



# CRISIS & CRITIQUE

**READING CAPITAL: 50 YEARS LATER**

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*Dialectical Materialism Collective*

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Reading Capital: 50 years later

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# Introduction

With this issue of *Crisis and Critique*, we want to celebrate the fiftieth birthday of the publication of Louis Althusser's *Reading Capital* and *For Marx*. The publication of these books marked something close to what one may call an event, both within the French philosophical scene, as well as Marxist thought, or more specifically in Marxist philosophy in general. Setting new standards for the very reading of Marx, they established, maybe for the first time in Europe, what one may call a Marxist philosophy that marked a break with the past (as much with former orthodox ways of reading Marx as well as with the traditional Marxist orthodoxy). Opening up entirely new horizons of how to think and, materially speaking, of how to read Marx's work, by inventing an entirely new way reading, Althusser's project and with it the 1960's in France can legitimately be given the name of an epoch, maybe that of the *Althusserian years* in Marxism, in philosophy and in the thought of emancipatory politics.

This ambitious project embodied both in *Reading Capital* and *For Marx* had a decisive as well as divisive effect in and on the history of political thinking because it proposed one single answer to what appeared to be two separate problems, one being of a political and the other of a philosophical nature. The political problem concerned communist militant practice and its two deviations, sectarianism and dogmatism - the philosophical problem was linked to the theoretico-philosophical stagnation of Marxism, equally entrenched in existential subjectivism on the one hand and a methodological reapplications of a worn down objectivist matrix onto new contents that at the same time had no influence on this very matrix, on the other. In order to simultaneously deal with these two issues, and in bringing together a renewal of the theory of ideology, able to conceive of the limitations of any practice that relies on identifications (of the subject of revolutionary change, for example), and a new presentation of Marx's dialectics as the first theory of history (that remained fundamentally determined by contingency), Althusser and his students did not simply attempt to offer yet another reading of *Capital*, but placed their very own access to this work under the conditions of the historically specific impasses of political agendas, parties and movements and of the philosophical and scientific novelties of their time. The philosophical, political and scientific conjuncture in France, which determined the publication of these two books is profoundly complicated to oversee. Post-War French philosophy was dominated by phenomenology, reactionary appropriations of Hegel, humanism, yet also by rationalist epistemology, the emergence of Lacanian psychoanalysis, and so on. Politically, it was a decade of great and profound political experiments, revolutions,

riots, national-liberation-movements and anti-colonial struggles, partially inspired by the spirit of Maoism. It is under these conditions that *Reading Capital* and *For Marx* emerged and must be situated. Furthermore, his project precisely therefore presented an on-going struggle between philosophy and its conditions, that at the same time made this very philosophical thinking possible - it constantly and paradoxically struggled with its own conditions of possibility (that thereby were also its conditions of impossibility).

Clearly, the philosophical, political and scientific conjuncture today changed drastically after Althusser, one may just think of all the revolutionary attempts and experiments that led to failures or, at least, have become saturated. So, why do we still read *Reading Capital*? Why might one nonetheless claim that there is a persistent actuality to this book such that it seems to persist in the contemporary debates in philosophy, politics, economy, etcetera, transcending the immediate philosophical and political conjunctures in which it was unfolded and by which it was determined?

*Reading Capital* is the first truly collective enterprise in the history of philosophy (of course there have been author couples before and after, famously Marx and Engels, Deleuze and Guattari, Adorno and Horkheimer, and others). Yet, the structure of this very book gives a clear idea of what one may call the Althusserian methodology (that may not be limited to the historico-socio-politico-scientific circumstances in which it emerged). This is why there may be fundamental (and good) reasons for remaining faithful to this very methodology, and thereby maybe even to Althusser himself, working continuously on and elaborating further the philosophical horizon rendered possible by his books. And is this not how Althusser himself understood Marx? Not as a finished stable project, hindering all alteration, a canon to which we dogmatically stick and which only enables us to mechanically repeat his theses. For Althusser, on the contrary, being a Marxist in philosopher equals advancing further the "continent opened up by Marx." The future of Althusser and his legacy depends on the work that remains to be done on this continent of thought. Althusser's philosophical project will live on only if this continent will also include an "Althusserian field or country" rather than an orthodox and scientific, philological department of "Althusserian studies". Having said this, we should bear in mind that there was never such a thing as an "Althusserian school," and most likely there will never be one. This is where, for example, his difference with Lacan resides: Lacan was very interested in formalizing his thought such that it could constitute and immanently

sustain an institutional framework (a society, a school and the field). With Althusser, given the very nature of his project and intervention (intervening philosophically and politically in particular philosophical and political conjunctures), formalization looks almost impossible. Also an institutional framework of "Althusserian Studies" or "Althusserian Society" is equally unimaginable – one only has to think of 'overdetermination' and such a school would immediately be dissolved. Here we encounter the second *invariant of his project*: as a communist, he was an inventor of a new methodology of philosophical thinking, as probably the literally first (in both senses of the term) collective philosopher. This methodology, no matter how naïve and simplistic it may sound at certain points, is nonetheless properly and practically communist.

Having all this in mind, every attempt which proposed to return to *Reading Capital* and *For Marx* today, fifty years after, implies, first of all, that we answer the very Althusserian questions anew from the proper historical and conjunctural perspective of the contemporary situation: what are the political and scientific impasses and novelties conditioning our return (to emancipatory thinking and thus - ultimately - to Marx)? And, finally, in the face of such novelties, what remains new in Marx's magnum opus today? The present issue of *Crisis and Critique* gathers philosophers who work on the "Althusserian Field", in the "Althusserian country" of thought – his students, co-authors of *Reading Capital*, thinkers and scholars who work through and with Althusser's work. The aim is to think of the legacy and contemporary importance of his two monumental books. We are very proud to have these authors in the present issue. Although every philosopher has a different take on the relevance and legacy of his work, they all agree on one fundamental point: on the contemporaneity of Althusser's opus. And that the question of how to determine his contemporaneity may create further divisions, ultimately proves his actuality even further.

Agon Hamza/Frank Ruda

Prishtina/Berlin, November 2015

# Althusser and “Communism”

## Étienne Balibar

### Abstract:

This paper aims at examining the relation of Althusser to communism, its levels and instances, as well as the transformations of his thought with regard to the communism. It explores the possibilities of communism as understood and theorized by Althusser himself.

### Keywords:

Althusser, Marxism, Communism, theory, politics.

I must begin with some preliminary remarks, caveats if not warnings. The first is that I am too directly implicated in the history which I am going to discuss to see it from an external and objective point of view. This entails both advantages and disadvantages. Among the advantages, I would include, to speak as Nicole-Edith Thévenin recently has, the engagement of the subject in its object, which means that there is an interest in its truth and not only a concern for the possibility of objectivity. Among the disadvantages I would include the inevitable *inadequation* of my ideas on the question, in the Spinozian sense of a knowledge “of the first kind,” “mutilated and confused,” because it is based in a large part on memories and mostly subject to the illusion that I am able to maintain by virtue of having been the contemporary of certain facts and events, which in reality have to a great extent eluded me and without doubt continue to elude me. This is particularly true of Althusser’s facts and gestures, intentions, even obsessions. I was his student and close friend from 1961 to his death, but I am very far from having having known everything, including what concerns his political and philosophical ulterior motives. The published texts, including the enormous mass of posthumous publications, only partially alleviate my uncertainties. Moreover, unlike others, I have not done any research in the archives. Memories, thus, can continue their work of concealment.

