

The 'Subject' and the 'Self'

A Note on Barker's Cartesianism

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The argument *I* have with Barker is by now played out, at any rate over "Can a Christian be a Marxist?" (*New Blackfriars*, June 1975). From the start I knew that that article had its shortcomings. But it is, essentially, corrigible. I think I know what I wanted to say in it, though I acknowledge that what I wrote did not always say it. Barker, however, has a habit of regarding what I write as just a very extended parapraxis, all the surface deficiencies being but symptoms of the fact that what I want to say is, literally, unspeakable. The very fact that I should want to put down these deficiencies of formulation to *subjective* conditions of production would itself be symptomatic of the degree to which I am held in thrall by the ideology which is the true author of what I wrote—the ideology according to which "subjects" (e.g. Denys Turner) are the authors of, among other things, texts. All this would be by the way were it not that, in Barker's view, it is its captivation by the ideology of "the subject" which is the chief ideological element in Christianity and the chief reason why Marxist science cannot debate Christianity. For the ideological nature of Christianity makes it the (potential) object of Marxist science, not a discourse it can debate with on equal but different terms.

I have no objection in principle to this apparently high-handed procedure, analogous as it is to the Freudian habit of giving Freudian explanations of the critics of Freudian theory. After all I myself argued ("Marxism, Christianity and Morality", *New Blackfriars*, April 1977, p. 191), that the mark of any science is its capacity not merely to explain what ideology fails to explain but also to explain why ideology cannot explain what it fails to explain. But Barker's arguments still do not prise me away from the "strong compatibility" thesis because I see no reason to accept the premiss from which they derive. Very simply Barker is wrong about "the subject" and is wrong because he is, not deeply, but very obviously and on the surface, confused about this matter. He confuses two quite different notions, namely that of "the subject" with that of "the self" and, though corrigible (easily—it is one of the better-known Cartesian confusions). it is so only at the price of serious damage done to the whole Althusserian enterprise.

I

Barker says that I am wrong in seeking to formulate a theory of the relationship between science and ideology in terms of any form of appearance/reality contrast. This is because any form of this contrast implies the existence of (a) "a subject for whom the appearance is a mystified expression of the real" (*Science and Ideology*", *New Blackfriars*, October 1977, p.478) and/or implies the existence of (b) "a pre-equipped fully cognitive spectatorial subject . . . set over against the deceiving appearances of capitalist society which are simply given to that subject." (Loc. cit.) And the category (more strictly categories: (a) and (b) are clearly different sorts of things to be implying) of "the subject" is itself an ideological category.

In fact, of course, there are no such things as "pre-equipped fully cognitive spectatorial subjects" and I should have liked a more fully evidenced account from Barker of how he comes to think that anything I say implies that there are (especially in view of the fact that, as he admits, (Loc. cit.) *I say nothing about "the subject" whatever.*) That my account implies something or other about, in general, the existence of subjects, I happily concede, though, since Barker doesn't explain how he gets from (a) to (b) I can only conclude that he doesn't see any problem about this because he simply conflates the two notions. He does seem to think that *any* notion of "the subject" appealed to in the course of delineating *any* appearance/reality contrast is necessarily a spectatorist notion of "the subject" and this is perhaps why Barker rather oddly provides us with no arguments against spectatorism *as such*. For, of course, if you eliminate "subjects" altogether you eliminate "spectatorial" subjects along with them. But since his arguments eliminate "spectatorial" subjects only by way of the general elimination of "subjects" then my suspicions are roused that maybe he hasn't got any arguments against spectatorism as such. More to the point, Barker's evident failure (so far) to produce an argument against a spectatorist account of knowledge generally as distinct from an argument against "subjects" is the basis of a hunch I have about Barker's Marxism (and about Althusserian Marxism generally): namely that it is itself a "spectatorist" Marxism *without a subject*.

