose the idea that scientific concepts, instruments and theories are mere instruments for the mind. On the contrary, according to these French epistemologist, these elements play an active role themselves. Following a famous distinction made by Foucault, one could contrast 'a philosophy of experience, of sense, and subject' –

⁶ « S'il y a conscience des progrès, il n'y a pas progrès de la conscience. Or l'un des problèmes essentiels de la doctrine de la science est que justement le progrès ne soit pas augmentation de volume par juxtaposition, l'antérieur subsistant avec le nouveau, mais révision perpétuelle des contenus par approfondissement et rature. Ce qui est après est plus que ce qui était avant, non parce qu'il en le contient ou même qu'il le prolonge mais parce qu'il en sort nécessairement et porte dans son contenu la marque chaque fois singulière de sa supériorité. Il y a en lui plus de conscience – et ce n'est pas la même conscience. » .

related to authors such as Sartre or Merleau-Ponty – to ‘a philosophy of knowledge, of rationality and of concept,’ linked with these French epistemologists (Foucault, 1989, p. x). To understand the history and the development of the sciences, one should question the assumption that there is a timeless and unchanging subject. Instead science itself plays an active role and possesses its own rationality and dynamics. The idea that the subject is completely in control is questioned and problematized: rather than the leading figure in the development of the sciences, the subject and the mind can be seen as an obstacle or a producer of obstacles for science.

This does not mean that the subject does not play any role anymore in scientific progress, nor does it mean that science is completely autonomous from the scientists involved (and is some mythical entity working on its own). Rather it means that in the network of all elements involved in science, the pith of the matter is not centred on the subject. The specificity of the sciences does not lie in pure rational thinking of the subject, nor is science a purely ideological or political weapon, but instead the specificity lies in a certain rationality in the structure of science itself. This is a typical element of these French epistemologists and can also be found, for example, in the work of more contemporary epistemologists, such as Gilles-Gaston Granger, who focuses in his work mainly on the social sciences: “Whatever may be the importance of these [scientific] ideologies, we believe that it is nevertheless permissible to take science in itself, and epistemological reflection can be justified only if the systems of scientific thought reveal an order of reasons, which, without conferring on them any absolute autonomy, nevertheless manifest the authenticity of the movement from which they proceed.” (Granger, 1983, p. 3-4).

6. French Epistemology beyond epistemology

There are some clear resemblances between these French epistemologists and the work of both Althusser and Foucault. Althusser borrowed the concept of epistemological break from Bachelard and tries to apply it to the work of Karl Marx. Foucault’s notion of *épistémès* resembles the discontinuist writings of the history of the sciences.⁷ But, nonetheless, the subject-matters of the studies of Althusser and Foucault seem to be quite different. Rather than

⁷ There are some, but not many, studies who stress these relationships. In the case of Althusser the literature is very limited. An exception is Peter Dews (1994), but this article focuses mainly on the relationship with Claude Lévi-Strauss and the early Foucault. In the case of Foucault, there is more literature (Gutting, 1989; Thompson, 2008).

a pure history of science, they focus on more political themes such as ideology, power, interpellation and subjectivation. So how are they still French 'epistemologists'?

Inspired by the introduction Foucault wrote for the English translation of *Le normal et le pathologique* (1943/1966) from Georges Canguilhem, it is possible to speak of a 'third wave' in this French epistemology. While previous epistemologists focused on more 'exact' sciences, Canguilhem opens the door to more 'vulgar' forms of science, such as biology and medicine. By 'vulgar' I mean that within the life sciences exact laws and strict principles seem to be inapplicable: within living beings, there are always unpredictable actions and forms of contingency involved. This opening-up is however, according to Foucault, more than a mere addition of new fields of study. Canguilhem's own interest, for example, goes also to the phenomenon of vitalism in biology and in the relation between the normal and the pathological. By addressing these issues as well, Canguilhem's reflections go beyond the role of the subject in the sciences (as was the case with Bachelard), and also look at the role of the subject in its biological and social existence. According to Canguilhem, man is not structured by strict laws, but instead his (biological) existence must be understood as an 'order' of which the equilibrium is always threatened by mutations, illnesses or environmental changes (Canguilhem, 2008, p. 125). Foucault typifies Canguilhem for that reason as the 'philosopher of error' (Foucault, 1989, p. 23): He tries to map how the biological subject constitutes itself as a response to these 'errors' that always threaten his existence. In this sense, similarly with the second wave, one should not understand the subject as primary even in the biological realm, but as a result of underlying processes in the biological and social sphere.