The second remark is more fundamental. Any reflection on the relations between Althusser and “communism “ by definition refers to our current perception of what is or what was communism, as a political and ideological phenomenon inscribed in history, at the same time that it can contribute to enlightening it. Likewise, it is based on the perception that Althusser himself had, or rather it attempts to elucidate it. Between these two perceptions, ours and his, both of which are evolving, there is necessarily a discrepancy [*décalage*], and a temporal discrepancy begins, resulting in an intellectual discrepancy. For Althusser, communism, as a

“movement” (I will return to the connotations of the term), thought itself in the *present*, a present which was at the same time, as Leibniz would say, “pregnant with the future.” The more this present was troubled, uncertain, contradictory, the more its reality was affirmed and, in a way, perceived, because the contradiction could be thought of as an intrinsic characteristic, it could even serve to specify the modalities of the future which the present would bear. For us on the contrary (and here, I obviously take sides under the innocent appearances of an “us,” which does not oblige the reader), communism is not a real movement, it is at most (which as a matter of fact is not anything), a hope against all odds, that is, an idea or a subjective conviction. Sometime around 1989, a little before or a little after, it appeared to us that the “meaning” of history of which we were the witnesses or the inheritors was not and could not be the “transition” toward communism, in any case not in the form imagined by Marxism, even if the political movement or movements claiming this name had played a big role in history, bearing consequences that were completely paradoxical in regard to their objectives, such as the preparation of a new phase and new hegemonies in the development of capitalism and of relations of power in the world.

Thus there is a great temptation retrospectively to interpret the period in which Althusser’s communism is inscribed as the period of the acceleration of decline and decomposition, whose “contradictions,” locally as well as globally, were the warning signs, and by contrast to record his repeated assertions of the irreversible nature of the fusion of the Workers’ Movement with Marxist Theory (in capital letters), or of the entry into the phase of the death pangs of imperialism, of the proven inability of bourgeois ideology to seize the masses and to control their actions, as so many pathetic illusions.<sup>1</sup> Even in the 1978 text from Venice, ‘The Crisis of Marxism’, in which Althusser notes that Marxism was incapable of understanding its own history and integration into history—which was not for him an extrinsic limitation, a simple “insufficiency,” but what affects the interior, at its core, its scientific pretension—he still claims that the revelation of this crisis (and by the same token the possibility, even an “aleatory” one, of its resolution) is due to “the power of an unprecedented mass worker and popular movement” of which we were the contemporaries.<sup>2</sup> Thus, Althusser was not only completely taken by surprise

1 On the “fusion,” see the Goshgarian correspondence.

2 Althusser, 1978

by the real course of history in which he attempted to intervene, like every Marxist since Marx without exception, even if only by thought and theory, but it is very difficult to resist the impression that all this thought, like a bird which crashes into the glass wall of its cage, constitutes a defensive reaction against real history, in which the treasures of inventiveness (“dialectical” or not) that it often deploys merely affords a more tragic dimension. It is true that one can also attempt to read things upside down (and I do not rule out that an intention of this type is behind the symposium that we are holding, or in the minds of those who are attending): if it was proven that, fighting against not only the “crisis of Marxism,” but, what is more serious, against the crisis of *historical communism*, and seeking gradually to understand the causes, Althusser pinpointed some “absent cause” which is nevertheless real, some disordering mechanism of “encounters” or “combinations” which—very “aleatorially”—sometimes provides individuals, caught in the history of the modes of domination, the collective capacity to alter the course—whether it is called communism or something else. Thus, perhaps the weakness that in the past belonged to him, may metamorphose into a resource for today or for tomorrow. That remains to be seen.

But all this being said, I am aware of the absolute necessity—even for interpreting the work of Althusser himself—of providing a *factual* corrective to the representation of the history of the 20th century as the history of a decline and decomposition more or less deferred for a long time, contrary to what was the communist imagination. The projection of an “end,” which is ambiguous by definition, onto the process that preceded it is mystifying, in the same way that term-by-term inversions from one historical mythology into another are. The big question that seems to me must dominate the interpretation of Althusser’s elaborations and interventions in the field of the “communism” of his time, is the question of knowing whether or not the intermediary period, say from 1960 up to the milieu of the 70s, when—for a short time—the “eurocommunist” perspective was being outlined, contains a revival of challenges to capitalism, and more generally to the dominant social order, the bearer of historical *alternatives* of which we no longer have any idea of today. If one accepts, all too quickly, that the soviet regime of the Stalinist type was intrinsically part of the established order, under the appearance of a radical challenge to it, does this mean that “de-Stalinization” would, ultimately, only lead to prospects for the restoration of capitalism? And if one accepts that the anti-imperialist movements of any sort, from the Arab world to Africa and from South East Asia to Latin America, contained within themselves the

possibility of inventing another path of development than that which rests on the extreme polarization of social inequalities, does this mean that their being crushed under military dictatorships and financial-political corruption constituted the only possible outcome? The violence of the means that were implemented to achieve this destruction can rightly attest that conflict existed and that the outcome was not fatal. Similar questions arise regarding social movements, worker and non-worker, in Western Europe before and after '68. To put it plainly, what should we think today of the feeling that was shared during this period by a number of communists of my generation, and even those a little older, that we were entering into a new revolutionary season, which would also be an *alteration* in the modalities of the revolution, what Régis Debray (in close collaboration with the Cuban leaders before they fell into orthodoxy) had famously called a "revolution within the revolution" (which, it is true, not everyone viewed the orientation in the same way)? I propose that we keep this question in mind, without preconceived answers, at the same time that we examine Althusser's trajectory.

This brings me to my subject, beginning yet again with a precaution. The word "communism" is extremely polyvalent, and even equivocal. It designates several things. Contrary to others, I do not believe that we can, even at a very high level of abstraction, reduce it to the simplicity of an idea. Or if such an idea exists, it "bursts out" from its applications and levels of realization. To judge the relationship of Althusser to communism, it is necessary to situate his engagement at different, heterogenous levels, but which are not radically separate from each other, and try to understand the variations that occur. There is no doubt that Althusser, from the moment of his "conversion" in the aftermath of the war, educated by the experience of captivity and the encounters he had there, was completely caught up and formed in the world of communism, which was for him more than for many others a total experience, but, I repeat, at different levels.<sup>3</sup>

At the first level, which I would call subjective in the ordinary sense of the term, I think that it is necessary to situate at one and the same time, in a high voltage short circuit, lived experiences and eschatological hopes, the unity of which is often united by him in the language of *fraternity*. Fraternity experienced in the present, and even in the quotidian, as we all experience in very diverse settings, among which for him meant primarily the framework of militant activities with the cellmates from the

3 See the very beautiful analysis by Stanislas Breton: Breton, 1997.

party, especially since these were, as an exception to the structures of the party of the epoch, in academic milieus, not exclusively intellectuals. At this level, but it is clearly perilous, I am equally tempted to note his relationship with his wife Héléne, ending tragically in 1980, at once functional and conflictual. Héléne, expelled from the party after the Liberation of France for reasons that have not been entirely explained, represented for Althusser an imaginary link (and even stronger) with the militant fraternities of the heroic periods (the Popular Front and Resistance).<sup>4</sup> But fraternity is also the sign under which the eschatological hopes of Althusser are inscribed, that of a society of social relations freed from the commodity form, certainly a "negative" definition, but the most precise that we can find in his texts of "communism" as a mode, or better as a *form* of social organization. At the end of his life, in texts that can appear delusional, such as the "*Thèses de juin*" from 1987 preserved in the IMEC archives (but is not delirium one of the forms under which the truth of the subject is expressed?) the quotidian and the eschatological join together in the thesis: "communism is already here," among us, invisible or imperceptible, that is, not named as such, in the "interstices of capitalist society," wherever men associate together in non-market activities.<sup>5</sup> Obviously there is a very high tension here, in the first degree at least, with a thesis often stated elsewhere: no society is transparent to itself, no society without ideology.<sup>6</sup> Unless one thinks, which would not be anti-althusserian perhaps, that fraternity *is the very ideology of communism*, or even that it is *communism as ideology*, as a medium of thought and life, finally freed from its class function...