This suspicion is not merely frivolous. It is given rise to by the very great difficulty there is in conceiving how any epistemological distinctions whatever (including that implied by Barker's reference to "spectatorism"—clearly meant to contrast with some other account of knowledge) can be made out without reference being entailed to some notion of "the subject". What notion of "the subject" is entailed is, of course, a contentious matter, and depends, partly at least, on just which epistemological distinctions it is thought fit to make. But at a minimum, if there is to be any epist-

emology at all which a Marxist could accept you cannot do without this much ontology: there exist social agents which are individual parcels of highly organised matter (bodies) of which it can be said (a) that their individuation is that by which occurrent sets of psychological phenomena are individuated; and (b) that they are the agents (i.e. efficient causes) of such individuated psychological phenomena.

That only such individuated parcels of matter speak, lie, deceive, are deceived, judge and act, and that the noun "person" is the general term standing for the kinds of bits of matter which can do and undergo these things, is truistical, and therefore, like all truisms, true. But not trivially true (any longer) since Barker and the Althusserians want to eliminate (or have got themselves into the position of being unable to fail to eliminate) "the subjects" as a category of scientific discourse in the name of what is, relative to this truism, a sheer *metaphor* about "subjects *being spoken by* discourses. . . ."¹

This metaphor is, *if* only a metaphor, at the very least misleading. It must be a metaphor unless the truism is literally denied that only human persons (subjects) speak; and is misleading because, being a metaphor presumably meant to help out what is a deeply obscure analysis, it undoes all the work of the analysis it is meant to illustrate. For it suggests (given the truism that only subjects speak) that discourses are (somehow) at least *analogous* to subjects, which is, I gather, among the propositions which the analysis is supposed to refute. It is easy to admit that "discourses" are limitations on what can be said; that they licence some and prohibit other general classes of factual claims and the inferences which can be made from them; that they are, in a word, "paradigmatic", definitive for a science of a range of problems and a range of acceptable-in-principle solutions to them. But that discourses are in any useful (even metaphorical) sense capable of "speaking" is either nonsense if it is denied that they are "subjects", or else, if it is allowed that they are subjects in any sense at all, is plainly false.

The obscurantism of this metaphor is significantly related with another feature of Althusser's polemic against "the subject". Althusser rejects as deviant all the passages in Marx's writings which lend support to the sort of appearance/reality account of ideology which I gave.² All occurrences in Marx of the Leibnizian "essence/phenomena" contrast are peripheral misformulations for, again, this contrast entails that there are subjects *for whom* this contrast

¹ The reference is to Terry Eagleton's article, "Marx, Freud and Morality", *New Blackfriars*, January 1977, p. 21, but Barker is evidently in sympathy.

² "Ideology and the Ideological State Apparatuses" in *Lenin and Philosophy*, pp.

is perceptible. The properly formulated equivalent notion is said to be the Spinozistic contrast between a structure itself and the causality which a structure exercises over its effects (“structural causality”). Since, however, a structure is *nothing* over and above its effects—it would be to lapse once again into “appearance/reality” thinking to say that a structure merely expresses itself in its effects—the causality which structure exercises over its effects must be what Aristotle called *formal*, not what he called *efficient*, causality. For if (a) structures can cause, but (b) are not distinct events from their effects, then they are formal principles determining structured complexes for *what* they are, and cannot be efficient causes, bringing it about *that* effects, in just those structured complexes occur at all. A formal cause determines *what* happens; an efficient cause determines *that* something happens (namely, what the formal cause determines will happen if anything happens). A formal cause is a specifying principle, an efficient cause is an agency. Hence the metaphor of “discourses speaking . . .” is systematically misleading because what can only be a formal cause (a discourse) is made, in the metaphor, to do the work of an efficient cause (“speak”) as if a structure were not merely that which determines *what* can be said but also that which brings it about that what *can* be said *is* said.

