A Critique of British Marxism

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On Not Wanting to Know

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NOTE

Parts of this book are revised versions of articles that were originally published elsewhere. Chapter two appeared as 'Juan Carlos Rodríguez and the Renewal of Althusserian Marxism', *Álabe* 7, June (2013) 1-24 ; chapter three as 'Crítica e ideología: el hispanismo anglosajón revisitado', *Riff-Raff,* translated by Vicente Rubio Pueyo, 037, 3, Spring-Summer (2008), 89-109; chapter five as 'Lo libidinal versus el inconsciente ideológico: encuentros cercanos de tipo hermenéutico', translated by Blanca Fernández García and Antonio Gómez L-Quiñones in *La lupa roja: Ensayos sobre hermenéutica y marxismo* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Teseo, 2019), 269-309; chapter six as 'The Dog that Didn't Bark', *Álabe* 16 (2017) 1-28; chapter seven as 'Hispanic Colonial Studies: On the Renewal of Marxism', *Journal of Latin American Colonial Studies,* 15 (1) (March 2006), 111-26; and chapter eight as 'Apuntes para una teoría del inconsciente ideológico/libidinal: Juan Carlos Rodríguez sobre Freud' *Álabe,* translated by Pablo Aparicio Durán, 30, July-December (2024) 187-229. My thanks to the editors of these publications for their permission to reprint. Chapters one and four have not been published elsewhere but not through want of trying. At the first sign of trouble from marauding Althusserians, the wagons of British Marxism have always been quick to form a defensive circle.

PREFACE

Most prefaces, the present one included, are written after the completion of the works to which they are attached as a supplement, their function being to allow authors to confess to the existence, within their texts, of certain trace elements of a personal, subjective nature. I place on record, accordingly, the fact that I arrived more belatedly than was normal on the steps of one of the Russell group of British universities in the mid-1960s, having left school at the age of fifteen and been forced to pursue my further education through technical institutes, alongside apprentices from Rolls-Royce and British Celanese. Traditionally, prefaces also serve to conjure away the subjective elements in question, to leave the body of the text intact, as an objective entity, cleansed of unnecessary accretions. None of us choose the circumstances into which we are born, the argument runs, but these circumstances are an irrelevance when it comes to assessing the objectivity of an argument. Except that what is commonly forgotten is that the past weighs more heavily upon some of us than upon others. A fact into which my critique of British Marxism sinks its roots. The 'making of the British working-class', in the agentive sense, based on the existence of a class *consciousness*, spoke more to the condition of the middle-class radicals whom I encountered at university, who romanticized the 'working-class', and not to my own. My conviction was, rather, that I had had very little control over my destiny or, as I would now phrase it, that I had been *made* in the passive sense. And made *unconsciously* to boot, which is where, in turn, my theorization of an 'ideological unconscious' sinks *its* roots.

Prefaces can be, and usually are, put to another use: to alert the reader to the structural form of the work that they precede, which may, for example, be that of 'collected essays'. Particularly in the context of the postmodern university, over-worked academics find themselves increasingly denied the space in which to pursue lengthy projects and must, accordingly, develop their ideas over time, sometimes over decades. Such piecemeal production, through independent studies,

may result in a certain unevenness of form and degree of repetition, as earlier lines of thought are resumed and developed. Confessedly, in my own case, residues remain from an initial exposure to the traditional 'lit crit' promoted by British Hispanism and from a Hegelian turn that traced the existence of a 'moving spirit' behind Spanish culture. An encounter with Freud, in an existential form, subsequently led me to take on board a whole new theoretical vocabulary, which would be further reconfigured following upon a close study of Structural Marxism. Determining this second, Marxist 'break' was my acquaintance with Juan Carlos Rodríguez's theory of ideological production, the influence of which is registered throughout the present work.

Yet, again, it is important to discriminate: the demands to 'publish or perish' within a educational state apparatus regulated by an ideology of production are more easily met by some than others. Journals and publishing houses are not equally open to all. It is one thing to recuperate the notion of the 'freedom of the individual', after having conceded the influence of societal pressure, on the basis of the individual/society dichotomy, and quite another to promote the existence of an 'ideological unconscious' that, allegedly, *precedes* the individual/society dichotomy and that *determines* the debate that takes place around it; one thing, in other words, to establish the priority of the 'subject' within the bounds of an ideology that takes this subject's existence and its freedom as founding, juridically legitimated principles, and quite another to lay claim to having lifted oneself up by one's bootstraps, so as to escape the reach of bourgeois ideology. A critique of this ideology, from a position at its margins, courts obvious dangers.

Hopefully, readers will begin to understand the extent to which my own trajectory through the academy is also the record of a struggle. Firstly, as an undergraduate, against the bullying condescension of British Hispanists ('Malcolm, you just don't know how to write'); secondly, against a questioning of a native empiricism ('the problem with this young Hispanist ...'); thirdly, my embrace of psychoanalysis ('not applicable to literature'); and, finally, my Althusserian turn ('Now, Professor Read, about this Marxism ...'). For bourgeois scholars, persuaded of their personal excellence, comfortably ensconced within

the academy, the suggestion that they were not individuals in charge of their destiny, that they were not intellectually capable of resisting the effects of dogma and 'ideology', could only appear as an outrage. For a student of working-class origins, who had sat and failed the notorious 11-plus exam, who had yet fought his way through the minefield that was tertiary education and been scarred psychologically in the process, the idea that a subject is determined, ideologically, at an unconscious level made perfect sense. All of which was assessed retrospectively in my book *Educating the Educators: Hispanism and its Institutions* (2008).