Anyway, it is a bit of a leap to move from there to what I would call the second level, that of *theory*, where the important thing to say is at first, once again, negative: for Althusser (and this will become more and more clear), theory (including and above all *Marxist* theory) does not have anything to say about communism as such, it only deals with the *possibility of communism*, insofar as it is inscribed in the contradictions of capitalism, that is, in the class struggle.<sup>7</sup> It is not enough, I think, to refer here to the "real movement which abolishes the state of existing things," even

4 Note the network of common friends of Althusser and Héléne, partly comprised of former resistance fighters.

5 Matheron, 2009.

6 The thesis asserted in *For Marx* and repeated in 'Ideology and the Ideological State Apparatuses'.

7 Althusser, 2006

if it happened that Althusser embraces this famous formula from *The German Ideology*, because it is clear that for him it runs the risk of implementing a determinist representation of the process of the class struggle, even “in the last instance.” The term that he had increasingly favored is that of “tendency,” on the condition that it is immediately combined with “counter-tendency,” in such a way as to inscribe in the same problematic the possibility and *the impossibility* of achieving communism posed by the vicissitudes of the class struggle. This is what we must theorize, and we immediately see that such a theory can only assume very paradoxical properties from an epistemological point of view. Many problems arise, and I will indicate three, unfortunately without being able to enter into all the details here. First, should we think that the possibility is strategic and the impossibility somehow “tactical”? But politics, especially in the Machiavellian perspective that Althusser privileged while continuously seeking its adaptation to the contemporary form of class struggle, for which it had not been conceived, is nothing but a tactic. And, consequently, the question arises of knowing to what extent the realization of the “final goal,” communism, will be affected not only in its historical possibility, but in its content, by the “tactical” vicissitudes of the class struggle that engenders it.

Here, then, is grafted the second problem, which is that of the articulation between the two categories of “socialism” and “communism” inherited from the “Marxist” tradition on the basis of a very biased reading of *The Critique of the Gotha Programme*, and canonized by Stalin in his evolutionist interpretation of the revolutionary transition, which de-Stalinization has not only failed to call into question, but, on the contrary, has fully extended.<sup>8</sup> Althusser himself, until very late, reasons in these terms. It is therefore necessary to determine precisely the moment when he introduces the thesis (which is today shared by Marxists or Post-Marxists, for example, Antonio Negri) according to which socialism does not exist as a mode of production or autonomous social formation, but represents at most a name to characterize the multiplicity of circumstances in which a tendency within capitalism (that is, a tendency for its reproduction, even its adaptation or its modernization) and a tendency in communism (identified in the insistence of *forms of social relations* rather than a *mode of production*) confront one another.<sup>9</sup> I am tempted to

8 Reporting on my conversations with Chinese philosophers?

9 See the Goshgarian correspondence

maintain that this thesis is a by-product of the discussion of the “dictatorship of the proletariat” from 1976, in which occurs a very contradictory, and therefore very violent, sort of *acting out* of Althusser’s relation to the heritage of “*Leninism*,” that is, quite plainly, of Stalin. Thus springs fourth the formula: “Communism is our only strategy (...) it not only commands today, but it begins today. Better: it has already begun”<sup>10</sup> It is necessary to recognize that this formula is rather far removed from the way in which *Reading Capital* had theorized the “transition” between modes of production, which certainly multiplied the elements of “overdetermination” to ward off evolutionism and historical positivism, but which remained more than ever subordinated to a problematic of the *periodization* of the history of social formations.<sup>11</sup>

However, as far as we go in the substitution of a problematic of the present (as well as its differential tendencies and counter-tendencies, or its non-contemporaneity to itself) for a problematic of succession and periodization, there is something which clearly does not change, namely, the idea that the motor of history is the class struggle, “complicated” and “supplemented” if necessary with every other kind of levels and practices, distributed according to the registers of an economic, political, and ideological class struggle (even though essentially any class struggle is political: politico-economic, politico-ideological, or political-state or anti-state ) but only to occupy the place of the “determination in the last instance.”<sup>12</sup> This is why Althusser was completely deaf and blind to the way in which feminism reassessed *the univocality* of emancipation movements, permanently “pluralizing” the idea of forming a process of transformation of social relations or of questioning domination. And he reacted with an extreme violence, in advance, as it were, to the idea that the “mass ideological revolt” of 68 (according to his not entirely irrelevant expression however, if “revolt” is taken in a positive sense : Rancière would have only a small transformation to make in order to return, in the words of Rimbaud, to the “logical revolts”) could constitute the form of an anti-authoritarian struggle that has social bases, but the meaning of which was not defined by the interests and experiences of the working class.<sup>13</sup>

10 Althusser 1977, Althusser 1976a

11 This was particularly the case in my own contribution: Balibar, 1969.

12 See the text “On the Cultural Revolution” published anonymously by Althusser in the *Cahiers Marxist-Léninistes*: Althusser, 2010.

13 The expression “mass ideological revolt” of the students and lycées is particularly used in ‘A propos de l’article de Michel Verret... (Althusser 1969b) and in a letter dated 15 March 1969 to

In the final analysis, we see the dilemma that every rereading of Althusser's propositions, at different stages of its development, will inevitably place before us: if these propositions are inseparable from the assertion of the "primacy of the class struggle," and if the primacy of the class struggle is that which articulates Marxism to communism, do we retain the whole of this system to think the "tendencies" that we want to inscribe in a historically *present moment*, even at the cost of new definitions, or do we consider it necessary to suppress or relativize certain elements, and which ones? It is not certain that this is possible one way or the other.

But it is here that we arrive at the third level of Althusser's "communism," or the communism with which Althusser maintains what might be called a relation of critical interiority: this level is *communist organization*, not only as a project or methodology of political action thought in principle, at the level of the concept, but as a *given*, even if it is contradictory (and if its contradictions more and more appear to be intrinsic, constitutive of it). We must also play here, it seems to me, with several terms. One of them, obviously, is "party," both in the sense of taking part, or of *taking a position* in society, the class struggle, thought, philosophy (it happened that Althusser, at the beginning of the 60's, at the height of his "theoreticism," spoke of the "party of the concept," a term he said he had found in Marx), and in the sense of a historically constituted organization: the "French Communist Party," officially called the section of the Communist International – i.e. the Komintern dissolved in 1943 for which it is clear that, like other militants of his generation, he was nostalgic. He completely identified with this party ("the Party" with capital P), but in order to transform it, to protect it from its "deviations," even to prescribe it paths to its internal rehabilitation, at least obliquely. Thus it could seem that the idea of the party *divides in two*, that there is a kind of empirical communist party, he feels at odds with if not foreign to, and an ideal communist party, which is the true object of Althusser's fidelity.<sup>14</sup> But the constant feature of his attitude, which applies to the "offensive" battles of the 60s, and to the major conflict over "socialist humanism," as well as to the "defensive," if not to say desperate, battles at the end of the 70s, against what had seemed to him a shift toward "bourgeois democracy" of the so-called strategy of the "common program" (not to say against the

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Maria-Antonietta Macciocchi: Macciocchi, 1969.

14 Cf. Althusser, 1974, 274.

16 Althusser and "Communism"

general idea of Eurocommunism);<sup>15</sup> this constant feature is the conviction that the struggles for the transformation of the party can and must be carried out *inside* by "forces" present in the party, and can only be lost and turned against their objective if they are carried out from the outside. In a way the ideal party is a fragment of the real party, what it reveals to itself and should prevail.<sup>16</sup> Hence Althusser's extraordinary reluctance to follow the path of "dissidence," of which I can personally attest to, in particular for having contributed to the revision of the pamphlet *What Must Change in the Party* in 1978, which it is clear that it would have cost Althusser an excruciating amount of effort, probably not without subsequent aggravation on his mental state.<sup>17</sup>

However the "party" is only one of the names or forms under which, in Althusser's discourse, the question of *communist organization* presents itself to us. There are others which spill over the level of the "party," I am tempted to say extensively and intensively. Both concern the idea of the *workers' movement*. First there is the question of the *international communist movement* considered precisely as a form (and even a superior form, on the world scale) of the workers' movement as it would be established for revolution and the passage to communism first, from its "encounter," then its "fusion," with Marxist theory. It is very striking to see that Althusser maintained against the wind and tide the idea of a virtual unity between elements of a movement more and more fragmented and involved in geopolitical confrontations of the State, because of its supposed opposition irreducible to a single adversary, world imperialism. Which also led him to pose the problem of the crisis of Marxism regarding as an effect of the inability of communists to analyze the opposing divisions between the socialist countries, China and the USSR, later followed by Brezhnev's USSR and the western "Eurocommunist" parties, was to see these as contradictions internal to the movement. This conviction, is I believe, apart from personal allegiances and friendships, the underlying reason for the "double-dealing" that Althusser was tempted to practice for some years—essentially between 65 and 67—between the officially pro-soviet and certainly anti-Chinese PCF, and the Maoist organization created by certain of his older students which, eluding his

.....  
15 What Andrea Cavazzini in an excellent little book (Cavazzini, 2009) calls "Althusser's last struggle," an allusion to a title by Moshe Lewin: *Lenin's Last Struggle*.

