

Towards Structural Marxism as a Hermeneutic of Early Christian Literature, Illustrated with Reference to Paul's Spectacle Metaphor in 1 Corinthians 15:30-32

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This essay explores the potential of the structural Marxist theory of Louis Althusser to provide a path beyond the mechanistic and expressive models of causality that have dominated comparative studies of early Christianity in the Greco-Roman environment. The essay analyses representational forms of the self in the "society of the spectacle" that characterized imperial Rome, drawing upon the work of Guy Debord. The potential of a structural Marxist hermeneutic is illustrated by a comparison of Paul's spectacle metaphor in 1 Corinthians 15:30-32 with the eighth discourse of Dio Chrysostom.

I

I take as the theoretical framework for this essay Louis Althusser's analysis of the historical forms of causality (or "effectivity") in *Reading Capital* (1970), and his notion of the constitution of the subject through *interpellation* in his seminal essay on "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses" (1971).¹ I find myself impelled toward structural Marxism as a theoretical basis for my hermeneutic by dissatisfaction with the homologies that result from my own attempts at comparison in the field of religious history.² It is not merely the banality of the discovery that Paul's view of "remorse" in 2 Corinthians is similar to Plutarch's explanation of "conscience" in his moral essays,³ or that the praise of "cosmic harmony" in 1 Clement 20 is similar to several passages in the speeches of Dio Chrysostom (Breytenbach and Welborn 2004: 182-96), which accounts for my dissatisfaction with homological comparisons—although I confess to being influenced by the values of my teacher Arnaldo Momigliano (1987: 8), who judged that "in the field of religious history differences are more important than similarities—and therefore knowledge of Greco-Roman history can be useful only for differential comparison." Rather, it is because I have come to doubt the assumption of an *inner essence* that underlies the specific languages of pagans, Jews, and Christians that I find myself drawn toward a theory that seeks to establish the interrelatedness of the elements in a social formation by way of their *difference* from one another, rather than by their identity.

In this pursuit, Althusser's analysis of the three historical forms of causality proves crucial (1970: 186-89).⁴ As is well known, Althusser determined that classical philosophy had two concepts of causality: mechanistic and expressive. "The mechanistic system, Cartesian in origin, reduced causality to a transitive operation" (1970: 187), that is, the billiard-ball model of cause and effect. In the study of Christian origins, the mechanistic concept is exemplified by the older history-of-religions approaches which looked for similarities between religions in order to posit relations of influence and dependency (e.g. Eichhorn 2009; Bousset 1970; Reitzenstein 1978). The expressive concept,

¹ For Althusser's relevance to Biblical interpreters in general, see Boer (2007: 107-62).

² Cf. Smith (2011: 27), expressing his preference for analogical comparisons over homological ones.

³ Compare 2 Cor. 7:8-9 with Plutarch *Mor.* 476E, 498D, 554E-F, 556A; cf. Welborn (2011: 549-52).

⁴ See the discussion in Jameson (1981: 23-26); Elliott (2006: 140-61).

which Althusser traces to Leibnitz, presupposes that the social totality is “reducible to an inner essence, of which the elements of the whole are then no more than the phenomenal forms of expression, the inner principle of the essence being present at each part in the whole” (1970: 188). The expressive model of causality has dominated the study of early Christianity since the Second World War, whether in the search for the genre of the gospels (e.g. Smith 1971: 174-99; Burrige 2004), or in the rhetorical analysis of Pauline epistles (e.g. Betz 1979; Mitchell 1991; Kennedy 1984), or in the study of Christian moral discourse (e.g. Malherbe 1989; Engberg-Pedersen 2000), or in the examination of apologetic responses to Roman art (Nasrallah 2010). In every case, the construction of a comparative class involves the privileging of one of the elements within the totality—whether a literary form, or a pattern of thought, or a social relationship such as “benefaction,” or a political structure such as “empire”—such that the principle in question becomes a master code or an “inner essence” capable of explicating the other features of the social whole, and providing an answer to the question of meaning (cf. Jameson 1981: 27-28).