Much the same dynamic has been reproduced, albeit at a more theoretically advanced stage, in my encounter with British Marxism. The point of departure in this case was the critique of the latter mounted by Rodríguez in the final part of *Theory and History of Ideological Production* (1974, 2002). British Marxism, the Spaniard's argument ran, was mortgaged to a psychologism that, its left-wing credentials notwithstanding, was blind to the unconscious operations of ideology at a structural level. A parochial Anglophone discipline failed even to register the existence of *Theory and History* and has subsequently met attempts to promote the Spaniard's work with guarded recognition, invariably with incomprehension, and, sometimes, with rejection. In the case of Hispanism, which lacked a Marxist discourse, radical submissions to journals would be rejected because of 'scholarly inaccuracies', real or imagined. Similarly, critical reports from Marxist journals habitually suggest ways in which an article promoting Rodríguez's work needs to be 're-constructed', along technical lines. In effect, I suggest, substantive issues are thereby raised to the second power: conflict over narrative structures is merely one more manifestation of the hidden workings of an ideological unconscious and, more specifically, of a covert (albeit unconscious) attempt to reinstate the central agency of the subject.

We will be engaging at length with such issues below. The point that I am trying to make here is that the generic 'preface' urgently focuses attention on a *subject of history*. It is perilously easy, we will be arguing, for the Althusserian concept of *history WITHOUT a subject* to be reconstrued in such a way as to salvage the opposition between 'individual' and 'society', through a transference of the emphasis from

the former to the latter; also, for an Althusserian 'change of terrain' to be reversed by promoting 'human nature' at the expense of 'modes of production' and associated categories. Reformist strategies of this kind are most effectively countered by a detour through what Rodríguez refers to as 'radical historicity', mediated by the dialectical interchange between abstract theorizing and empirical data. Such a detour needs to start with a 'preface' that registers the full force of the contradictory circumstances that give rise to, nay, that *construct,* the historical form of our individualities. At which point a series of paradoxes begin to rear their heads. Just as it is impossible for the conscious subject to grasp its own act of cognition, for the simple reason that this cognition coincides with itself, so does this same subject lack a vantage point from which to view, from the outside, the ideology within which it basks. Along with other seeming absurdities. We know, for example, that our every action is causally determined but must proceed as if we could choose between alternatives. Proceed, furthermore, on the basis of a 'limited rationalism' that is paradoxical in one final sense: a discourse that promotes itself as a construction of the 'I' who writes must, at the same time, depart from an 'I' that itself can only be an effect of the construction in question.

INTRODUCTION

For those who lived through the explosion of civil unrest that erupted in 1968, nothing was more curious than the restoration of 'law and order' that took place over the ensuing decade. That restoration together with the inability of theoreticians on the Left to explain it. Not, of course, for want of trying. Narratives of various sorts abounded to account for the fact that the class *consciousness* of the working class had not unfolded quite as expected. But all to no avail. The 'poverty of theory', it is to be concluded, which was being widely proclaimed at the time, was not the best point from which to have begun. Nor was an entrenched empiricism that 'refused' to relinquish the subject/system dichotomy, that was unable to 'think' the existence of an ideological *unconsciousness* that *precedes* the oppositions in question. In certain conditions, some theories (like plants) fail to 'take'. Quite simply, Marxist historians and theoreticians *did not wish to know*. And with catastrophic results. Left largely defenceless, at the level of serious theory, before an assault by neo-liberalism, 'socialism' in the 1980s and '90s was progressively driven from the political agenda. Closer to home, it would subsequently prove vulnerable to a body of professionalized, middle-class politicians who, their left-wing credentials notwithstanding, aspired to little beyond the establishment of a 'good capitalism'. There was no alternative to exploitation, we needed to accept, other than exploitation in a mildly humane form. Marx was the 'God that failed'.

Except that, as soon became apparent, it was not Marx who had failed, nor socialism nor Marxism for that matter, but capitalism. The global crises that followed the fall of Soviet communism gave a quietus to proclamations regarding the 'end of history'. A social democracy, firmly located in the centre of the political spectrum, was seemingly unable to provide even the basics of life for many. And, following the crisis of 2010, the downward spiral continued. Everyone recognized the need to reform social care, but politicians of all stripes were paralyzed with indecision. Symptomatically, foodbanks have more recently proliferated,

as have measures to provide emergency accommodation. The sense of social breakdown is now palpable. Locally, in Britian, patient waiting lists grow within an increasingly dysfunctional national health service; rivers run full of sewage and contaminate our beaches; drugs, violence and anti-social behaviour disfigure the daily life of deindustrialized cities; prisons, in varying states of structural decay, are full to overflowing; corruption, incompetence, and mendacity characterize parts of the political establishment. More widely, in Europe, fascism is again on the rise; a war rages in Ukraine, whereas in the Middle East, in Gaza, Palestinians are being slaughtered in their thousands. And all of this is happening while entrepreneurs and bankers continue to obsess about the extraction of surplus value and the accumulation of an anti-value in amounts that boggle the mind.