16 Still the eschatological schema of the 'remnant of Israel'...

17 The text first appeared in the form of four articles from the journal *Le Monde*, 24-27 avril 1978 (republished in a library volume, François Maspero, Paris 1978).

17 Althusser and "Communism"

grasp, had over run the strategy he had elaborated for them, and under the direct influence of Beijing (even if this was for a very short time) had begun to constitute a pole of attraction in the face of the CP and the General Confederation of Labor. This double-dealing would cost him dearly, on both the political front and the emotional front, since it led to his being attacked from both sides. But the conviction that underlay him (which might, once again, be called an illusion) was that the *membra disjecta* of the “international communist movement” *must* sooner or later join, and that it was necessary in this moment for vanishing mediators to arise, “disappearing into their intervention,” (*Lenin and Philosophy*, 1968), that is to say, “philosophers,” not in order to negotiate agreements from the mountaintop but to “think” the historical conditions and perspectives for this refoundation.

This could be an illustration of what I believe to have been a strategic—and I am also tempted to say *stylistic*—factor of the conception that Althusser had of theory and more precisely of philosophy in relation to *organized politics*. He sought to “found” theoretically at the same time, not exactly a clerical or “ecclesiastical”<sup>18</sup> conception, in which philosophy serves a previously defined political line; also not—despite his proclaimed admiration for the great “leader theoreticians”: Lenin, Gramsci, Mao, extinct with Stalinism and de-Stalinization— as a guiding and almost “sovereign” conception, corresponding to the idea of a *deduction* of political practice from “scientific” knowledge of the social totality; but on the contrary both as a pedagogical and critical conception aiming to register in the *vicinity* of political decision (as well as in the *difference*, the “interior distance” or the “emptiness of a distance taken” in relation to the political)<sup>19</sup> A conception close enough, it seems, to which the ecclesiastical tradition, of which Althusser remained extremely close through his training and certain of his friends, called *potestas indirecta*: the “spiritual power” or “intellectual power” that did not substitute for political power but overdetermined it, and thus in a way characterizes the political essence of “conjunctural” politics.

But what is even more interesting, for us today, is the way in which the question of the “party form” itself emerged in Althusser—without it

18 As Bernard Pudal correctly says in his commentary on *Lettre à Henri Krasucki* from 1965, an extraordinarily revealing document, testifying to another moment of the ‘double act’: see the documents published on the Fondation Gabriel Péri Foundation: Pudal, (date)

19 Matheron, 2009.

ever being exactly formulated in these terms.<sup>20</sup> The question of the “party form” does not only concern so-called “democratic centralism,” correlative to the “dictatorship of the proletariat” in Stalin’s construction, but above all the idea of the hierarchical distinction between the “economic class struggle” and “political class struggle,” as embodied by the organizational distinction between the party and the trade union, where the latter belongs to the system of “transmission belts” of the party and of the dictatorship of the proletariat itself—according to Stalin’s eloquent formula perpetuated in every communist party but severely undermined by the strikes of 1968 and, in Italy at least, by the factory struggles and the emergence or resurgence of the “council” forms of organization from below.<sup>21</sup>

Here is the heart of Lenin’s contradictory legacies, in Stalinism as well as in Gramsci. It is interesting that Althusser had come, in the texts of the period of “crisis” (in particular the intervention of the Venice colloquium, “The Crisis of Marxism” to pose an *intrinsic limit of Marxism*, of which the origin was in Marx himself, what he called the “calculable concept of surplus-value,” as the quantitative difference between the value of labor and the value retained or created by its productive utilization (the responsibility for which he attributes, in *Capital*, to the famous Hegelian order of exposition, once more the root of error in his eyes).<sup>22</sup> Because, according to him, this conception which would relegate to the margins the articulation of the accumulation of capital and its logic with the concrete forms of exploitation and extortion of surplus labor as experienced by workers, would be precisely the origin of the division between the levels of organization, or at least of the inability of Marxist theory to fight its perpetuation, which in addition corporatist interests sustain by apparatuses organizing the class struggle and their cadres (obviously one might think that Marxist theory is here judge and jury).<sup>23</sup>

Such thoughts can give one the feeling that we are in a rearguard battle with organizational forms and the conception of the party with

20 Contrary to what was happening at the same time in certain branches of Italian *Workerism* that he had completely ignored at first, but which it is not absolutely impossible that he was aware of afterwards. And above all, I think, in the tendency of “the left” of the PCI, such as Pietro Ingrao and syndicalists such as Bruno Trentin, or the exterior by Rossana Rossanda and the journal *Il Manifesto*. Cf. my intervention in the Padua colloquium on Rossana Rossanda.

21 See the implicit indications in Georges Séguy’s *mémoires*: Séguy, 2008 on his conflict with the direction of the party, represented within the CGT by Henri Krasucki. See also Trentin, 1980.

22 Althusser, 1977, p. 247-266.

23 Althusser, 1978b, p. 281-296.

which, as I have recalled, Althusser himself was completely impregnated. But I would like, by way of a provisory conclusion, to qualify this impression by invoking a banal, but quite persistent, formula to which Althusser periodically had recourse: the formula that suggests that Marxism (and consequently, ideally at least, the “communist party” that is demanded by it) must give rise to “another practice of politics,” in the double sense (but the two things are obviously linked) of a *new practice* in relation to that which has already existed in history, and a *heterogenous* practice in relation to that which invented the bourgeoisie (of which Marx said in the *Manifesto*, in a formula extremely ambiguous to Althusser, but one that raises a crucial problem, had “educated the proletariat to politics” to the extent that it needed to mobilize it in order to have sufficient forces, that is, mass movements, necessary to its victory over feudalism and the monarchy of the *Ancien Régime*).

What is this “other practice of politics” to which Althusser would always return, which would somehow be *specifically communist* practice? I am not entirely sure, but I can formulate some hypotheses, which partially arise from the way in which the terms of a dispute that we had in 1978 have, in retrospect, become clear to me, precisely as part of the discussion prompted by *II Manifesto* as a result of the Venice colloquium, and which had begun with Althusser’s responses to Rossanda, under the title “*Le marxisme comme théorie ‘finie’*.”<sup>24</sup> Althusser argued two things, one aimed directly against the plans for participation in coalition governments proposed in France by the Union of the Left and in Italy by the “historic compromise,” and the other being of a wider theoretical scope. The first consists in contrasting the practices of compromising apparatuses required by such alliances (which he would call, in *What Must Change in the Party*, “contractual”) and what we called here recently (Kenta Ohji) the “mass line,” that is, mass mobilization, and particularly working class masses, at the center, in an autonomous manner, as an *arbitrating* force and not a *supporting force* of official politics (he would cite several times Maurice Thorez in ’36: “we do not have ministers, but we have the ministry of the masses”).<sup>25</sup> The second, which is of a wider theoretical scope, consists in saying that the “communist party” is by definition a *party “outside the state,”* which goes beyond the idea of non-participation or non-subordination in the government. In line with what had formed the

24 Althusser, 1978b, p. 281-296. The originale version appeared in Italian in the volume *Discutere lo Stato: Posizioni a confronto su una tesi di Louis Althusser*, De Donato editore 1978.