You cannot, however, have it both ways, even in metaphor. Efficient causes are agents and agents are, where human, subjects. Some notion of “subject” is required by that of agency; and some notion of agency by that of praxis. So, either discourses are not subjects (which is what Althusserian theory says) in which case there is no category within Althusserian science capable of explaining agency, or else “structural causality” is a form of efficient causality, in which case structures are agents and therefore subjects—the sources of occurrent social phenomena. Therefore, either discourses are agents and subjects, which is false, or else the category is itself undermined and with it that of praxis. If the latter, then there is nothing for Barker’s “*spectatorial*” subjects to be in contrast with—the epistemology of the contrast is obliterated.

II

Which brings us back to the notion of “the subject” itself. There is at least this much work which usefully done by the metaphor of “discourses speaking”: it usefully eliminates a category which, because of their cartesianism, it is perfectly understandable that French philosophers cannot distinguish from the category of the subject, namely, that of the self-conscious *self* or ego.³ But

³ Althusser is explicit: “Much theoretical work is needed to deal with all the forms of this empiricism sublimated in the ‘theory of knowledge’ which dominates Western philosophy, to break with its problematic (*cogito*) and object—and all their variations”.—“Marx’s Immense Theoretical Revolution” in *Reading Capital*.

epistemological subjects are not (Cartesian) psychological selves. Subjects are in my sense materialistically conceived *bodies* and are the sources of the individuation *of* experiences. Subjects in the cartesian sense are idealistically conceived as consciousnesses and are individuated *by* their experiences. The existence of epistemological subjects is presupposed, as I have said, to there being any experiences at all. Psychological selves are the supposed objects of a subset of psychological experiences—i.e. of a special sort of direct intuition. It appears to be thought by cartesians (and evidently some Marxists) that whatever there is to be said about the cartesian self (that it is a product of ideology) can be said, via the conflation of the concepts, about subjects. But any non-cartesian can see through this confusion—in fact it is evidence of cartesianism if you cannot. Aquinas (*Summa Theologiae* 1a q. 87 a 1), Hume (*Treatise* I, IV, vi) and Kant (*Critique of Pure Reason*, B 157-159) all agreed in rejecting any notion of “the person” or “the self” or “the ego” in the sense in which “the self” would be something which answers to direct experiences. And they all did so for the same reason, namely, that there simply aren’t any such experiences as those of which “the self” is a direct object. Of course, agreed on that, they differ on everything else. If, like Hume, you both grant the cartesian identification and acknowledge the absence of the supposed experiences then you will end up without “subjects” of any sort. But, as Kant argued, that admission undermines any possibility of a realist epistemology, so that although philosophers like Hume go on making epistemological distinctions—and not always wrong-headed ones—they do so without any right.

Of course this reference to Kant should not mislead. The “minimal notion of the subject” necessary to Marxist science is not so minimal as Kant’s “transcendent ego”, existing, but not the object of sense (or any other sort of direct) knowledge, known only because and insofar as epistemology requires you to postulate it. Human subjects are material, perceptible, linguistic individuals—bodies, as Terry Eagleton puts it, “inserted into language”, Being linguistic they are capable of self-reflection. They *are* self-conscious, but they are not defined or constituted *by* their self-consciousness. It is perfectly consistent with this (non-cartesian) notion of the human subject that their self-consciousness should be constituted by conditions which lie, repressed, outside of the range of that consciousness itself. And insofar as it is true that this is so, that self-consciousness which is not only not aware of, but is constituted by its repression of the knowledge that it is not self-constituting is implicated in a structure of misrecognition which is, for Althusser, paradigmatically ideological. But, I should like to know, just where these “subjects” are to be found (outside of cartesian *theory* at any rate) who, in real life, are unable to per-

ceive at least *that* they are constituted as subjects by more than their self-consciousness. *All* subjects are determined as subjects by more than their subjectivity. Who but philosophers, with an interest in a theory, deny this? That none of us know exactly *what* makes us to be the subjects we are; that all of us need *not* to know this in order to be the subjects that we are is certainly true; and the theory which not only elucidates the mechanism of this repression but is capable of describing the content repressed has to be of vital significance within the general theory of ideology itself. But the suggestion that the very perception of the self as a subject is implicated in the cartesian identification of “subject” with the self-constituting ego flies in the face of the facts which Aquinas, Hume and Kant found it easy to acknowledge because they, like the run of mortals, could identify no experience which corresponds with the ego of cartesian theory. The fact is that we do not, in ordinary everyday ideology, so construe ourselves.