In such circumstances, as was bound to happen, a resurgence of interest in Marxism has taken place. Structural Marxism had already experienced a renewal of sorts following the collapse of Stalinism (1989-92), when, for the first time, it became possible to dis-entangle Althusser's contribution to social theory from his failed political agenda (see Resch 1992; Kaplan and Sprinker 1993). Then came the return of history with a vengeance in the new millennium, which happily coincided with, or led to, the publication of some of Althusser's hitherto inedited texts, thence to a far-reaching rediscovery and reassessment of an Althusserian heritage. Perhaps, after all, Althusser had a point when he questioned the efficacy of 'consciousness', on the part of subjects of history, and emphasized the capacity of capitalism, unconsciously, to reproduce itself. And yet ... the residues of the Left within the British academy continue, unashamedly, to profess allegiance to the 'poverty of theory'. Which brings us to the details of the present volume.

In chapter one, we will revisit the 1970s and ’80s, better to understand the singularly vicious attacks to which Althusser was subjected from within British Marxism. Historians and cultural theorists failed to grasp the significance of the 'change of terrain', advocated by Althusser, from a problematic based on the psychology of consciousness, both individual and collective, to one based on the 'social formation' and associated concepts. Such, at least, was the nub of a critique mounted by Juan Carlos Rodríguez in his *Theory and History*. The key to this work

were two theoretical concepts: the *ideological unconscious* and the *radical historicity* of ideological production. While Althusser himself had insisted upon the existence of an ideological *unconsciousness*, it fell to Juan Carlos Rodríguez, one of his former students in Paris, to theorize the notion of an ideological *unconscious*. The present chapter puts Rodríguez's claims and concepts to the test of their object, in juxtaposition with those of two leading exponents of the British tradition, G. A. Cohen and Alex Callinicos. As throughout, theoretical claims are assessed empirically, on the basis of selected cultural texts drawn from the Spanish tradition. As throughout, the texts in question reflect the vagaries of my own reading and lay no claim to contributing to the 'history of Spanish literature'.

In chapter two we continue to focus upon the immediate aftermath of 1968 but paying particular attention to Terry Eagleton and Fredric Jameson. While both these scholars were deeply and confessedly indebted to Althusser, in the case of Eagleton, for helping him disengage from an indigenous 'cultural materialism' (1976), in that of Jameson, for contributing to his notion of a 'political unconscious' (1981), they would subsequently prove ambivalent in their attitude to the French Marxist: Eagleton, through a series of texts that, their unquestionable distinction notwithstanding, ran hot and cold in their attitude to 'Althusserianism'; Jameson, through a brand of Hegelianizing Marxism that finally proved unable to take on board the full complexity of the Althusserian legacy. Juan Carlos Rodríguez had already published *Theory and History* in 1974, a work that marked the beginning of a research programme comparable in range and depth with those of Jameson and Eagleton. Except that, located as he was within a provincial university, and a Spanish one to boot, Rodríguez would never gain access to the global academy. Eagleton and Jameson either ignored him or, what is more likely, were simply unaware of his existence.[1] Possibly, one other factor is relevant, for whereas his Anglophone counterparts quickly 'dropped' the French philosopher for 'other' interests - a wise career move in the circumstances - the Spaniard would continue to profess allegiance to the 'other' way of thinking that he had imbibed directly from Althusser in Paris. In the

[1] We will be exploring the 'silence' that has shrouded the work of Rodríguez in chapter six.

present chapter, we will take the measure of his work through a review of three of his more important texts.

Chapter three focuses upon on a single work, *Gender and Modernization*, by the British Hispanist, Jo Labanyi. The period beginning in the 1970s, when a body of literary theory, encompassing Marxism, feminism, deconstruction, and the like, emerged across an increasing diversity of disciplines, has now assumed the status of a golden age of scholarship. Understandably so, when viewed from the standpoint of a present in which universities have been routinely regulated and, beyond a Russell group of privileged institutions, commonly teeter on the brink of bankruptcy. By way of contrast, it is comparatively difficult to wax nostalgic about the good old days of British Hispanism, which was dominated throughout the 1960s and '70s, by a conservative brand of Catholic moralism and, symptomatically, ignored, as it continues to ignore, the work of Rodríguez. The break with traditional 'lit crit', when it eventually came, under the 'new Hispanisms', was a delayed and rather perfunctory affair, which bypassed Marxist theory, as an independent problematic, to embrace a rather benign materialist form of 'Cultural Studies'. The result was a hotchpotch of theoretical concepts that were drawn together from a variety of post-structuralist and feminist sources, without any thought as to their differences. The ideological conjuncture is perfectly captured in *Gender and Modernization*. The latter would serve, crucially, to smooth the transition from a traditional eclecticism of the humanistic variety to a postmodern pluralism.

Chapter four resumes the thread of British Marxism and its continuing misinterpretation of Althusser. It begins by assessing the claim by Norman Geras to the effect that the French philosopher 'abolished' the subject from history. The blockage in Geras' case is 'human nature', promoted at the expense of 'modes of production' and associated concepts. The Marxist philosopher David Hillel Ruben is viewed as similarly typifying the refusal to relinquish the transcendental status of the free subject. Both scholars remain unconsciously attached to the notion of a subject that is *influenced*, as opposed to *constructed*, by social relations. We then proceed to focus upon David Harvey, the theoretician of human geography and commentator on the texts of Marx. In a professional trajectory that now extends over decades, Harvey will never feel called upon radically to examine the empiricist

framework that he assumed at the start of his career. Each new theoretical layer will be added to those preceding it, to form a stratified structure. The instabilities of the latter manifest themselves with a vengeance in the commentaries. At all points, contrasts are drawn with an Althusserian tradition that traces the historical emergence of the free subject.