25 Althusser, 1978, p. 118.

basis to his opposition to Khrushchevism, thus had sustained, but without saying so explicitly, his project of a “left critique of Stalinism” (that many, obviously, understood as a relic of Stalinism itself), Althusser explains without qualification that the “fusion of the party and the State” constitutes the element common to the Stalinist deviation from Marxism (and in fact from communism) and to the “socialist” politics that could emerge from the construction of a parliamentary alliance between communists and socialists, or more generally “bourgeois” parties, on the institutional terrain. This is why it is necessary that communists don’t play this game: they would lose the working class at the same time that they lose themselves. The communist party “is not a party like others,” in a way it is even the *antithesis* of all the other parties. I had objected at the time that this thesis was not compatible with the way in which the “ideological state apparatuses” allowed one to think about “parties,” and I continue to think this. But perhaps what this signifies is that the theory of the ISAs is insufficient to analyze the *ideological modalities* of the class struggle itself. This is at least what would seem to specify such texts—remarkable in many ways, even if they remain more than ever contradictory—such as the “Granada conference” on “The Transformation of Philosophy”<sup>26</sup> and the incomplete manuscript “Marx in His Limits” (1987), particularly by the strange thesis the latter upholds: the State Apparatus *is outside of the class struggle*, precisely to be able to dominate it from the point of view of the bourgeoisie (Poulantzas in the same period, in founding Eurocommunism, said exactly the opposite).<sup>27</sup> The counterpart to this thesis, therefore, would be that the communist party, in order to separate from the State, and to escape it as much as possible, must perpetually strive to *enter into the class struggle*, in particular through the door of “economic struggles,” that is, struggles that are underway in the very sites of exploitation. Hence the opposition to “the autonomy of politics” proposed by a party of Italian Marxists (notably Mario Tronti).<sup>28</sup> Hence also, perhaps, the aporia of a “communist politics” which must at once *lead (or be led)* as would a Prince, to find the “Archimedean point” where it is necessary to enter to transform the world (in any case society), and *to return* political

26 Althusser, 1976b

27 Althusser, 2006, 7-162. I later said that, in the “dispute” on the Dictatorship of the Proletariat, I had realized after the fact that Poulantzas’ position was more correct than Althusser’s (cf. Balibar, 2010, 145-164)

28 Note on the Tronti-Negri opposition: but neither does Althusser side with Negri, because one dissolved the “working class” in to the working-mass, the other in the multitude ?

power to the masses (Althusser often said, in a terminology reminiscent of the PCF of the 30s, to the “popular masses”), this capacity that they possess in themselves, but which apparatuses of every sort never cease to dispossess.<sup>29</sup>

*Translated by Joseph Serrano*

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<sup>29</sup> Cf. the items added in my conversation with Yves Duroux in *Cahiers du GRM*.

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# Althusser's Best Tricks

## Robert Pfaller

### **Abstract:**

This essay deals with the importance of Louis Althusser's project for our situation, placing it vis-a-vis two fronts: against neoliberal politics of our era, as well as against its double, postmodern relativism in philosophy. It situates his work in relation to his contemporaries (Deleuze, Derrida, Foucault, Lacan) as well as in relation to past and contemporary thinkers, demonstrating his significance for our contemporary situation.

### **Keywords:**

Althusser, Marxism, Ideology, Kant, postmodernism

### **01 Discovering Althusser - The Revealing Symptom**

To read Louis Althusser's texts during the mid-1980s meant for my friends and me, at this time students of philosophy in Berlin and Vienna, a double breakthrough: On the one hand, this reading proved to us that the newly emerging postmodernist philosophical *jeunesse dorée* that mostly delighted in paraphrasing Deleuze, Derrida, Foucault or Lacan was wrong in assuming that it was not anymore necessary to consider Marxist theory at all. On the other hand, we finally found something that was not part of that all-too-familiar arrogant tiresome kind of Marxism, both orthodox as well as Frankfurt school inspired, which at that time either pretended that Marxism already had an answer to every question or limited itself to complaints about the dominance of "instrumental reason"; suffocating (in both cases) every theoretical curiosity, for example, by assuring that things had to be seen "dialectically". Here, in the Althusserian texts was, finally, a marxist theory that came up with questions instead of smothering us (and itself) with pre-fabricated answers. Finally, somebody admitted that it was all but easy to be Marxist in philosophy! Althusser's theory re-established our trust, not only in theory, but in rationality as such. It was a philosophy that attempted to speak in both elegant and understandable words about the questions that matter - a fact that put it into fierce opposition maybe not to Deleuze, Derrida, Foucault or Lacan themselves but certainly to their delirious and kitschy postmodern adepts.

The aggressive despise or ignorance by which, at that time, most Marxists were treating Althusser's theory, as well as the silence by which postmodernist philosophers tried to pass over it (of course with Marxism altogether), could for us, young Althusserians of the time, only be read as a *symptom*. This silence was the crucial, telltaling point within the philo-

sophical discourse of the epoch. Insisting on this point meant to reveal the ideological nature of the whole alleged opposition between a fading Marxist orthodoxy and a prospering, fashionable postmodernist philosophical pseudo-poetry. Due to their profound anti-rationalist stance, both had to be seen as epistemological "twins", or accomplices - just in the way Althusser himself had designated theoretical-humanist Marxism and Stalinism as accomplices.

This is the reason why, for us, it was not important whether Althusser had interpreted Marx correctly or not - the question by which most of his marxist critics got stuck, falsely reading Althusser's texts only as a kind of secondary literature on Marx. Althusser (under whose name we subsumed the whole group of disciples as well) was for us an original philosopher, just like the aforementioned icons, one of the brilliant key heads of the 'French moment' in the 1960s and 70s; even if Althusser, as opposed to most of his colleagues, always modestly tried to hide away the originality of his approach, by covering almost every new concept he introduced under a kind of traditional marxist reference.<sup>1</sup> We did not care whether that Marx which Althusser spoke about did really exist. Was it really the worst case if Althusser had invented him? We cared for the best Marx, and not so much for the true Marx. Maybe some critics were right to emphasize that the famous "Introduction" from 1857 had never been published and could therefore not be seen as a reliable source of philological interpretation. Yet: was Althusser not right to point out the amazing theoretical richness of this text? And, furthermore: Was Althusser not right to underline, in "Capital", Marx' own perspicuous method of "symptomatic reading" of the classical texts by Smith and Ricardo - as well as Engels' most refined epistemological remarks on this?<sup>2</sup> Which other marxist theorist had ever read Marx and Engels in such a careful and subtle way, and developed their epistemology? What we cared about was the fact that this Marx that Althusser presented was definitely worth reading and thinking about - not only in a historical sense and with regard to the well-known matters of marxist theory, but also as a tool for tackling new questions, and as a weapon for a contemporary critique of postmodern ideology. Thus we approached the all but easy task to be Althusserians in philosophy. For the struggles at the epoch of neoliberalism and

1 For this Problem of Althusser's "camouflage strategy" see Elliott: "(Althusser) attempted to cover himself against the charge of importing non-Marxist elements into Marxism by representing Marx and Engels as Bachelardians avant la lettre (...)" (Elliott 1987, p. 66); see also Pfaller 1997, pp. 14ff.

2 See Althusser [1965] pp. 19ff.; pp. 145ff.

its ideology, postmodernism, we armed ourselves with a philosophical toolbox containing what we called Althusser's best tricks.

## 02 The Uses Of Althusser's Tools In Neoliberal Postmodernity

For me, as a philosopher, since the early 1990s mostly engaged at universities of art, and in the corresponding ideological struggles, in the first place Althusser's notions of the "philosophy in practical state" (philosophie en état pratique)<sup>3</sup> as well as of the "spontaneous philosophy of the scientists" proved to be of particular usefulness. Not only the scientists, but equally the artists were in danger of misrecognizing their own discoveries and covering them up under a layer of "borrowed-language"-philosophies. This danger was even bigger due to the fact that artists since the 1980s were more and more surrounded by "prompters" - like curators, theorists and critics - who imposed fashionable theoretical discourses upon the artist's understanding of their own practice. Due to the more and more predominant position of the curators, and due to the newly emerging policies concerning "artistic research", it was beneficial for the artists to explain their own works in the borrowed language of the curators and to try to impress those who had to decide upon artistic research funds by feeding their illusions about a kind of scientific "funding" of artistic practice as well as about the predictability of its results. Thus it became advantageous to use a language that was highly impregnated by the predominant ideology of the time.