Outside of special contexts that is. Barker illustrates his Althusserian account of ideology with a very special case, that of the literary ideology of genius. (Science and Ideology, *New Blackfriars* October 1977, pp. 479-480). I have no quibble with his account of this bit of ideology as such, since the notion that the work of literature is a content entirely determined by the supercharged consciousness of “geniuses” is based on a cartesian view of concept- and imagination-production: on the notion, that is, of an autonomous consciousness freely choosing its own contents and on an instrumental view of language on which authors simply pick the words which match the thoughts. Furthermore, this theory of literary production is not just false but is also ideological (in view of its elitism). For the ideological purpose of being able to identify “geniuses”, people are very often happy with a cartesian account of the *very special subjectivity* of artists which they would on no account attribute even in a lesser degree to themselves. It is, indeed, in this very inconsistency that the elitism of the ideology consists, for it accords, as Barker himself says, a *privileged* subjectivity to the artist. Just so, and, I should add, a cartesian subjectivity it is.

Barker is, of course, right that ideology in the more general sense functions at the level of that primary obviousness with which a person is incorporated, socialised, “hailed” or “interpellated” into the daily round of social role and routine and that to be hailable a person has to be aware of himself as a subject under certain “obviously true” descriptions. This is true for the reason which I have already given. To recognise that he is a *subject* is a necessary condition on anyone’s part of his being aware of himself as a possible social *agent*. But this recognition as such cannot be what makes his “hailability” ideological, because what is ideological is the fact that he recognises himself *only* in those “obviously

true” ideological descriptions. It is the *descriptions in which* he recognises himself that are ideological, not the mere fact of self-recognition all on its own. And this is for the reason, among others, that there is no such thing as the “mere recognition of oneself as a subject” as I have already argued. It is because of this that it is possible for a person to *mis*recognise himself, misconstrue the true nature of his social agency, for he can perceive himself via descriptions which are false or ideological. The question, therefore, whether a person’s self-description as a subject is ideological or not is a question about whether the descriptions under which he is “hailed” by the social system are ideological or not. And that is a question about the social structure itself not about the “hailability-in-principle” of social agents.

The trouble, then, with Barker’s account of the primary processes of ideological insertion is that it presupposes the quite unwarranted assumption that people normally perceive themselves as subjects under the cartesian description of autonomous self-consciousness. No one needs to think of himself as a pure subjectivity in order to think of himself as a subject, even in bourgeois ideology. But everyone has to think of himself as a subject whenever he forms any notion of himself as an agent, whether in an ideological conception of his agency or a scientific. The primary notion of a subject—as the minimum condition of any agency whatsoever, i.e. as an efficient cause—is, therefore, a notion required equally by any ideology and by the scientific account of an ideology’s origin and persistence.

III

It is not, therefore, by itself an objection to my appearance/reality contrast that it minimally presupposes the existence of “subjects”. Moreover, Barker has no arguments against the particular notion of the subject which my contrast does presuppose, for all his arguments are directed against a generalised notion of “the subject” on the supposition that any such notion is spectatorist and subjectivistic. But any work done by the epistemology presupposed to my appearance/reality contrast it can do without appeal to the individualistic subjectivity of post-cartesian ideology.

The notion of “the subject” which I do need (and stand by) is characterised by at least the following two properties. First, at a very general level, there have to be individuals which are both bodies and language-bearers (or rather, to follow Aquinas on this, bits of matter which are language-bearing, *i.e.* bodies) for, e.g. the Freudian explanations of ego-constitution to which Barker is so attached, to hold true of. In other words, the subject is that individual of which it can be said, if the theory is true that its constitution as a self-conscious, “hailable”, ego is premised on the repression of the conditions which constitute it as such.