Our aim in chapter five will be to tease out further the troubled relationship between Althusserian Marxism and Lacanian psychoanalysis, to which end we will be considering the works of a group of scholars selected for the importance of their contribution to the topic. Rosalind Coward and John Ellis combined to produce *Language and Materialism* (1977), the fundamental text on the topic; Julia Kristeva is of interest for staging an encounter between the (conscious) *symbolic* and (unconscious) *semiotic* dimensions of discourse; Slavoj Žižek importantly signalled the revival of interest in ideology, from a Lacanian standpoint; and Samo Tomšič systematically works the 'homologies' to be found between the Marxist and Lacanian problematics. Their differences notwithstanding, all these writers looked in common to the Lacanian theory of a libidinal unconscious to fill in a gap that, allegedly, existed within classical Marxism, created by the absence of a theory of the subject. History, we will be arguing, is conspicuous by its absence from all of them, to offset which, attention will turn to the work of Rodríguez. Specifically targeted will be its discussion of the transition from medieval Aristotelianism, via nominalism, to animism, the first form of bourgeois ideology, and, subsequently, the clash between an emergent animism and a resurgent substantialism. Our own focus in this respect will fall, firstly, upon the attempt by Spanish writers and grammarians of animist extraction to impose a 'plain style' and, correspondingly, to fix the order of syntax; secondly, upon the subversion of this attempt by ideologues and writers who, by way of contrast to their animist counterparts, were variously impacted by a dominant substantialism.

In chapter six, entitled 'The Dog that Didn't Bark', we will explore further the curious fact that the extensive body of research associated with Rodríguez has failed to receive the attention it deserves, when judged purely on its merits. The reasons commonly adduced to explain such neglect have tended to focus solely upon external, circumstantial

factors, notably upon Rodríguez's marginal location within the global academy. Ignored thereby is the existence of certain internal barriers whose effect, at the level of the ideological unconscious, is to render problematic the reception of Rodríguez's work within the Anglophone academy. Consideration needs to be given to a *cyclical* or *spiral* style of argumentation that conflicts with the *linear* style favoured by empirical discourse. Under the former regime, the meanings of key concepts emerge progressively, through a narrative form that constantly *doubles back* upon itself to develop further aspects of the concepts in question. The resultant narrative structure stands in stark contrast to its empiricist equivalent, which neglects structural relations at the level of the totality to focus, visually, upon its object. The appearance of two volumes by Rodríguez, together with a collection of essays published in his honour,[2] provide an opportunity to consider these issues in greater detail, together with others to which they give rise. We will be specifically concerned, in this latter respect, with the critique of Althusser's historicism mounted by Rodríguez. However unintentionally, we will be arguing, this critique helped fuel the scurrilous distortions of Althusser's work still circulating throughout the bourgeois academy, with damaging consequences, both for a younger generation already awash with anti-Marxist rhetoric, and, ironically, for Rodríguez's own work, a regressive Hegelian reading of which it helped to legitimate.

In chapter seven, we consider the dynamics of an encounter between two different modes of production, mediated through one of Rodríguez's most distinguished pupils, María Mar Campos. On the one hand, the 'primitive' tributary mode of the Mexica, on the other, the conflictual social formation of their Spanish conquerors, transitional between feudal and emergent capitalist modes and overdetermined by both. Social relations of the transition, we have seen, secreted a

[2] The volumes to which I refer are *De qué hablamos cuando hablamos de marxismo* (2013), which reproduces, in part or in their entirety, some of Rodríguez's more important theoretical statements; *Para una teoría de la literatura (40 años de historia)* (2015), a belated and updated version of Rodríguez's doctoral thesis, which makes available for the first time some of the relevant groundwork that preceded the author's seminal *Teoría de la historia de la producción ideológica* (1974); and the celebratory *La literatura no ha existido siempre: para Juan Carlos Rodríguez* (2015).

dominant substantialist ideology, based on service to the lord/Lord, and animist ideology of a 'literalist' variety, promoting the initiative of an isolated individual. The ensuing conflict between modes was resolved, as is habitually the case, in favour of the technologically superior mode, both within Europe and within the colonial context. In the campaign against the Mexica, a precarious balance was struck, ideologically, between the profession of allegiance to the crown and a secular literalism that determined the governance of everyday life. Thus, while the conquistador, Bernal Díaz, with whom Mar Campos is concerned, hoped, finally, to be rewarded for 'services rendered', his immediate recourse, amid battles with the Mexica, was to his own survival instincts. Similarly, Hernán Cortés, the leader of the Mexica campaign, while remaining attentive to his relations with King Charles of Spain, to whom he constantly professed fidelity, exhibited a tactical *nous* in his immediate dealings with the Mexica that can only be described as 'Machiavellian'. The Mexica, by contrast, laboured under the limitations of stone-age tools, sustained by a magico-mythological ideology. We will use the occasion of the ensuing intercultural encounter to explore further the relations between the ideological and libidinal unconscious. Spanish feudalism was distinctly *anal* in its preoccupation with sin and corruptness and *obsessional* in its concern for ritual, although transitional to a *phallic*, *paranoid* syndrome. Does the Mexica's anthropophagy betray a culture limited to an 'oral' phase, sustained by a 'hysterical' dependence on the Other?