That I can no longer believe in an “inner essence” in which pagans, Jews, and Christians participated, and which generated the similarities between their respective discourses, is owing, in large measure, to Althusser’s analysis of the way in which ideologies constitute concrete individuals as subjects (1971: 170-77).⁵ Invoking Paul’s speech before the philosophers in Acts (“As St. Paul admirably put it, it is in the ‘Logos,’ meaning in ideology, that we ‘live, move and have our being’.”), Althusser repudiated the capitalist notion of the subject as a self-conscious agent endowed with inalienable rights, and insisted, rather, that subjectivity is *imposed* upon individuals by the structure of society, and is recognized by individuals as “inevitable” or “natural,” in a reaction that ideology serves to produce (1971: 171). Althusser illustrated the process by which ideology recruits individuals and transforms them into subjects by the memorable example of “hailing” or *interpellation*. He compared ideology to a policeman shouting “Hey, you there!” toward a person walking in the street. “When the hailed individual turns around, by this one-hundred-and-eighty-degree physical conversion, he becomes a *subject*. Why? Because he has recognized that the hail was ‘really’ addressed to him” (1971: 174). Affirming Althusser’s account of the constitution of subjects by ideology, I find it impossible to believe that Paul of Tarsus, a hand-worker, who, by his own account, was often “hungry and thirsty, ill-clad, homeless, beaten, reviled, harassed, slandered,” who saw himself mirrored in the ideology of the early Empire as “the refuse of the world, the scum of all things” (1 Cor. 4:9-13; cf. Welborn (2005: 50-86)), could have shared the values, desires, preferences and judgments that were inculcated in the billionaire Stoic philosopher and sometime counselor to Nero, Seneca. When I perceive parallels between the letters of Paul and the epistles of Seneca, I find myself wondering whether I have achieved sufficient immersion in the subjectivities of these authors so as to make possible a differential comparison of the controlling logics that emerge from their respective discourses.

Hence, I seek to appropriate a hermeneutic based upon Althusser’s third concept of effectivity, that of structural causality. Althusser presents the model of structural causality as an explication of the concept of “Darstellung,” which he judges to be “the key epistemological concept of the whole Marxist theory of value, the concept whose object is precisely to designate the mode of *presence* of the structure in its *effects*, and therefore to designate structural causality itself” (1970: 188).⁶ “Structure,” as Althusser conceives it, “is not an essence outside the economic phenomena which [somehow] comes and alters their aspect, forms and relations, and which is effective on them as an absent cause, absent because it is outside them” (1970: 189). Rather, “the structure is immanent in

⁵ See the discussion in Elliott (2006: 208); Resch (1992: 208-13); Montag (2003: 77-79).

⁶ See the discussion in Resch (1992: 33-83).

its effects” (1970: 189)—a formulation which reveals Althusser’s indebtedness to Spinoza’s theory of immanence.⁷

It may be useful to make explicit the assumptions and implications of Althusser’s concept of causality, however obvious they may seem. First, the structure which is the site of immanent causality is a monad. That is, only *one* structure exists for Althusser, namely, the mode of production itself, or the synchronic system of social relations as a whole (cf. Montag 1978: 64-73; Jameson 1981: 36). To be sure, Althusser acknowledged the existence of levels within the structure, and he continued to give a certain priority to the relations and forces of production in the base or infrastructure. But, for Althusser, causality is not a function of one of the levels, as “ultimately determining instance,” rather it emerges from the entire system of relations between the levels and among their practices.

Second, the levels within the Althusserian structure are characterized by their “semi-autonomy.” Unlike traditional Marxism, where economic relations in the base rigorously determine the superstructure, Althusser allowed that the ideological apparatuses of the superstructure—the religious, the educational, the domestic, the legal, the political, the cultural—serve to reproduce the means of production and the relations of production, and variously *interpellate* individuals as subjects (1971: 128-57; cf. Resch 1992: 208-13).