From this perspective, the work of Althusser and of Foucault can be seen as a continuation of this French tradition: they transfer the same methodology to the study of man beyond science. This means two things: firstly, the style and methodology of these French epistemologists is applied to other domains to investigate how knowledge comes into being in these spheres. Foucault's work on the rise of the disciplinary society can be seen as an example, but also Althusser's reflection on the possibility of Marxism as a science of history. Secondly, the constitutive role of the subject is also questioned beyond the sphere of the sciences: must the subject be seen as the source of biological and social norms (Canguilhem)? Is history a process with or without a subject (Althusser)? And must power be understood as a product of the (intention of the) subject (Foucault)?

Thus, when Althusser claims that Marxism is a science, it is not a Positivism or a Scientism, but instead the claim that Marxism is able to function through the relative autonomous scientific rationality that breaks with ordinary and ideological knowledge. Because

the sciences seem to possess some kind of 'autonomous' rationality, they hold the promise of a non-ideological theory of philosophy, ideology and society. This is why it is so important that Marx makes the epistemological break, which is the only guarantee of his independence of ideology.

As we have seen before, Foucault radically disagrees on this: there is no such thing as an epistemological break in the work of Marx. As Foucault famously put it in *Les mots et les choses*: "Marxism exists in nineteenth century thought in the same way a fish exists in water; that is, it stops breathing anywhere else." (Foucault, 1972, p. 262) Marxism cannot be the science which Althusser wants it to be, because such an autonomous scientific practice is impossible. Marxism is deeply imbedded in the social and cultural aspects of the 19th century. Claiming to be scientific, it is already inscribing itself in certain extra-scientific power and social relations.

In this sense Foucault creates in his work more distance between him and the *épistémologie* than Althusser does. While Althusser dreams of some kind of power-free analysis of society, Foucault states that this is fundamentally impossible: "Relations of power are not in a position of exteriority with respect to other types of relationships (economic processes, knowledge relationships, sexual relations), but are immanent in the latter" (Foucault, 1978, p. 94).

However, by not reducing 'real' knowledge to scientific knowledge, and by stressing the relation between truth, power and subjectivity, Foucault opens up the possibility to study these aspects in a new light. In a 1972 interview he states:

I believe that the problem does not consist in drawing a line between that in a discourse which falls under the category of scientificity or truth, and that which comes under some other category, but in seeing historically how effects of truth are produced within discourses which in themselves are neither true nor false (Foucault 1984, p. 60).

Governmentality, for example, is not necessarily linked with 'scientific' knowledge, but can be connected by various forms of knowledge. It is the art of governing that is immanently related to power and knowledge structures, who imply each other. A good example that Foucault uses in his lectures at the Collège de France is Utilitarianism (Foucault, 2008, p.40-41). Instead of looking at it as if it were either an ideology or a science, Foucault focuses on the effects it had on governmental practices: Utilitarianism gave rise to a practice of calculation: to what extent are certain governmental practices efficient and useful? These effects are the real significant aspects to analyse. The fact that Utilitarianism is either scientific or an ideology is not really relevant.