Chapter eight brings the 'state of play' up to date with respect to the theorization of the libidinal-ideological unconscious. Psychoanalytic Marxists have traditionally accepted the opposition between an introspective psychoanalysis and a historicizing Marxism and simply tried, with varying degrees of success, to bring these two disciplines into alignment. From the ensuing interdisciplinary encounter, Marxism has habitually emerged as the loser insofar as forced to concede ownership of the concept of the unconscious to its antagonist. A Lacanian tradition promoted the notion of a transhistorical *kernel of desire*: subjects of any age, its practitioners argued, are condemned to quest for some 'thing' that, because it is repressed, always remains frustratingly out of reach. Such is the position with which, arguing from the standpoint of a *radical historicity*, Rodríguez began to take issue from the 1990s in disparate articles drawn together and extended in his

posthumously published *Freud: la escritura, la literatura* (2023). In essence, we discover, it is the ideological unconscious that *entraps* its libidinal counterpart, not the latter that sustains the former, as an inside to an outside. The one point of convergence between the two forms of unconscious is their *detachment* from biology, in which respect they contrast starkly with the existential version of psychoanalysis that prioritizes instinctual life, albeit in its sublimated forms. The present chapter assesses the strengths and weaknesses of Rodríguez's position, in the light of Hispanic texts selected from the transition from feudalism to capitalism.

As the preceding outline ought to make clear, this is not a book about British Marxism *per se* nor about British Marxism in relation to the Althusserian tradition. It seeks rather to assess the critique of British Marxism mounted by one of Althusser's foremost students, Juan Carlos Rodríguez, in the context of the Spaniard's ongoing research programme, and the reasons for the failure of either the critique or the research programme to engage the attention of British Marxists. A failure to be attributed, we will be arguing, to an anti-theoretical, sometimes brutally pragmatic impulse, of the kind that drives the dominant empiricist ideology of the British establishment and that found expression in the mid-1970s, within the narrow confines of British Left, in pronouncements as to 'the poverty of theory'. Announced by leading Marxist historians and sustained by Marxist theoreticians, theoretical poverty was viewed as a consequence of the functionality of an Althusserian programme that, allegedly, left no space for agency, specifically that of the British working class. An emphasis upon the capacity of capitalism to endlessly reproduce itself, it was claimed, precluded the existence of a space in which a subject, whether individual or collective, was able to 'make history'. The logic was inexorable: the misguided hopes placed in the French Communist Party, as a source of renewal, symptomatized the failure of Althusserianism as a theoretical problematic and justified its rejection. In the event, the naivete proved to lie with British Marxists, whose convictions rested not upon hard-won theoretical gains but upon their faith in the power of *consciousness* to initiate social transformation. By the 1980s, the same intellectuals who had denounced Althusser for his theoretical pessimism were abandoning the 'grand narratives' of yesteryear and accepting with surprising ease the society they had

once scorned. 'Consciousness', it turned out, was no basis from which to resist the forces of a resurgent capitalism. Such, at least, was obvious to Rodríguez, who mounted a sustained critique of British Marxism in the mid-1970s from his vantage point in Spain. And a vantage point it proved to be. Whereas British Marxists were basking in the comfort of a bland social democracy, Spanish Marxists were struggling to survive in the aftermath of a civil war in which of most of their forerunners had been liquidated. Rodríguez was not about to underestimate the political obstacles to be overcome and was driven, by the sheer force of circumstance, to press Althusser's ideological *unconsciousness* further. In the 'ideological unconscious', sustained by a 'radical historicity', is to be found what is arguably the most seminal concept to have emerged from the Left in the (post)modern period. A seminal concept that British Marxists do not want to know.

CHAPTER 1

BRITISH MARXISM: CHANGING THE TERRAIN

There is something rather curious about the controversy that surrounded the reception of Althusser in Britain in the 1970s. Not about the fact of controversy itself – impassioned confrontations are, after all, common currency within intellectual circles and might even be considered as a sign of a culture's rude health. Nor even the scatological 'crescendo of violence' – Perry Anderson's phrase – levelled against Structural Marxism ('all this shit', etc.) or the strange sense of humour of those who found 'hilarious' (Dennis Dworkin) the scurrilous assault upon Althusser. No. What surprises is the sheer inability of commentators to grasp exactly what was at stake. True, at first sight, the opposition seems clear enough: on one side were those theoreticians who discussed social classes in structural, abstract terms; on the other, cultural historians who promoted the role of human agency, in all its concreteness. And this, assuredly, was how the confrontation was viewed in retrospect. In the words of the historian of the controversy, Dennis Dworkin: 'Theoretically, this crisis was most clearly expressed as an implicit and explicit debate over the relationship between structure and agency, experience and ideology, and theory and practice' (Dworkin 1997, 126-27). But to extract from this debate, as Dworkin does, the existence of two radically different conceptions of society and history is surely a step too far. Has not Anglophone culture habitually taken as its point of departure the opposition between 'subject' and 'system'? And have not individual scholars always been at liberty to stress one side of the equation as opposed to the other? After all, there are possible weightings to cater for all tastes – now a little more subject, now a little more system. By Dworkin's own estimation, the gap between the two standpoints was not too great to allow for re-adjustments over time: E. P. Thompson himself, initially an unflinching proponent of agency, came to pay greater attention to the structural obstacles to 'making', and erstwhile

structuralists, likewise, to qualify and even to regret the support they had formerly lent to Althusserianism. It all looks like a storm in a very British teacup. Why, then, all the talk about an ‘unbridgeable theoretical divide’?