Third, the levels and practices within society make up one complex, interconnected whole, despite their relative autonomy. That is to say, Althusser insisted upon the *interdependency* of the levels in the social formation. The interconnectedness of social practices makes possible *mediation* between the levels—only that, for Althusser, the mediation passes *through* the structure, rather than folding all the levels down into the economic base. Whereas mediation in traditional Marxism produces rigorous homologues built upon a hierarchical model of the relationship between base and superstructure, Althusser relates the elements of the social formation by way of their difference and distance from one another, rather than by their ultimate identity (cf. Jameson 1981: 40-42; Elliott 2006: 137, 151-52).

Fourth, and finally, the cause of the structure is “absent” in the Spinozist sense, in that it is “immanent in its effects” (1970: 189). Thus, Althusser denies the existence of an inner spiritual essence or a hidden master narrative, whether that fundamental narrative is conceived as the providential history of Hegel, or the catastrophic history of Spengler, or the cyclical history of Vico. Althusser embodied his Spinozist idea of the “absent cause” in the memorable dictum “History is a process without a *telos* or a subject” (1976: 51; cf. Resch 1992: 67-72). True to Marx, Althusser conceived of history as nothing more or less than the ceaseless struggle between the classes, “freeman and slave, patrician and plebian, lord and serf, guildmaster and journeyman—in a word, oppressor and oppressed—[which] stood in constant opposition to one another, [and] carried on an uninterrupted, now hidden, now open fight, a fight that each time ended, either in a revolutionary reconstitution of society at large, or in the common ruin of the contending classes” (Marx and Engels, 1971: 81).

The potential of Althusser’s program for a structural Marxism to provide a resonant hermeneutic of early Christian literature has been demonstrated by his student, Alain Badiou, who draws upon Althusser’s theory of the relative autonomy of the practices in the superstructure and Althusser’s concept of *interpellation*, in order to argue that Paul’s message of the resurrection functioned as a liberating counter-ideology, with the power to extract subjects from the “situated void” of death in the early Roman Empire (2003: 68-73).⁸

⁷ See also Althusser (1971: 164). See the discussion of Althusser’s indebtedness to Spinoza in Moreau (1997: 75-86); Resch (1992: 42-46).

⁸ On Badiou’s application of Althusser to Paul, see Welborn (2009).

II

In what follows, I wish to explore the hermeneutical potential of Althusser's notion of structural causality by focusing upon one of the spectacle metaphors in Paul's Corinthian correspondence. My rationale for the choice of this metaphor is obvious: among the most conspicuous practices in the social formation of the early Empire was spectacle (Beacham 1999; Bergmann and Kondoleon 1999), whether in the theater, the amphitheater, or the street.⁹ Individuals from a variety of classes represented themselves as participants in spectacle through literature and art (Clarke 2003: 130-59), as they sought to conceive of their lived relationship to the transpersonal reality of the social structure. The producers of these representations were elite and non-elite, including Roman senators,¹⁰ Cynic philosophers,¹¹ and former slaves.¹² Perhaps Althusser's concept of structure, with its emphasis upon difference and distance, will make possible a more precise account of how Paul imagined his relationship to power, and of how Paul compares in this respect with his contemporaries.

I should acknowledge that my choice of Paul's spectacle metaphor in 1 Cor. 15 as the proper field of examination reflects my historicist perspective: that is, my approach to the past is guided by my experience of the present (Benjamin 1974: 693-704). In my view, the peculiarity of our present moment in late monopoly capitalism has been accurately diagnosed by Guy Debord as a "society of the spectacle" (1994).¹³ In 1967, Debord presciently argued that capitalism in its final form "presents itself as an immense accumulation of spectacles" in which "all that once was directly lived has become mere representation" (1994: 12). However, in Debord's view, "spectacle" does not simply coincide with what we today call the media. Rather, radicalizing the Marxian analysis of the fetishistic character of commodities, Debord defines spectacle as "a social relationship between people that is mediated by images" (1994: 12). Spectacle is produced through expropriation and alienation, not only of the products of labor, but of human sociality itself (1994: 13, 20-23). Debord summarizes this idea in the formula: "The spectacle is capital accumulated to the point where it becomes image" (1994: 24). Thus, spectacle is the most extreme form of separation: when the social world is transformed into an image and when images become reality, the productive power of human beings is separated from itself and presented as a world unto itself (cf. Agamben 1993: 78). In the figure of a world separated and organized by spectacle, monopoly capitalism attains irresponsible sovereignty over all of social life (Agamben 1993: 78-79). "After having falsified all of production, capitalism can now manipulate collective perception and take control of social memory and social communication, transforming them into a single spectacular commodity where everything can be called into question except spectacle itself" (Agamben 1993: 79).

