

Anthropology under Politics: A Critical Comparison between Gramsci, Althusser and Foucault

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Abstract

If modernity is theoretically understood as the priority structure and ideological dynamics of time over space, then the whole post-modern trend of thought can be regarded as a space turn. Its main idea is a spatialized way of thinking which takes space as priority over time. This way of thinking promotes the transformation of knowledge from absolute knowledge (truth) based on entity and given nature to contextualized knowledge which advocates that relationship takes precedence over entity, contingency takes precedence over necessity, and construction (generation) takes precedence over given knowledge.

Keywords

Gramsci, Althusser, Foucault, modernity, knowledge.

1. Gramsci's Notion of Hegemony

Gramsci's emphasis on culture has a background of the development of Western capitalist society and the transformation of the way of domination. He not only reflects the social conditions at that time, but also the characteristics of an era. This section will focus on the multi-dimensional structure of Gramsci's theory of cultural hegemony, specifically from its social background and theoretical groundwork and the specific content of cultural hegemony theory.

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, under the social conditions of western monopoly capitalism, class contradictions began to intensify due to disputes of interests within the western capitalist countries, which eventually led to the outbreak of the First World War. The world war brought great disasters to the people of all nationalities in the world. Some intellectuals with proletarian ideology around the world began to fight against the bourgeoisie. However, with the victory of the October Revolution, the upsurge of the proletarian revolution, along with the mad repression of the bourgeoisie, eventually fell into a downturn. In view of the economic determinism of the Second International, Gramsci, as the leader of the Italian working class, began to reflect deeply on the reasons for the failure of the revolution. He put forward the theory of cultural hegemony, which had a far-reaching impact on the development of Western Marxism. In theory, Machiavelli's *The Prince* has great inspiration for Gramsci. Regarding hegemony, Machiavelli believes that collective consciousness can only be formed through enlightenment at first, and that the formation of hegemony must rely on strong organizational strength, which is reflected by the concept of "monarch" in his place. Therefore, it can be said that Gramsci understood Machiavelli's individual "monarch" as the spokesman of the collective will of the proletariat, as well as the propagandist and organizer of proletarian culture and ideology, that is to say, modern democracy must and can only be the creator and organizer of moral reform. Marx's thought about the state and civil society is also an important source of Gramsci's theory of cultural hegemony. Marx believes that the state represents the will of the ruling class and is the tool used by the ruling class to suppress the ruled class. The difference is that Gramsci believes the

“state = political society + civil society”[1]. From this, it can be seen that he thinks civil society is independent of the economic foundation and juxtaposes with the political field in the field of culture and ideology. Mouffe summarized Gramsci’s contributions to Marx’s ideological theory, including, firstly, emphasizing the materiality of ideology; secondly, denying the false consciousness of ideology; and thirdly, denying the principle of reductionism that all ideological factors have their class affiliation[2].

Gramsci’s cultural hegemony is how to gain leadership, not how to implement leadership. Gramsci believes that the foundation of the theory of cultural hegemony is civil society. In Letters from Prison, he clearly pointed out that the superstructure was divided into political society and civil society. The former was an autocratic institution reflecting the compulsory nature of the state, and the latter was a non-governmental organization disseminating the ideology of the ruling class. Through these institutions, the ruling class disseminates certain moral concepts, daily codes of conduct and values to the society, thus winning the people’s “consent” rather than “coercion”. This is the sign of the establishment of cultural leadership. In other words, or more importantly, cultural hegemony refers to intellectual and moral leadership. Predominance is here not only about economic or political control, but also about the ability of the dominant class to establish its own way of seeing the world as natural and common-sense. Gramsci holds that in most western countries, civil society has developed into a more complex structure. After serious economic attacks, it can still exist. War only destroys state apparatus. Therefore, in western capitalist countries, only to strengthen the struggle in the ideological field, defeat bourgeois ideology with proletarian ideology and finally establish proletarian cultural leadership in civil society can we win the revolution, which shows a strong practical value in addition to theory. Gramsci also believes that the power of cultural hegemony depends on intellectuals. Whether a class can cultivate its own intellectuals determines whether a class can grow independently and ultimately achieve its cultural leadership, which is manifested by a process and never a system or a structure.

If hegemony is a kind of rule exercised by consent, it means that the subject has to be tested to prove that such consent is feasible. Therefore, it is necessary to develop the theory of subject in the sense of ontology, which is what Althusser and his source Lacan did.

2. Althusser’s Theory of Ideology

Lacan’s structuralist psychoanalysis influenced the academic circles in Europe after the 1960s, and directly generated the main theoretical resources for the post-modern trend of thought to dispel the subjective philosophy. Althusser was the first to be irradiated by Lacan’s philosophy. Under the guidance of Lacan’s concept of pseudo-individual subject, Althusser would reject subject philosophy, economism and humanism in ontological logic. Moreover, in the construction of the theory of ideological in 1969, he followed Lacan's ideas about mirror image and oppression, and achieved a heterodox Marxist theory.