The answer, I am going to argue, lies in the fact that there were aspects of Althussserianism that scholars reared in the Anglophone tradition of empiricism just could not 'see', but whose presence they sensed like rocks among the breakers, lying in wait for unwary vessels. The first aspect was the displacement of focus from the subject/system dichotomy to the determinate mode of production, the latter conceived as a ‘structure in dominance', consisting of specific social 'instances' or social levels. To shift from the first to the second required nothing less than a 'change of terrain', at the cost of considerable theoretical labour, or so at least Althusser insisted (Althusser and Balibar 1970, 26-27). Dworkin's inability to break with the empiricist problematic – and all its variations – is clear enough. Less so, the reason for such a critical failure. The latter, it is important to insist, is attributable not to any personal deficiencies on, say, Dworkin's part, but to a structural, unconscious 'blindness', imposed by the conditions of a specific problematic. 'The sighting is thus no longer the act of an individual subject, endowed with the faculty of "vision" which he exercises either attentively or distractedly; the sighting is the act of its structural conditions, it is the relation of immanent reflection between the field of the problematic and *its* objects and *its* problems [...] It is literally no longer the eye (the mind's eye) of the subject which *sees* what exists in the field defined by a theoretical problematic; it is this field itself which *sees itself* in the objects or problems it defines' (25-26, italics in original). Such, at least, was the conclusion at which Althusser and Balibar arrived, extracted from a close reading of Marx's text.

Of course, nobody was going to tell E. P. Thompson that he did not know his Marx – *'I know these texts'* – or that he was not a subject in total command of his thoughts. True, his understanding of Marx's concepts derived from the practical application of them, as a historian, but the time was past, or so it was argued, when the exegesis of Marx’s texts, of the kind in which theoreticians indulge, served any purpose (Thompson 1995 (1978), 34). Such, then, was the situation: for Althusser, while there may be subjects *in* history, there was no subject

of history; for the likes of Thompson, history was emphatically something that was *made* by subjects. And it was left to Perry Anderson famously to defend Althusser against his detractors. But we will be missing certain crucial considerations if we fail to recognize that, like many of his contemporaries, Anderson clearly felt intimidated by the vicious tongue of 'our finest socialist writer today' (Anderson 1980, 1); that, by his own admission, Anderson was no Althusserian (2); and that, notwithstanding the importance attributed to systemic pressures, Anderson shared Thompson's attachment to the subject, albeit of a collective kind. Such an attachment will prove decisive: although a critic of a 'mediocre and inert' British academy (Anderson 1968, 4), Anderson still took unconsciously, as his point of departure, 'our fundamental concepts of man and society' (5), hence, in the words of his most perceptive commentator, 'ultimately failed to forge a path out of the structure/subject dichotomy' (Blackledge 2004, 131).

Symptomatically, Anderson prefaces his *Arguments within English Marxism* (1980) with an epigraph taken from Thompson that, brief though it is, manages to include two references to 'consciousness'. Which brings us to the second point of blindness vis-à-vis Althusser, characteristic of British Marxists, namely, their inability to *see* the importance attached by the French philosopher to the notion of ideological *un*consciousness. *'[S]trictly speaking'*, Althusser's argument ran, 'there is no *dialectic of consciousness'*, which is to say, 'no dialectic of consciousness which could reach reality itself by virtue of its own contradictions' (Althusser 1990, 143). Thompson found such a position in all respects unthinkable: 'We hear nothing about *consciousness*' (1995, 129). Crucial in this context is the meaning attached to 'ideology'. Predictably enough, given his prioritizing of the subject, Thompson equates ideology with 'conceptually inadequate notions' entertained by the subject, in other words, with 'false consciousness'; the only notion of the 'unconscious', conceivable to a British empiricist was the psychoanalytic variety, and even this notion, as Anderson had well demonstrated in his critique of British culture (1968, 41-43), was kept at a very safe distance, along with that of 'totality'. Althusser, on the other hand, was inevitably led to view ideology as secreted unconsciously, through the matrix effect of the social formation viewed as a whole: 'It is customary to suggest that ideology belongs to the region of "consciousness". We must not be

misled by this appellation which is still contaminated by the idealist problematic that preceded Marx. In truth, ideology has very little to do with "consciousness"' (1990 (i), 232-33). To be more precise – an important nuance – ideology 'only appears as *"conscious*" on condition that it is *unconscious*' (233).

There is a third aspect of Althusserianism to which Anglophone Marxism is blind: its potential as a programme for historical research. The root of the problem is a statement made by Althusser and Balibar, to the effect that 'history lives in the illusion that it can do without *theory* in the strong sense, without a theory of its object and therefore without a definition of its theoretical object. What acts as its theory, what it sees as taking the place of this theory is its *methodology*' (1970, 109). Structural Marxism, these same scholars proceeded to argue, had promoted, by way of rectification, a formal body of theoretical concepts or, as they termed it, a 'problematic', consisting of modes of production, social formations, social levels, and so on. Althusser himself, of course, was a professional philosopher and made no pretence to being a practising historian, hence, offered an easy target for empirically inclined historians. Predictably enough, his offer to *underlabour,* theoretically, for historians was firmly rejected by his Anglophone critics. To his theoretical concepts, Thompson counterposed a methodological emphasis upon 'facts' and 'experience', the 'dialogue' between concept and evidence, and the testing of hypotheses against the evidence. As for Althusser's rotating 'instances', these were dismissed as 'so many hollow tin cans' (1995, 129), emptied of all social and historical content. It was not simply that Althusser's theoretical concepts had not been tested in historical laboratories, but that, in principle, they 'offer no purchase whatsoever for actual historical analysis' (122). Thompson, as Dworkin reminds us, had many admirers within his discipline and his views were widely echoed across the Anglophone academy. Andrew Levine, to take one example, argued that 'the account of the materialist dialectic one finds in Althusser's writings was dangerously, if not fatally obscure. It had an a priori and stipulative character that had almost nothing to do with ongoing social scientific research' (Levine 2003, 113).