To give one example for this, since the beginning of the 90s, artists could gain recognition and prestige if they declared their works "interactive" - thus boarding a highly ideological discourse with more than questionable assumptions both on the political as well as the aesthetic side. Were observers more emancipated if they had to contribute to the accomplishment of the artwork? Is being "active" (e.g. involved) always better than remaining at a distance? And did it really produce more aesthetic pleasure if the observers had to produce and observe their own impact instead of observing an independent artwork? Did interactive installations really tackle, as sometimes promised, the difference between artists and observers?

A good couple of sceptical questions of this kind, together with a

3 Althusser [1965] pp. 32.

sound Althusserian mistrust in the hailing of "activity" within the interactivity discourse,<sup>4</sup> prepared me to discover, within a number of apparently "interactive" artworks of the nineties, a totally different "philosophy at practical state": What should we say, for example, when performances by Ruth Kaaserer, Astrid Benzer or Martin Kerschbaumsteiner brought up the question of whether you really wanted to meet your friends at a bar or rather preferred to send the artist in your place; or whether one could stand the artist's suggestion to be paid for observing the artist digging a hole in the ground?<sup>5</sup> And, on the side of observers, what should we think when Slavoj Žižek declared that he liked the canned laughter in Sit-Coms since it laughed in his place so that after a while he could feel "objectively amused"?<sup>6</sup> - Did these instances not reveal the uncanny fact that people - against all assumptions of "interactivity theory" - did not only not want to become actively involved but even tried to escape their passive involvement? Did these phenomena not show that enjoyment and consumption are all but easy things, and that people sometimes actually try to delegate their enjoyment to vicarious agents, such as other people, or machines, or pets? Along these lines of thought, the uncanny phenomena of "interpassivity" were discovered and became the subject of a first conference at Linz University of the Arts in October 1996.<sup>7</sup>

The strange and funny phenomena of interpassivity then revealed a more general structure: not only pleasure can be delegated, but also illusions. When an intellectual delights in photocopying hundreds of pages of a book in a library - who is then supposed to believe that the machine was reading in his place? Beliefs without believers, anonymous illusions, deceptions without deceived, illusions without owners - this strange finding turned out to be the underlying structure not only of interpassive rituals or of sexual fetishism but of the most basic cultural practices such

4 For the Althusserian mistrust in "activity" see below, section 03.

5 See for this Pfaller (ed.) 2000. The brilliant two videos of Kerschbaumsteiner's performance can be observed on Youtube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UYABLSEyz5I> and <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qv24iFXD9L4> (accessed: 2015-09-30).

6 See for this Žižek 1989, p. 35: "... the Other – embodied in the television set ... is laughing instead of us. So even if, tired from a hard day's stupid work, all evening we did nothing but gaze drowsily into the television screen, we can say afterwards that, objectively, through the medium of the other, we had a really good time."

7 Conference "Die Dinge Lachen an unserer Stelle. Interpassive Medien - die Schattenseite der Interaktivität", Kunstuniversität Linz, Austria, October 8-10, 1996 (participants, amongst others: Mladen Dolar, Helmut Draxler, Susanne Lummerding, Stella Rollig, Slavoj Žižek. For the results see Pfaller (ed.) 2000). For the notion of interpassivity see Pfaller 2014, chapter 1.

as rituals and games, as well as of politeness and elegance. Moreover, it could be described as the source of pleasure within these practices, i. e. the "pleasure principle in culture" (Pfaller 2014).

Using Octave Mannoni's brilliant distinction between "beliefs" (illusions without owners) and "faith" (illusions with proud owners),<sup>8</sup> one could start to distinguish between different "subject-effects": when beliefs produced pleasure, faith produced self-esteem. And self-esteem sometimes proved to be hostile against pleasure: Whenever people who are proud of their own illusions observe others who happily indulge in illusions which are not their own (for example, in magic rituals, or in glamorous appearance, in charming or polite behavior), they tend to take these others as stupid and to renounce their practices as well as the pleasure these practices bring about. The analysis of this perspective-based illusion, the profound misperception of the happy other as a stupid other, and the subsequent hostility against pleasure, allowed us to tackle a next problem: the stunning ascetism typical for postmodern and neoliberal ideology. Is it not striking that, since the 1990s in the Western world, all of a sudden, people started to hate things and practices such as smoking, drinking alcohol, driving cars, wearing furs and perfume, using adult language, being polite, giving a compliment etc.? Could we not say that neoliberalism, depriving millions of people of a good part of their good lives, on the ideological level cunningly succeeded in making them hate their pleasures on their own? Was this not the most prominent "subject-effect" of neoliberal ideology?<sup>9</sup>

These questions led me to investigate the double-faced character of cultural pleasure as something that can be loved as much as it can be hated or feared - just as the ambivalent "holy" or "sacred", according to Sigmund Freud and Émile Durkheim.<sup>10</sup> Everything that made life worth living could now, due to its ambivalent dimension, be described as a "sacred of everyday life"<sup>11</sup>; the typical postmodern confrontation appeared to be one between a "filthy sacred" and a "pure reason"<sup>12</sup> - an

8 See Mannoni 2003.

9 These questions have been the subject of my study "What Life Is Worth Living For. Elements of Materialist Philosophy" (in German, Fischer Verlag, 2011). Althusser's definitions of materialism played a crucial role for this endeavour.

10 See for this Freud [1912-13], Durkheim [1915]; cf. Pfaller 2008.

11 See for this notion Leiris 1978.

12 See for this Pfaller 2008.

alleged reason, of course, that indulged in fantasies of its own purity (in terms of hygienic and moral cleanliness, as well as with regard to its apparently unconditional rationality). Now, if every cultural pleasure bears some ambivalent dimension, then it is clear that human beings are not spontaneous hedonists, or pleasure-seeking animals - as idealist anthropology tends to assume. Much worse, they are all too ready to sacrifice their lives for whatever stupid idea, as Michel de Montaigne once wittily remarked. Yet they tend to fear pleasure and the good life, due to the ambivalent dimension that even the most innocent pleasures contain (for example, even going for a walk or listening to music can be perceived as a waste of time and therefore requires one to transcend one's usual time budgetting).<sup>13</sup> Pleasures are feared in the first instance - this finding also made clear that it is not prohibition (as other idealist explanations, like the famous one given by St. Paul,<sup>14</sup> assume) that makes us interested in the prohibited things which we otherwise would have passed over with indifference. When pleasures are first feared, and not just ignored, what then, is the role of prohibition? - Following a few hints of psychoanalytic theory, the answer became possible: *prohibition is a cultural trick that allows individuals to perceive their internal hindrances against pleasure as mere impositions from outside.*<sup>15</sup> This became quite obvious in the case of "sexual liberation" that turned so amazingly fast into the predominant feeling of "sexual harrassment" (see below). Yet this is not the only trick culture can use in order to reconcile human beings with their ambivalent pleasures. The most important cultural trick is the collective injunction to the individual to transgress his or her usual boundaries. For example, when people say to their hesitating friend: 'Don't be a spoilsport! Dance with us!' Or, when people encourage their elder relatives who pretend not to be hungry to eat, by eating together with them. This interpellation is not always explicit. It can also be materialized (since, as Althusser taught, ideology has got a material existence) for example, in a certain architecture: When, for example, I enter a bar where elegant atmosphere, decent light and cool jazz prevail, I can hear the voice of culture telling me, 'Don't behave like a child now. Don't order a juice.' It is culture that can give individuals this support, this encouragement to transgress their "econo-

13 In this sense, it can be stated that pleasure is always "beyond the pleasure principle".

14 See Romans, 7,7: "I would not have known what sin was had it not been for the law. For I would not have known what coveting really was if the law had not said, "You shall not covet.""