Althusser categorically pointed out that the category of subject (which may function under other names: as Plato’s soul, or as God, etc.) is the constructive category of all ideologies, regardless of the ideological stipulation (region or class) or its historical age, because ideology has no history[3]. This means that the pseudo-subject is the key to the construction of ideology, which is a new interpretation of ideology based on Lacan’s thought. Lacan’s philosophy is a profound theory of subject criticism. He combines psychoanalysis with structuralist linguistics to form a philosophical insight (Lacan’s thought directly affects Foucault, Althusser and later Deleuze, and also becomes one of the important ideological bases of post-modern thoughts). As for Lacan’s theory of psychoanalysis, one of the core ideas is that the subject is always a kind of self-deception. Lacan’s thought of argumentation is just

the opposite of Piaget's. Instead of explaining the construction of individual subject positively, he focuses on explaining the falsity of individual subject negatively. In his opinion, the formation of individual "I" occurs in a kind of alienated compulsory self-identity. This can be concretely summarized as three links: first, alienation in the mirror image; secondly, naming, that is, individuals are forced to identify with a symbol; and finally alienation in the real level. This means that once people enter the society and fully accept knowledge education, they will formally embark on the eternal road of no return. Methodologically speaking, ideology interpellating individuals as subjects is the key components of Althusser's ideological theory. This inquiry is very similar to Dasein's mandatory inquiry of things in Heidegger's later years. Althusser believes that the reason why ideology can produce such self-evident dominance is that the individual has always been the subject. The individual is an always-already subject, even before birth.

Such ontological standpoint has at least three effects. Firstly, it cancels individual's initiative in the fundamental sense. It can even be said that subject is only the agent of ideology, and human is the illusion after ideology occupies. Furthermore, because of the structuralist elements in Althusser's thought, the subject has been recognized as incomplete in a transcendental sense. That is to say, a Kantian sense of self-knowledge of the soul will be a thing-in-itself existence, making the subject never be able to get a more fundamental understanding beyond its own vision.

So is the individual doomed never to surpass the decisive fate in the sense of Hegel? Doesn't repression in subjectification itself imply the existence of the subject itself, even though it has no meaning, that is to say, it just exists in a non-existent way, or conscious in an false-conscious way? Could it be said that people do need to first accept and understand the normative nature of society, then sublimate or even change it? Therefore, it is worthwhile to have a more extensive and in-depth discussion on people and society, and even on material forces like people and technology. Here, a more interactive relationship becomes the core. Foucault made it possible.

3. Foucault's Understanding of Power

Foucault's ideological achievements are closely linked with power[4]. However, although he still chooses to use power to summarize his understanding of politics, society and even modernity, power here is quite different from some of the power factors mentioned above. Gramsci's cultural hegemony reveals the shadow of power. In fact, he only talks about hegemony in a cultural sense, although he still emphasizes a practical dimension. In Althusser, power permeates in the construction and existence of the subject. In his view, the subject is essentially a non-existent fiction, so the ownership of power is not fully manifested. It is better to say that power here degenerates into an original energy in the sense of psychoanalysis. This kind of power is manifested as a kind of restraint and oppression, and is unidirectional, from ideology to individual. Although it also has a certain degree of production value, it only stays on the construction of the subject, and this construction is also presented by denying the initiative of the subject itself. Therefore, this energy is not productive in nature, but dictatorial, nihilistic and hallucinogenic. Foucault's understanding of power is groundbreaking, which is reflected in three aspects: first, he transforms the power center into a fundamental force rather than a marginal and secondary one; secondly, power has a certain vitality in Foucault, which means that power is not neutral and empty, but a source of productive capacity and creativity; finally, power has been raised to the height of criticism of society and even modernity by Foucault, so that the analysis and insight of social functioning are based on different narratives of power.

Foucault's holistic definition of the concept of power appears in *The History of Sexuality*[5]. He believes that diversified power relations are contained in a space with its own rules and self-operation (Foucault, 1979). In this regard, the most striking feature of power in Foucault's sense is its relevance. Power can not be embodied in the individual and the organization, but in the relationship involving other existence. Therefore, power does not mainly exist in a specific source of sovereignty, but is inherent and ubiquitous in the relationship with each other.