But at this point let us suspend the debate *in abstracto* over the alleged deficiencies of Althusserianism and turn to a practising Althusserian,

who took history 'very seriously' indeed (Rodríguez 2002(i), 17). *Theory and History of Ideological Production* had already appeared in 1974, in other words, several years before the controversy over Althusser broke out in Britain. At the time, British Marxists were totally ignorant of its existence, as indeed were British Hispanists, within the discipline more pertinent to things Spanish, and have continued systematically to repress all knowledge of it ever since.

The Poem of the Cid: Feudal Usury

British Marxist historians, let us concede at the outset, have been responsible for some important contributions to the study of feudalism – the work of Rodney Hilton, Perry Anderson, Jairus Banaji and Chris Wickham comes to mind. That said, these same contributions have been notably limited with respect to the production of feudal ideologies. Students of ideology, one would guess, find 'modernity' a more amenable, because more accessible, terrain, contained as it is within the boundaries of the subject/system opposition, hence, of the dominant bourgeois ideology. All ideology, it can be safely assumed, exists through and for the subject. From such a standpoint, Rodríguez's work represents a radical departure, targeted as it is upon *substantialism*, the dominant feudal ideology, and, specifically, upon the transition from this ideology to *animism*, understood as bourgeois ideology in its first, emergent form. Its effect is to throw into relief the *otherness* of feudalism: '... these feudal people were of another kind. Doubtless, we do not understand their ideological unconscious, their ideological imaginary' (2002 (i), 412-13). Unconsciousness, we have seen, was a topic systematically marginalized by British Marxists, which explains why they have little of interest to offer on the complexities of ideological production.

In this section, I will focus upon the ideological unconscious specifically as it relates to the status of Jews within feudalism. We will take as our point of departure the following observation by Rodríguez:

> ... if in a certain way it is possible to speak (at the level of ideological structure) of 'the Jews' in general, it is naïve to do so at the economic or political level (or at the level of social relations in general). The simple fact is, although it seems incredible to have to say so, that individuals who are ideologically 'Jews' (sic) belong to different 'classes' or 'social

> groups'. They are, in other words, inscribed in real relations that are diametrically opposed and that differentiate them in structural terms. (2002 (i), 51)

Under feudal regimes, as Rodríguez continues to explain, those groups that participated most visibly in the primitive accumulation of capital could be conveniently defined as 'Jews'. Hence all the clichés about the 'avaricious Jew' and 'usury', to be contrasted with the largesse and extravagance of the 'knight'. *The Poem of the Cid* usefully throws light upon such matters.

Suffice it to say, for the benefit of those readers unfamiliar with Spanish history, that *The Poem of the Cid*, sometimes known as *The Song of the Cid*, is an epic text based on the 12th-and 13th-century legend of the Castilian hero, Ruy Díaz, known otherwise as the Cid (d. 1099). The episode of interest to us occurs in the early section of the poem that finds the Cid being driven hastily into exile by King Alfonso, after being accused of retaining for himself part of the tribute collected on the King's behalf from the southern Moors. We are borne thereby into the heart of a typically feudal dynamic in which, economically, a nobility that exploited a peasantry was forced to eke out a modest social surplus by pillage and expansionism.[3] Politically, vassal 'lords' exercised an authority over 'serfs' based on their 'blood' or 'lineage' ('I am Rui Díaz of Vivar'), their self-appointed task being to 'prove' themselves through military exploits. Ideologically, a dominant *substantialism* legitimized the notion of reciprocal 'service' between classes. The Cid, accordingly, rides into exile accompanied by a private army, consisting of all those 'in his service' (*Poema* 1977, line 69b), for whose needs he is obliged to cater through the provision of 'bread' and a 'reward' for services rendered or, in the case of a feudal army, a *'soldada'* or payment (line 80).

Rather more unusual than such eminently feudal characteristics is the dilemma in which the Cid initially finds himself: he is short of funds. 'Spent is the gold. And all the silver, / as you can well see. That I bring [nothing], / and I stand in need. For all my followers. / I do this thing unwillingly, otherwise I would have nothing' (lines 81-85). 'This thing' is

[3] For a useful discussion of the relevant dynamics, see Benno Teschke 2003, 97-98 and passim.

a trick performed upon two Jews, Raquel and Vidas. The Cid arranges for two elegantly studded, finely embossed chests to be filled with sand, to give the appearance of being full of the booty that, allegedly, he had taken from the King. Martín Antolínez, the Cid's right-hand man, is then dispatched to speak with the Jews. The suggestion is that the two chests be surrendered as surety for a loan of 600 marks. Raquel and Vidas debate between themselves. 'We need to make a profit out of this' (123). It is an offer they cannot refuse. But its acceptance comes with conditions attached: 'Market exchange is not conducted in this way' (139). Only when the chests are to hand and in the Cid's presence, only then will the money be forthcoming.