While my choice of one of Paul's spectacle metaphors is admittedly determined by my perception of the threat that hangs over my own moment in history, I would also assert that my choice embodies an assessment of the crisis of social experience in the world of Paul and his contemporaries. Students of the early Empire insist that, by the age of Nero, spectacle had become such an all-encompassing feature of social experience that one can speak without exaggeration of the "theatricalization of life," which is not merely to be understood as the blurring of the boundary between life and art, but as the triumph of representation over reality. Shadi Bartsch describes the transformation of the Roman populace into actors as a crossing of the boundary that separates the real from the representational: "In the *Annals* of Tacitus, in Suetonius' *Life of Nero*, and in the epitome of Dio Cassius..., we find portrayed an emperor in performance who both watches his

⁹ On the spaces of spectacle, see Welch (1999: 125-45); Welch (2001: 492-98); Welch (2007).

¹⁰ E.g., Seneca *Ep.* 7, 77.

¹¹ E.g., Diogenes in Dio Chrysostom *Or.* 8.

¹² E.g., the tomb of Lucius Storax: see Clarke (2003: 145-52).

¹³ Originally published in 1967 as *La société du spectacle* by Buchet-Chastel.

audience and enlists other to do so for signs of a less than enthusiastic response, and an audience transformed into a gathering of the gagged: actors now themselves, they play the role of happy fans to save their lives in the seats that have become, in essence, the true stage” (1994: 3; cf. Parker 1999: 163-80). Commenting upon Ovid’s description of a triumphal procession in the *Ars amatoria*, Mary Beard makes the following observation about the depiction of historical events in Roman street theater: “All that is ‘real’ about it is the brilliant cardboard cut-out or gaudy painting carried along in the spectacle. Representation, in other words, has become the only reality there is” (2003: 37). Thus by interpreting one of Paul’s spectacle metaphors in the context of late capitalism, I am seeking to respond to Walter Benjamin’s injunction to the historical materialist: to “grasp the constellation which his own age has formed with a definite earlier one” (1974: 704).

So, to Paul’s spectacle metaphor. In 1 Cor. 15:30-32, Paul compares the mortal danger to which he is daily exposed in his apostolic calling with a “beast-fight” (θηριομαχεῖν)¹⁴ in the arena of the city of Ephesus: “And why are we putting ourselves in danger every hour? I die every day! That is as certain, brothers and sisters, as my boasting of you—a boast that I make in Christ Jesus our Lord. If with merely human hopes I fought with beasts in Ephesus, what advantage would that be to me? If the dead are not raised, ‘Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die.’” Scholars debate whether Paul’s question referring to a “beast-fight” in Ephesus should be understood in a literal or a figurative sense (Bowen 1923; Coffin 1924; Osborne 1966). In my view, the best explanation is that offered by Johannes Weiss (1910: 365): 1 Cor. 15:32 is an unreal conditional sentence, in which the particle ἄν has been omitted from the apodosis, as it so often is in Epictetus, and precisely with the expression Paul uses here – τί τὸ ὄφελος. Accordingly, Paul’s rhetorical question in 1 Cor. 15:32 is neither a literal reference to an event that occurred during his sojourn in Ephesus, nor a figurative description of a theological conflict with opponents, but a metaphorical comparison of the dangers of his existence as an apostle of Jesus Christ with a beast-fight in the arena at Ephesus.