The basis of power (if it can be expressed reluctantly in terms of basis) is largely embodied in knowledge and more practical material factors such as schools and hospitals. Foucault implored us not to believe that knowledge can only be acquired through the eradication of power. On the contrary, he profoundly expounded the view that power produces knowledge. In his most exploratory work on discipline, *Discipline and Punish: the Birth of the Prison*, he explains why prisons have become a popular punishment institution, trying to transform people through discipline. From this work, Foucault's research direction has changed from knowledge archaeology to genealogy which pays more attention to power, showing how power erodes people's subjectivity through knowledge and how rationality oppresses "irrationality" through the power of knowledge. In this book, Foucault presents the formation of prison archipelago and discipline society composed of prisons, army, schools, factories, shelters, relief homes and so on. And prison is a microcosm of this disciplined society, and also the focus of Foucault's analysis - the analysis of power technology, the transformation of punishment methods and the formation of modern prisons.

Foucault compared the public execution of Damian in 1757 with the work schedule of the Paris Juvenile Delinquency Institution established by Leon Foucher 80 years later. Through this comparison, we can see that the way to punish crime has changed from open, bloody, physical punishment to physical discipline, deprivation of freedom and spiritual punishment. On the surface, this is a victory of humanitarianism. However, Foucault questioned and criticized it. He pointed out that the punishment of prison crimes did not reduce the number of crimes, but increased the number of negligent offenders. At the end of the Middle Ages, the torture of the representative monarchy warned the audience through public execution, which reflected not only a judicial ceremony, but also a political ceremony to show power. During this period, prisoners can not contact the case file to excuse themselves, the monarch and the judge have absolute power. In the classical period, humanitarian reformers began to change the judicial process. In the late 18th century, there were three ways of organizing punishment power: based on the old monarchy, based on the utilitarian idea that punishment power should belong to the society with the function of prevention and transformation, and based on the coexistence of the former two. By the mid-19th century, the focus of punishment was no longer torture that caused pain, but deprivation of wealth or power. It seems that the victory of humanitarianism and rationality is essentially a different punishment technology and the way of punishment has changed. It seems to be less cruel, more painful, more benevolent and respectful, but the scope of punishment has become wider, and this is actually due to the consideration of maximizing various economic interests and achieving the greatest power effect with the least economic cost. Classifying and grading criminals and punishing them in different degrees and in different ways are all based on a set of punishment techniques and knowledge to regulate the educational activities. Prisoners have become the objects that need to be recognized and studied, resulting in a series of political anatomy, accompanied by a set of techniques, methods, knowledge and descriptions. Thus, a power-knowledge system has been set up, through the control of time and the division and utilization of space, through hierarchical surveillance, standardized adjudication and inspection to conduct comprehensive surveillance of criminals. Judicial organs and experts have the power to control and observe

criminals, and this power can help them to produce relevant discipline technology; at the same time, these technologies and knowledge provide rationality for power. The subjectivity of prisoners gradually disappears under the control of these disciplines, because power is subjectless.

The model of prison extends to the whole society. The formation of various disciplines is based on a set of disciplines and rules. In Foucault's words, "Discipline is a political anatomy of detail"[6]. The background of discipline is the emergence of a dominant technology that makes the human body more useful and more compliant through mechanisms. The body is tame and can be manipulated, used, modified and improved. Man becomes a machine, and man is strengthened and weakened at the same time - man as a group increases efficiency through division of labor and cooperation (such as factory assembly line manufacturing), while as an individual, he becomes smaller and smaller. In addition, a panoptic power-monitoring network has also spread to the entire social supervision system, which creates a prison city. People live in a transparent world, and are always in a situation that can be monitored at any time but not necessarily paid attention to, whose knowledge and behavior are the result of construction and discipline. Foucault believed that it was an excessive abuse of power and that ultimately there will be a war between everyone and everyone. Based on these empirical materials, Foucault deeply criticized the consequences of the iron cage produced by modern rationality and the disappearance of man as the subject. Man has become a tamed object, objectified by social mechanism and himself. This formed the core idea of Foucault's thought.

To sum up, Foucault's understanding of power has the following five characteristics. In the first place, Foucault attaches great importance to the relationship between knowledge and power and the material dimension of power. It is for this reason that Foucault pioneered a unique knowledge archaeology, so that through the discussion of social institutions, he can further obtain the macroscopic insight of criticizing and reflecting on the whole social mechanism. Secondly, because Foucault endowed power with a unique ontological status, power itself has the ability to promote the formation of chains in all sectors of society, thus enriching the connotation of power, broadening the horizon of power research, and reshaping the perspective of looking at society. Thirdly, the broad and deep obscurity of power has a close relationship with social function in a sense. Therefore, in Foucault's view, there is no independent social entity and its power effect, which is still a backward concept of power, on the contrary, power and society coexist. Fourthly, it is precisely because of the co-construction of power and society and the non-subjectivity of power that power and resistance always appear at the same time. And this kind of interaction is no longer the dualistic opposition that traditional theory adheres to, but the balanced coordination and internal chimerism, coming from below. The categories of master-slave, oppression-resistance, dominator-dominated will no longer apply. Finally, the characteristics of power, which are similar to those of currency, namely, possession, exchange, sharing and deprivation, have been replaced by flow and paragenesis in a more original sense, thus making it possible to have a new perspective and criticism of society and even modernity. Relations of power are not in a position of exteriority with respect to other types of relationships, but are immanent in society. Unlike Marx's understanding of social classification, economic foundation and superstructure, power relations play a role of production in a direct sense. Here, the thinking of the whole society is more abundantly reflected in Foucault's discussion of bio-power, which is marked by an explosion of numerous and diverse techniques for achieving the subjugation of bodies and the control of populations. Foucault regards it as the core part of capitalist development that can not be ignored. Together with his theory of governmentality, Foucault shows the dialectical essence of power with plenitudinous material colour.