But secondly, and more specifically, there are subjects which

are not merely the subject-terms of the sort of assertions neo-structuralist Freudians make about ego-constitution and ideology production, but are also sensuous, material (and *therefore*) individual, but above all, *practical* agents, the individuated loci of needs and wants. These subjects are self-conscious, but, as I have said, are not constituted in general as individuals by their being self-conscious nor, in particular, are they constituted as the individuals they are by the peculiarities of the contents of their consciousnesses. On the contrary, they are, in general, individuals and, in particular, the individuals they are because of their bodies, i.e. in virtue of their materiality. And it is just because of this materiality that their consciousness of themselves is not in that relation of immediacy to themselves that they cannot fail of self-knowledge. Thus, because of their materiality, because their constitution as subjects is contingent upon conditions which are external to their subjectivity and because, therefore, their needs are knowable only mediately through knowledge of the external social conditions which generate them, they need the science of society in order even to know themselves. It is, therefore, as practical, needing subjects that they need this knowledge: as I put it in my last reply to Barker, if we have any needs at all, we have at least one meta-need, the need to know what our needs are. (“Marxism, Christianity and Morality”, *New Blackfriars* April 1977 p. 185). We need knowledge precisely because our materiality as subjects puts our needs outside the range of immediate awareness and within the scope only of adequate science.

Viewed as such it is pretty clear why the minimal notion of the subject actually appealed to by my appearance/reality contrast has nothing in common with Barker’s “pre-equipped, fully cognitive, spectatorial subjects.” Barker’s subjects are cartesian ego’s. Mine are language-bearing lumps of sensuous matter.⁴ As sensuous matter they have needs. As language-bearers they are capable of misdescribing their needs. As material social individuals (bodies) they necessarily construct their misdescriptions in the form of a social order—or, more accurately, their misdescriptions come in the form of a social order in the first place.

Therefore, it is just as material needing beings that the scientific knowledge of society is necessary to humans and the criterion of scientificity (by contrast with ideology) is the adequacy of the

⁴ I argue that *mine* exist and that the category of “the subject” is crucial in an understanding of *praxis*. Barker argues that *his* are ideological. I argue that it is not particularly ideological, but rather more simply just false, outside of special literary and philosophical contexts, to say that *his* exist, even in the sense that agents *understand* themselves or others to be subjects in the cartesian mode. Besides, Barker does not provide a single consideration, let alone argument to show that subjects in *my* sense are either ideological or non-existent.

grasp of that total social mechanism whereby needs are simultaneously generated and deformed, that is, generated *in* distorted form⁵—the heuristic model for this mechanism being, I still believe, what Marx describes as the “fetishism of commodities”: it is the model for it because it is its primary instance.

Furthermore, it is because scientific knowledge is what answers to need that that knowledge can be construed as practical, indeed as *moral* knowledge. But it can be construed as such only if we can allow as a category of science that of the conscious subject who is the bearer of needs; for without that notion we can form no concept of an agent, and without the concept of an agent it is not possible to ground any distinction between the epistemology of spectatorist subjectivities and the epistemology of praxis.

It is not surprising, therefore, that Barker, attracted by the Freudian critique of ego-formation, but unable to distinguish between the notion of the self-conscious ego and any materialist alternative account of the subject, is unable even to understand the “morality is marxism” thesis. More surprising, though, is his unsupported charge of spectatorism, since his own rejection of “the subject” as a concept of science removes the framework within which the very distinction itself between spectatorist and non-spectatorist epistemologies can be scientifically made out.

⁵ Contrary to what Barker supposes, it is no necessary consequence of the contrast between “true” and “false” needs that somehow “underlying” false appearance there should exist a level of perceptible-in-principle occurrent true needs. In ideology, true needs exist only in their false form. To contrast them with true needs is to point to what could be perceived as man’s true needs in whatever is the historically realisable alternative of capitalism, i.e. socialism.