15 See for this explanation Grunberger 2003: 73. For an analogous account of the oedipal prohibition as a support for pleasure and an injunction to generosity, see Bataille 1993, pp. 39ff.

my" of everyday life in order to become generous, elegant and happy. Only due to this cultural interpellation individuals can, for certain moments, as Georges Bataille put it, stop being servants and become "sovereign". This finding was of particular importance with regard to the postmodern ideological condition: Since in postmodernity, people were constantly encouraged to feel weak and vulnerable and to perceive the other's pleasure as a threat to themselves.<sup>16</sup> This ideology inevitably led to hatred against pleasure and de-solidarization within society. Yet, as we could show, the other's pleasure is not necessarily the cause of my misfortune. On the contrary, pleasure, just as freedom and dignity, is by its very essence social: it can and must be shared in solidarity, since only due to the other, and together with him or her, I become able to experience the ambivalent goods of the "sacred of everyday life" as pleasures.

The difference became obvious between a postmodern ideology that interpellated individuals as vulnerable and presented pleasure as a threat (or, as a theft by the other), and a modern ideology that interpellated individuals as adults and pleasure as something that is, if at all, only taken away from us by historical circumstances that have to be changed. The difference between these ideologies led me to conceive of different types of interpellation and accordingly different subject-effects - a point that Althusser, by focussing only on Christian religious ideology, may have left to explore.<sup>17</sup>

Having used Althusser's theory for a whole series of interconnected purposes with regard to contemporary ideology critique, I want to show in the following what appears to me to be one of Althusser's best philosophical "tricks".<sup>18</sup> It is a theoretical tool that can be used for discerning the underlying ideological matrix of a good part of contemporary

16 It is interesting to see how postmodern ideology used the figure of the other analogously as the aforementioned Paulinian "prohibition theory" in order to conceal internal hindrance with regard to pleasure. In postmodern ideology the other was presented as the "thief of enjoyment" (cf. Zizek 1993: 203): If I have trouble to enjoy, then it is due to the fact that the other has taken enjoyment for himself. The other, as it were, is the cause of my castration. In prohibition theory, prohibition is presented as this cause. Yet of course with opposed outcomes: In postmodern ideology, pleasure is thus presented as a threat, a trap by the other that has to be avoided. Prohibition theory on the contrary presents pleasure as something essentially unproblematic and something to be appropriated; all problems are luckily transposed to the side of the other.

17 See for this Pfaller 2016.

18 For a more extensive elaboration of the philosophical backgrounds of this, see Pfaller 1997, pp. 98ff.

postmodernist attitudes and even allegedly emancipatory theories. This tool is to be found in Althusser's concept of ideological misrecognition. Already in *Reading Capital*, Althusser has claimed that ideology always produces a "fullness" (French: "plein"<sup>19</sup>), not an absence, or void or lack.<sup>20</sup> If there happens to be something like a void, we therefore have to be prepared to find it covered up by a fullness. The existence of the void is overdetermined by its cover up. For the "lonely hour of the last instance" never comes, not even for voids. This has important consequences to the problem of human bondage or freedom. What Althusser, following Spinoza, claims here is the primacy of the appearance of oneness over the appearance of foreignness.

### 03 Appearance Of Oneness, Appearance Of Foreignness. Two opposed concepts of ideological misrecognition

"Hegel seems to me to be always wanting to say that things that look different are really the same. Whereas my interest is in showing that things which look the same are really different. I was thinking of using as a motto for my book a quotation from *King Lear*: 'I'll show you differences.' [laughing:] The remark, 'You'd be surprised' wouldn't be a bad motto either."

—Ludwig Wittgenstein (1948)<sup>21</sup>

Just like Ludwig Wittgenstein in the quotation above, Louis Althusser is a philosopher who aims at revealing significant differences. Following Lenin (as well as Bachelard) in this point, Louis Althusser has emphasized that philosophy has to draw "demarcation lines".<sup>22</sup> In the following, I want to show how an Althusserian demarcation line can be drawn against a large philosophical system whose matrix today – mostly

19 See Althusser [1965], p. 143.

20 See for example Althusser [1965], pp. 29f.: "A conceptual omission that has not been divulged, but on the contrary, consecrated as a non-omission, and proclaimed as a fullness, may, in certain circumstances, seriously hinder the development of a science or of certain of its branches."

21 Remark to M. O'C. Drury, 1948. Reported in Drury, *The Danger of Words & Writings on Wittgenstein* (1996), p. 157.

22 See Althusser 1990, p. 75. Gaston Bachelard uses the notion exactly in the same sense; see Bachelard 1953, p. 207.

unnoticed – determines most of the partisanship in the cultural sciences, cultural studies and gender studies, as well as in art. The underlying matrix here is that of a certain philosophical *idealism*, namely *theoretical humanism*. By drawing the demarcation line, I want to show the detrimental consequences of this apparently emancipatory matrix.

### 04 Humanist idealism: Kant

A classical formulation of humanist idealism stems from Immanuel Kant. It is found in his famous 1784 essay entitled 'Answer to the question: what is enlightenment?' In this notorious text Kant states,

"*Sapere Aude!* [dare to know] "Have courage to use your own understanding!"--that is the motto of enlightenment. Laziness and cowardice are the reasons why so great a proportion of men, long after nature has released them from alien guidance [...], nonetheless gladly remain in lifelong immaturity, and why it is so easy for others to establish themselves as their guardians." (Kant [1784], p. 53; English version)

In these few lines all the central concepts are to be found, in the exact order, that characterize the program of humanist idealism: *separation between what is natural and human, freedom, re-appropriation, re-recognition, one's own responsibility, independent thinking, passive endurance of heteronomy.*

With Kant this program begins with the differentiation between what is human and what is nature: humans are free as far as nature is concerned, (nature has 'released them from alien guidance'), but still they are not: therefore a lack of freedom is not something natural but artificial, induced by humans themselves.

That humans are free as far as nature is concerned, as Kant establishes, does not mean that freedom is something natural for Kant, but rather the contrary: because humans are different from nature, they are not subject to nature. *Freedom* is therefore (like bondage) not natural, but rather *something specifically human*. A split emerges in Kant that divides the world in a seemingly unalterable natural half on the one hand, and a human-historical part on the other.

This separation of the human from the rest of nature opens for Kant the whole problem of constructing a theory of ethical action from the concept of freedom: 'Which actions are free?', 'How must one act in order

to act freely?', 'How does one have to act, when one is free?' – these (not un-paradoxical) questions not only determine Kant's attempt at an answer with his formulation of the so-called 'categorical imperative', but all practical philosophy belonging to the *moral* genre.

From the difference between the natural and the human spheres results the extremely narrow framework that Kant stakes for the problem of bondage: *Humans only lack freedom, because they do not use the freedom given (or, rather: left) to them by nature.* No real heteronomy such as class relations is investigated; rather Kant shifts the problem and makes something else of it – something that each and everyone can and should solve alone for himself. A problem that at first sounded like history and politics (Enlightenment, Liberation) is surprisingly transformed, suddenly and without any causal argumentation into an individual, ahistorical moral (maturing, coming of age) project.

For Kant, lack of freedom is therefore due only to individual negligence. Freedom exists; one needs merely take it. Liberation is conceived of as a movement of re-appropriation. Humans should reclaim that aspect that makes them most human, which they have merely forgotten or left unaware. Connected to the problem of re-appropriation is that of re-recognition: Humans must re-recognize what is most human in themselves; they must recognize that for example it is not because of nature that they lack freedom but because of their own negligence. *What appears foreign to them needs to be seen as their own:* in this main striking feature – this animosity toward everything alien and the preference for one's own-ness – every theoretical humanism reveals its inherent idealism. This idealism cannot bear objects, property, matter; instead it only wants subjects and the fleeting, the processable, the subjective.<sup>23</sup> The decisive theoretical achievement as seen by this idealism is always provided when something that at first appears as 'object' can be made known as in truth something subjective through a theoretical operation. The outcome of this is the fundamental ideological, theoretical position of humanist idealism: Every illusion, every appearance is an *appearance of foreignness*.

If everything in truth belongs to oneself, then clearly at first, also the so foreign seeming heteronomy is in truth something that belongs to oneself – *one's own fault* for not being free: 'due to laziness and cowardice' humans have neglected to claim their freedom. Their whole heteronomy/subjugation is nothing but self inflicted. At this point in Kant there

23 .....  
At this point, philosophical idealism meets with the clinical image of narcissism. See for this Grunberger/Dessuant 1997; cf. Pfaller 2008, pp. 27ff.

is a peculiar consequence, to which all these kinds of philosophical enterprises resort: All philosophies that pronounce humans to be freer than they themselves are aware of come to the conclusion that these same humans are to blame for their misery.

