THE POLITICAL THEORY OF JOHANNES ALTHUSIUS

by

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Johannes Althusius (1557-1638) was probably the most outstanding Calvinist statesman and social theorist (after Calvin) before Abraham Kuyper, the noted Dutch journalist, educator, and political leader, who was Prime Minister of The Netherlands at the turn of the 20th Century. Although Althusius was rather well known and influential in early 17th-Century Europe, he was quickly forgotten, and his work was not brought to light again until 1880 by Otto von Gierke in his Johannes Althusius und die Entwicklung der naturrechtlichen Staatstheorien. In 1932 Carl J. Friedrich republished most of Althusius' important Latin work, Politica Methodica Digesta, with a long, English introduction to his life and thought. Then in 1964, Frederick S. Carney presented an excellent abridged translation of this work, also with a helpful introduction. In these volumes one can find the background and details of Althusius' life, so I shall not repeat those matters here, except to say that Althusius, a German, lived and studied in Germany and Switzerland before being called to an important governmental post (Syndic) in the city of Emden in East Friesland in 1604. The first edition of his Politics had been published just before his call to Emden, but he produced new editions of it, as well as other works, during the rest of his life in that city.

Rather than attempt a full discussion of the background of, and influences upon, Althusius' Politics before getting into it, let us enter this remarkable study and allow his discussion to refer us beyond his own work.

In the prefaxes to the first (1603) and third (1614) editions of the Politics, Althusius brings to our attention his concern for delineating the proper field of political science (scientia politica).

Where the moralist leaves off, there the theologian begins; where the physicist ends, the physician begins; and where the political scientist ceases, the jurist begins. For reasons of homogeneity, we must not leap readily across boundaries and limits, carrying from cognate arts what is only peripheral to our own. Prudence and an acute and penetrating judgment are indeed required to distinguish among similar things in these arts. It is necessary to keep constantly in view the natural and true goal and form of each art, and to attend most carefully to them, that we not exceed the limits justice lays down for each art and thereby reap another's harvest. We should make sure that we render to each science its due (suum cuique) and not claim for our own what is alien to it.  

4 Politics, p. 3.
In one respect, Althusius is not saying anything wholly new here. From the time of the ancient Greeks, on through the middle ages, philosophers, theologians, and scientists had been concerned to differentiate their different disciplines. This concern was especially evident in the scholastic attempt to differentiate and relate philosophy and theology. But in another respect, Althusius is revealing something which was new with the Renaissance and the Reformation, for Althusius organized his Politics according to Ramus logic — that is, the logical method of Peter Ramus. This logic was different from that of Aristotle, though of course not wholly unrelated to it. Herman Dooyeweerd, a contemporary Dutch philosopher of law and politics in the same Calvinist line as Althusius and Kuyper, points out that Ramus’ logic was not rooted in the Aristotelian syllogism but in definitions and postulates, the material of which was found in the empirical sciences themselves. Carney explains that Ramus’ law of justice (lex justitiae) ‘indicates that each art or science has its own purpose, that this purpose serves as a principle for determining what is proper to a given art (suum cuique), and that everything not proper to it is to be rigorously excluded.’

Influenced by Ramus, Althusius was seriously attempting to discover the legitimate territory for political science, as distinguished especially from jurisprudence.

How far one may proceed in political science is sufficiently indicated by its purpose. This is, in truth, that association, human society, and social life may be established and conserved for our good by useful, appropriate, and necessary means. Therefore, if there is some precept that does not contribute to this purpose, it should be rejected as heteronomous.

... Now the political scientist properly teaches what are the sources of sovereignty (capita majestatis), and inquires and determines what may be essential for the constituting of a commonwealth. The jurist, on the other hand, properly treats of the right (jus) that arises at certain times from these sources of sovereignty and the contract entered into between the people and the prince.

Because this is stated so clearly, Friedrich feels that the greatest shortcoming of Gierke’s study was in his failure to emphasize the distinction between the “legal” and the “political” in Althusius’ thinking.

Indeed, Gierke tended to identify politics and its axioms with the law of nature. This identification is contrary to Althusius’ fundamental tenets... Gierke also identifies politics with public law. This identification is even less in keeping with Althusius’ view. To Althusius, politics was a descriptive science of facts.

5 Ibid., p. xvi. Both Carney and Friedrich present brief discussions of Althusius’ dependence on Peter Ramus. Herman Dooyeweerd says that in Ramus both the Humanist and Calvinist lines of thought are evident: The idea of an underlying interrelationship of all the sciences rooted ultimately in the sovereignty of God, reveals Ramus’ Calvinist roots. On the other hand, the Platonic spirit of Humanism with its unbridled life-impulse exhibits the Renaissance heritage. “In den Strijd om een Christelijke Staatkunde,” Antirevolutionaire Staatkunde, 2c Jaargang, 1926, p. 249.
6 Ibid. Friedrich says, “...against all inspirationalism and supernaturalism he [Ramus] asserts ‘the starting point of all human knowledge of whatever kind is the sensuous experience and the induction from single instances’,” PMB, p. lxi.
7 Politics, p. xvii.
8 Ibid., p. 4.
9 PMB, p. lxiii.