Now we need to proceed with extreme care when it comes to analyzing a work in which epic action is visibly being undermined by market transactions. Each detail, it is important to realize, is inflected *ideologically*. The Cid, as an 'honourable knight', is reluctant to perform a heinous act *in person* because he is above all a man of his *word*. And words are 'substantial' under feudalism. Hence, Antolínez is left to do the dirty work. But that is not where the greatest difficulty lies. Feudalism does not distinguish between a public and private sphere, nor between an inside and an outside; all action is stripped of any ambiguity, offers a pure and full signification. Which, of course, explains why the chests must be of impressive appearance: their exterior, in normal circumstances, must directly reflect their interior, just as the face is the image of the soul. For the same reason, there must be *two* Jews, who step aside to verbalize openly: feudalism cannot accommodate soliloquy as a means of expression. And thus do the ideological dynamics unfold. The marks paid to the Cid take the form of *marked* bullion: they are of value *in themselves*: feudalism only knows *signatures*, of an appropriately material kind, not abstract signs. And yet sufficiently abstract, within a market context, to facilitate an act of deceit on the Cid's part, doubtless to the intense delight and amusement of the audience to which the 'song' would be recited.

Such is the way in which an ideological unconscious seeps into every crack and crevice of the epic text. But how does this unconscious relate to its libidinal counterpart? Clearly, the latter, as it figures within a bourgeois context, is absent from feudalism. True, the text is traced by drives: the prominence accorded to feasting suggests a primitive

orality; the episode in which the Infantes de Carrión take refuge in a closet and get covered in filth qualifies as anal; whereas the Cid's preoccupation with his beard is distinctly phallic. Or so, at least, it might be argued. But Rodríguez's claim that the ideological unconscious determines the limits of its libidinal equivalent must stand. 'Psychology', as this is understood in a bourgeois context, is inconceivable under feudalism, which simply cannot accommodate the existence of a detached, *inner* 'consciousness'.[4] Its Oedipal dynamics are blasted across the cosmos, in the guise of the Father in heaven, the Virgin Mother, and Christ, the son. One might say that under feudalism everything is unconscious or, perhaps more accurately, that the opposition between the unconscious and conscious is, at best, embryonic. Althusser, we are reminded, argued that 'consciousness' was simply a 'new form of specific unconsciousness called "consciousness"' (Althusser 1990, 233), which emerges over the course of history. But to pursue this discussion, we need to change the terrain.

Blindness and Insight

To pick up the thread of British Marxism and its shortcomings, let us turn to the work of G. A. Cohen, encapsulated in his *Karl Marx's Theory of History: A Defence* (1979). Cohen's first task, set out in the foreword to the latter, is to measure his distance from Althusser, whose work, at least as embodied in *Reading Capital*, proved 'critically vague'. An indication, doubtless, 'that logical positivism, with its insistence on precision of intellectual commitment, never caught on in Paris' (Cohen 1979, x). The befuddlement of French rationalists could prove contagious: 'The Althusserian vogue could have unfortunate consequences for Marxism in Britain, where lucidity is a precious heritage, and where it is not generally supposed that a theoretical statement, to be one, must be hard to comprehend' (x). But readers be assured. Not a word more will be said about Althusser. Such a position appears to correspond with that assumed by E. P. Thompson not only about Althusser but also on the virtues of the 'plain style'. And in large part it does. But it is to be doubted whether the author of *The Making of the English Working Class* would have concurred with Cohen's self-

[4] See David Pavón-Cuéllar 2017, 22-23 and passim.

imposed limitations: 'there will be unusually little discussion, as books on Marx and society go, of class conflict, ideology, and the state' (x). The nub of Cohen's own exposition of Marx is a theoretical defence of a technological determinism that emphasizes the primacy of the means of production over the relations of production. Such differences call for further discussion.

Whereas Thompson prioritizes the notion of class, which he sees as embracing cultural and political self-creation on the part of a subject, Cohen emphasizes the systemic network of ownership relations and deigns to discuss social classes only to the extent that are locatable within this network. The difference is that between a cultural historian who focuses upon people's consciousness of their *agency*, upon their awareness of a common condition and shared interests, and a Marxist theoretician who considers structural considerations, of a distinctly impersonal kind, to be of paramount importance. The two positions appear to be diametrically opposed standpoints but, again, appearances prove deceptive; when considered more closely, as Rodríguez intuited in *Theory and History*, such differences amount to very little; more specifically, to little more than a question of focus, on the 'subject', in the case of Thompson, on the 'system', in the case of Cohen, within a common framework, based on the individual/society opposition. Symptomatically, Cohen is quick to pay homage to Thompson's 'sensitivity' and 'brilliance', and to his historical writings proper, 'whose magnificence is not in question' (73).

At first blush, admittedly, it may seem that Cohen has excluded the 'subject' from his theoretical considerations. Thus, in his opening chapter he expatiates upon a Hegelian dialectic that envisages history as a process *without a subject*, in the guise of an unfolding of the Spirit. But although the world spirit is not a human being, the argument runs, it functions very much like one, and, 'since human beings are the sort of persons most accessible to us, it will be useful to begin by describing one' (1). The slippage is crucial: in effect, a subject is being re-inserted, albeit in the rather strange form of a spirit. The latter evolves from an initial stage of a natural rationality, which is unconscious of itself, through intervening epochs or stages of increasing awareness, until freedom is finally achieved in the form of the self-consciousness of reason. 'History is the history of the world spirit', says Hegel. Cohen