Is Foucault's theory impeccable? In Foucault's vision, almost all social institutions, knowledge and norms are intermediaries and manifestations of power. We live not so much in society as in power and its ramifications. This pan-power view, and even the idea of anarchism, has been incisively criticized by western scholars. It includes, but is not limited to, McQuail's criticism of Foucault's obliteration of the attributes of different powers[7]; Said's view that his research is very personal and lacks attention to the community and the collective[8]; and Derrida's satire of the remnants of Descartes in Foucault's narrative of insanity[9]. Generally speaking, Foucault, like Marcuse and Sartre, avoided the problem of class struggle. In his view, this class struggle is still a totalized strategy of struggle. However, Foucault did not distinguish between power and its practice. His understanding of power is totalized, so he fell into the things he opposed. This problem can only be judged better at the methodological level. Derrida's criticism of structuralism, for example, reveals to a large extent the weakness of Foucault's thought. However, due to space constraints, it can only stop here.

4. Enlightenment to Anthropology

Jessop believes that Gramsci pays more attention to the political nature of philosophy and the characteristics of philosophy as an element of superstructure, that is, philosophy is not only abstract and speculative metaphysical thought, but also often embodied in daily life. In his view, Gramsci created a political epistemology, which dialectically depicted the effects of philosophy in various practical activities[10]. Gramsci highlighted the role of human's subjective initiative on this issue. He further believes that human beings are specific will, which means that they can effectively apply abstract will or impulse of life to the realization of such a will. It is not difficult to see that Gramsci borrowed Bergson's concept and vocabulary and endowed Marxism with a new content. When Gramsci thought about what man is, he realized that man is not only a pre-established and natural existence, but a relatively open system with multiple factors. Therefore, to carry out anthropological research, the key is to select the elements in human life to illustrate the systematic mechanism of human survival structure with a deep sense of practice.

Because of the affinity of methodology and research topic, Althusser and Lévi-Strauss have a lot in common. The former is famous for the study of ideology, while the latter is good at the study of myths. This makes them have a profound reference in research methods and themes. In particular, it is worth pointing out that a number of influential Marxist anthropologists, such as Godler, Meraso and Terry, have emerged under the joint influence of the two. Influenced by Althusser, they applied the concept of historical materialism to the primitive society in order to obtain a theoretical analysis of the primitive production mode as a part of the universal mode of production, whose central problem is to establish the status of kinship in the primitive society. Affected by Althusser, anthropology is used to combining with aesthetic art phenomena, which makes Marxism begin to pay attention to the structural relationship between aesthetic art and ideology, thus laying a theoretical premise for later Eagleton and Jameson's in-depth interpretation of the text.

Foucault introduced power into discourse and discussed the relationship between power and discourse. Knowledge plays a very important role. Just like an invisible hand, it plays a role between discourse and power. Knowledge is the source of power, and the comprehensibility of knowledge system and truth system is attributed to discourse rules. Foucault's discourse theory provides new methods and perspectives for anthropological research. His theory of deconstructing subject makes researchers realize the importance of subjectivity, social identity and individuality in discourse analysis. Said's Orientalism was influenced by this. However, although Foucault acknowledged that discipline may have a positive effect, it is more uneasy about the proliferation of discipline. His theory has a strong pessimistic color

because it unilaterally emphasizes the productivity and intentionality of power itself and ignores the initiative of human beings. In anthropological fieldwork, the attitude of anthropologists should be neutral, and Foucault's perspective is obviously undesirable.

Finally, I use Giddens' point of view to conclude the discussion here [11]. The so-called linguistic turn in social theory and the controversy aroused by the rise of post-empiricist philosophy are characterized by epistemology and concern for relativism. However, the exploration of social theory should focus more on ontological concern, the study of the existence and behavior of people, the concept of social transformation in production and society, that is, on structured theory, rather than indulging in epistemological debates.

References

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