Building upon this metaphorical interpretation, Abraham Malherbe has adduced a number of parallels from the writings of Cynics and Stoics (1989: 79-89). For our purposes, the most apposite is the eighth discourse of Dio Chrysostom entitled “Diogenes or On Virtue.” Dio Chrysostom reports a dialogue between Diogenes and an unnamed sophist on the occasion of the Isthmian games at Corinth. The sophist asked whether Diogenes had come to see the contest. “No,” Diogenes replied, “but to take part” (*Or.* 8.11). Then the man laughed and asked Diogenes who his competitors were. “Hardships,” Diogenes answered, which he then compared to “animals...greatly resembling dogs which pursue and bite people who run away from them, while some they seize and tear to pieces” (*Or.* 8.13, 17). “The noble man,” Diogenes explains, “holds his hardships to be his greatest antagonists, and with them he is always accustomed to battle day and night, not to win a sprig of parsley,...but to win happiness and virtue throughout all the days of his life” (*Or.* 8.15). Diogenes then describes “another battle more terrible and a struggle...much greater...and fraught with greater danger, I mean the fight against pleasure” (*Or.* 8.20). Diogenes summarizes his moral struggle by recapitulating the agonistic metaphor: “This is the contest which I steadfastly maintain, and in which I risk my life against pleasure and hardship” (*Or.* 8.26). In concluding the dialogue, Diogenes makes clear that he is fortified in his moral struggle by the god Heracles who is his model in fighting against hardships and pleasures, and in seeking to purify his life (*Or.* 8.28-35).

Impressed by such parallels, Abraham Malherbe concludes that “Paul’s use of θηριομαχεῖν ultimately comes from language used by the moralists of his day to describe the wise man’s struggle against hedonism” (1989: 85). As for what Paul means when he asks “If with merely human hopes I fought with beasts in Ephesus, what would I have gained?” Malherbe judges that Paul uses the figure of a beast-fight to describe his struggle to subdue his passions and to criticize the hedonism of his theological adversaries (1989: 88).

¹⁴ For θηριομαχεῖν as a terminus technicus of “beast-fight” in the arena, see the *Digest* 38.2; 48.19.

While acknowledging my indebtedness to the meticulous scholarship of Abraham Malherbe, I must dissent from this interpretation, and insist that this understanding of Paul's metaphor has validity only within the system of expressive causality, with its assumption that Paul and the philosophers shared an "inner essence." A different interpretation emerges from a structural model of causality, an interpretation which highlights Paul's distance from his Cynic contemporaries, even as they made use of a similar metaphor. As we shall see, the distance measures the different ways in which Paul and the Cynics imagined their relationship to the transpersonal realities of the social structure, and especially their relationship to God.

Let us return to the argumentative context of Paul's spectacle metaphor. In 1 Cor. 15, Paul presents a reasoned proof of the resurrection of the dead. The major divisions of Paul's argument are easily recognized: 15:1-34 offers a proof of the fact of the resurrection, established by reasoned arguments; 15:35-58 discusses the manner of the resurrection and the nature of the resurrection body. In 15:13-19, Paul employs a series of rhetorical syllogisms to refute the denial of the resurrection by some at Corinth (15:12). In 15:20-28, Paul argues positively for the resurrection based upon an eschatological order established by God. Having completed his reasoned proof, Paul adduces two examples of practices that would be futile, apart from the reality of the resurrection: the Corinthians' practice of receiving baptism on behalf of the dead (15:29), and his own daily exposure to mortal danger in fulfillment of his apostolic calling (15:30-32). As a hyperbolic instance of the futility of his constant death-in-life,¹⁵ Paul throws up the specter of a beast-fight in the Ephesian arena: Paul's point is that even such a heroic struggle would be for nothing, if the dead are not raised.