Another example is the notion of 'truth'. In the lectures Foucault gave at the Collège de France in the 80s, Foucault focusses mainly on the techniques of the self in Ancient Greek and early Christian philosophy. Based on this, he maps a different 'history of truth': truth as spirituality. Truth is thus not necessarily the same as 'cognitive truth', as we are likely to think since Descartes (unshakable certainty). In the case of spiritual truth it is all about a truth that one brings into practice, that one lives, and that has a profound impact on the individual itself. Arriving at the truth in this case implies a far-reaching self-labour and a transformation of the self:

We will call "spirituality" then the set of these researches, practices, and experiences, which may be purifications, ascetic exercises, renunciations, conversions of looking, modifications of existence, etc., which are, not for knowledge but for the subject, for the subject's very being, the price to be paid for access to the truth. (Foucault, 2005, 15)

The same 'open' approach can be found in his analysis of the notion of the confession and *parrhesia*. Again these notions are somehow related to truth, but not to 'cognitive' truth: a confession is in a way always true, otherwise it would not be a confession. And *parrhesia*, or speaking boldly, was a right in the Greek polis which was based, not on an undisputable epistemological foundation, but on a certain mode of life. These phenomena would disappear between all the other 'ideologies' in the case of Althusser, and they can only be properly studied if one does not start from the opposition between science and ideology.

7. Conclusion

So, there is a clear disagreement between Althusser and Foucault, but not the one to which one is inclined to point at first sight. The disagreement is not one about whether power is productive or whether ideology is purely false knowledge or not, but instead is concerned with the status of science in society: Can there be a real scientific analysis of society, somehow free from all present ideologies?

The background of this discussion is very important, but often forgotten. That is why I have tried to elaborate, somewhat extensively, this tradition in order to shed a new light on the disagreements between Althusser and Foucault: is there something special about science, or should we get rid of the idea of its privilege and superiority? It is important to avoid both extremes: claiming that science cannot be separated from certain social and cultural influences is, nowadays, a rather trivial statement. Claiming that it is nothing but a cultural phenomenon is plainly false. There is something specific to the sciences, which distinguishes them from religion, art, politics or sport. Or as Althusser writes:

If this analysis leads anywhere, it leads us to the threshold of the following new question: what is the specific difference of scientific discourse as a discourse? What distinguishes scientific discourse from other forms of discourse? How do other discourses produce different effects (aesthetic effect, ideological effect, unconscious effect) from the knowledge effect which is produced by scientific discourse? (Althusser & Balibar, 1970, p. 68)

This, of course, does not mean that the sciences are something completely rational and independent. French epistemologists clearly recognise the role of ideology and culture in the shaping of the sciences. Althusser is very clear in this when he speaks about the 'spontaneous philosophy of the scientists' (Althusser, 1990, 109). However, this is not the whole story about science: although the sciences are linked with ideology, they still, somehow, succeed in surpassing the mere level of a cultural phenomenon like a painting or a political speech. This specific rationality, which seems to break with ideology on some levels, is however not just a given fact or a premise, but the real problem: how is this possible? Althusser believes that this scientific mechanism is also at work in social sciences such as Marxism or psychoanalysis, while Foucault does not: "what I have been trying to show [...] is certainly not how, as the front of the exact sciences advances, the uncertain, difficult, and confused domain of human behaviour is gradually annexed by science: the gradual constitution of the human sciences is not the result of an increased rationality on the part of the exact sciences." (Foucault, 2003a, p. 38). However, the question still remains to what extent Foucault would make this claim about *all* sciences. For example, in *Surveiller et punir* he seems to state that there is a significant difference between the empirical and the social sciences:

For, although it is true that, in becoming a technique for the empirical sciences, the investigation has detached itself from the inquisitorial procedure, in which it was historically rooted, the examination has remained extremely close to the disciplinary power that shaped it. (Foucault, 1977, p. 226).

So perhaps even Foucault would accept such an (relative) autonomy of the exact sciences from ideology. He did indeed state that there is no epistemological break in Marx, but that does not imply that there might not be other epistemological breaks in different scientific fields. What is, however, certain is that he did not accept it in the case of Marx and the social sciences. Is science still possible, if it is always, somehow, in the grasp of ideology? And if so, how? Both Althusser and Foucault are concerned with that crucial question, just as this French epistemological tradition was, but they give radically different answers.

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