Employing a structural model of causality, let us now compare the uses of the spectacle metaphor by Diogenes the Cynic and Paul the apostle. By means of this metaphor, both Paul and Diogenes position themselves as combatants within the social structure. Indeed, both struggle courageously against the forces of alienation by the way in which they represent themselves metaphorically. This similarity doubtless reflects the proximity of their locations within the class structure. Dio Chrysostom emphasizes the fact that Diogenes was homeless, "camping out in the Craneion" (*Or.* 8.4). For the most part, Diogenes was despised by the cosmopolitan Corinthians, who did not think that a conversation with him would be worth their while (*Or.* 8.10). Evidently, Paul and Diogenes were similarly constituted as subjects by the structure of society, and recognized this fact by taking up the posture of combatants in their respective uses of the spectacle metaphor.

But that is where the similarity stops. Diogenes allegorizes the metaphor, coding the antagonists of the arena as vices—hardships and pleasures. The effect of this allegorization is to transpose the arena into the moral interior of the philosopher, where victory in the contest can be achieved through self-control. By contrast, Paul's use of the beast-fight metaphor shows no trace of moral allegory; indeed, the metaphor is so stark that generations of interpreters have been led to search Paul's career for an actual struggle with wild animals in the arena at Ephesus,¹⁶ though such a search is fruitless,¹⁷ and survival, in any case, would have been miraculous. In the logic of Paul's metaphor, it is assumed that he will be devoured by the beasts, as was the case with criminals who suffered this form of capital punishment (Kyle 1998). This is a major difference between the Cynic hero's self-representation and that of Paul. The Cynic hero wins the beast-fight by subduing his passions. If there is any hint of victory in Paul's metaphorical scenario, it is only the hope in the resurrection with which Paul confronts his inevitable death.

¹⁵ On hyperbole in 1 Cor. 15:30-32, see the insightful comments of Weiss (1910: 365).

¹⁶ An interpretive tradition that goes back to the *Acts of Paul*, according to Winter (1993:126-27).

¹⁷ The majority of commentators rightly question the historical possibility of Paul having endured a beast-fight in the arena of Ephesus: e.g., Collins (1999: 557-60); Fee (1987: 770); Barrett (1971: 366).

The most significant difference between the apostle's use of this metaphor and that of the Cynic philosopher lies in the way in which each imagines his relationship to the most important transpersonal reality in the social structure, namely God. Heracles, "the fighter of wild beasts" (θηριομαχός) is the savior of the Cynic philosophers, because his example shows them how to conquer themselves, how to be victorious over their hardships and pleasures (Malherbe 1989: 83).¹⁸ By contrast, Messiah Jesus, who suffered death and was buried (15:3-4), leads Paul into an existence in which he dies daily (15:31). It is because Jesus suffered a public execution reserved for slaves and criminals that Paul is able to conceive of himself as the victim of *damnatio ad bestias*. For the Cynic philosopher, the principle of sovereignty is the heroic will of the individual sage, exemplified by the labors of the demi-god Heracles. For Paul, the apostle of Jesus Christ, sovereignty belongs to the one who was crucified and risen (15:20-28).

Stepping back from the details of the beast-fight metaphor, we may ask ourselves how each use of the metaphor functioned in relation to the "society of the spectacle" that was Imperial Rome. Dio Chrysostom's Diogenes uses the metaphor to create critical distance from the Isthmian games: the star-performers of the arena—the wrestlers, the boxers, the spear-throwers, and the discus-hurlers—are trivialized as mere entertainers who divert human beings from their true calling. By means of the metaphor, Diogenes resists the expropriation and alienation of his true moral self by spectacle. Diogenes punctuates his derisive attitude toward the society of the spectacle, at the end of the dialogue, by squatting on the ground and performing an indecent act, scattering the crowd around him, like frogs in a pond (*Or.* 8.36). Paul, by contrast, uses the metaphor to embed himself absolutely in the society of the spectacle. Paul tells an unvarnished and horrifying truth about the extreme form of separation from the self, endured by myriads of his contemporaries in the early Empire. If there is less freedom and less resistance in Paul's posture toward the social structure, there is greater realism. And instead of derision, there is hope.

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¹⁸ Referencing Lucian *Lexiphanes* 19. See also Epictetus *Diss.* 1.6.32; Dio Chrysostom *Or.* 63.6.

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