In the end, idealism prescribes to the self inflicted immature the preferred remedy: thinking – independent thinking in fact, 'without alien guidance.' In contrast to the historical tendency of an increased division of labor and specialization, Kant declares books, ministers and doctors for expendable and replaceable by one's own intellectual efforts; he apparently sees enlightened progress moving in the direction of a kind of intellectual economy of self-sufficiency. In any case, thinking makes one free, and Kant seeks freedom primarily in thinking; he does not even consider any other field of action for freedom.

Under these circumstances, there is for Kant in the end only one answer to the question of the structure of human bondage: it consists of 'accomodativeness,' the *passive acceptance of heteronomy*. Bondage is here nothing but a lack of activity. However, as soon as people would become active and begin for example to think, then they would already begin to overcome their immaturity - and their bondage.

## 05 Anti-humanist materialism: Spinoza

A whole other concept, the materialism of a theoretical anti-humanism, is to be found in Benedict de Spinoza's 1677 posthumously published work 'Ethics according to a geometric method.' The decisive differences emerge in the following central points: *the unity of nature, happiness, misrecognition, rationalization, active struggle of the repressed for their repression.*

First, Spinoza emphasizes that there is only one nature. Humans are also part of it. However they like to delude themselves about this status, in that they imagine being something completely different – equal to an empire unto themselves within the empire of nature:

They appear to conceive man to be situated in nature as a kingdom within a kingdom... (Spinoza 1955, p. 128. English version: <http://home.earthlink.net/~tneff/index3.htm>)

However, the fact that everything is part of nature does not mean

that there is no freedom. There is just not a split with nature on one side and freedom on the other. Each thing in nature can – to differing degrees – be free: namely to the degree that this thing follows the necessity that lies within its own nature (and not a foreign one).

According to this unity of nature, it follows that the aim of Spinoza's philosophical thought is the question of happiness. While for Kant the theme of happiness only appears in the ignoble 'accommodativeness' of the immature and hence as the opposite of freedom,<sup>24</sup> for Spinoza happiness is identical with freedom (see Spinoza 1955, p. 244). One is happy and free when one pursues the necessities of one's *own* nature. The result of this position is a discipline of practical philosophy: *ethics*, which is a genre strictly distinguishable from *morals*. Ethics investigates the necessities of one's own nature. Because it inquires into the requirements of happiness, it is descriptive like medicine or schools of nutrition; there are no prescriptions that operate with imperatives as does morality, that inquire into the conditions of free, moral acts. The findings in ethics are dealt with within the contrasting pair 'good – bad;' morality in contrast operates between the values 'good – evil' (s. Deleuze 1988, p. 23).

In this connection happiness becomes a philosophical shibboleth: The idealistic philosophies see happiness in opposition to freedom, and as a consequence interest themselves only in freedom while forgetting happiness. In contrast Spinoza is able to understand freedom in unity with happiness. Since then therefore one can only call a philosophy materialistic if it makes happiness its watchword; as soon as freedom is placed in the foreground, this signals that happiness is conceived as an opposite and as something to be neglected.

In contrast to idealism, which places the concepts of re-appropriation and re-recognition at the center, Spinoza operates with the concept of the *imaginatio*, the misrecognition (or: over-recognition). The problem is not that humans do not recognize their own nature, but rather the opposite: *The problem is that they see much more to be their own nature than is actually the case.* They have the curious tendency to see themselves and their freedom in everything they do:

However, unless such persons had proved by experience that we do many things which we afterwards repent of, and again that we often, when assailed by contrary emotions, see the better and follow the worse,

24 Cf. also Kant's famous formula "Eigene Vollkommenheit - fremde Glückseligkeit" (Kant [1797], p. 515.

there would be nothing to prevent their believing that we are free in all things. Thus an infant believes that of its own free will it desires milk, an angry child believes that it freely desires vengeance, a timid child believes that it freely desires to run away; further, a drunken man believes that he utters from the free decision of his mind words which, when he is sober, he would willingly have withheld..." (Spinoza 1955, pp. 133-4)

Spinoza's theory is not a theory of re-appropriation. On the contrary: *What appears to humans to be their own nature, they must learn to acknowledge as foreign.* In fact they must in order to become free: because it is where they believe themselves to be free that they are not. Where they speak of freedom, they fail to recognize the cause of their actions and disguise this ignorance with 'words without meaning' (Spinoza, *ibid.*)<sup>25</sup>

Spinoza as does Kant knows the facts of a matter well, in which something appears as an object that in truth is of subjective nature. His complete theory of the 'knowledge of the first kind' deals with such phenomena.<sup>26</sup> When for example humans conceive themselves to be free, then the following structure is present: they do not perceive an objective fact, although they believe to, but instead only something subjective – namely the wish to be free. In this case, the appearance to be overcome is one of foreignness.

Yet for Spinoza it is decisive that a seemingly objective appearance always covers up a far more important subjective one. When something appears to humans to be an object although it is not, then at the same time they falsely ascribe their own subjectivity to something foreign or objective. There where people regard themselves to be free and take everything to be part of themselves, the theory has to do away with *the appearance of own-ness*, and must reveal to them the causes and forces of what is foreign or alien that are propelling their actions. People must be shown that they are not as free as they think they are.

*Thinking*, or independent thinking, is therefore for Spinoza not an unquestionable cure-all. Since especially when people conceal their heteronomy from themselves, they fall into a certain kind of thinking: they construct inadequate ideas such as their idea of freedom for example. Bondage takes place in subjects in none other than these covered up

25 Of course, this Spinozist notion of "words without meaning" is crucial for Althusser's epistemology as well as for his theory of (theoretical) ideology. "Words without concepts" and "answers without questions" have, according to Althusser, also blocked the development of Marxist theory (see Althusser [1965], pp. 27, 48).

26 See Spinoza 1955, p. 114

forms. Therefore, bondage is always "overdetermined". It never exists in its "naked", Kantian form of pure negligence and sheer lack of activity. On the contrary, it cannot exist but under the cover of an imaginary "fullness", provided by an over-activity of thinking. The cover-ups that thinking can provide thus are a determining factor for the lack of freedom. With this skepticism regarding autonomy and also the liberating power of thinking, Spinoza has outlined those thoughts that are summarized in Sigmund Freud's concept of 'rationalization.' By this operation, Freud states, we explain and justify our actions but are not conscious of their actual motives.<sup>27</sup>

Regarding the human lack of freedom, Spinoza arrives at an entirely different structural description from that of Kant. It is not only because of convenience and laziness that humans tolerate their subjugation. On the contrary: Spinoza recognizes that humans contribute actively to it; they "fight for their servitude as if for salvation".<sup>28</sup> Action is not always something liberating; activity can be a spontaneous contribution of the subjugated to their own repression.

## 06 'Construct yourself': re-appropriation today

In case this discussion appears to be a reassuring historical comparison, then one needs to be reminded that within the present culture one of the two described systems is powerfully effective: Almost all the social and cultural emancipation movements in the last decades stand under the massive dominance of humanist idealism. Most of the philosophical decisions and preferences were controlled by the idealistic matrix. Have we not again and again had to do with movements that assured us that something or other was not naturally but humanly caused, and that deduced the conclusion that humans are freer than they think – since everything made by humans can also be disposed of or at least 'deconstructed' by humans? Whether applied to conditions of class, sex, gender or some other 'construct': did one not operate in all these cases with reference to the human constructability of these circumstances? And with these references was not the hope of convertibility deduced? – But with what right? Can natural events not be changed? And are human con-

27 cf. Laplanche/Pontalis 1973, p. 418f.

28 Spinoza 1991, p. 51.

structs always so easy to eliminate?

As can easily be shown, there is nothing to justify the idealistic separation of the world into an unchangeable natural and a variable human substance: Humans can also change things that are not made by humans: they bring about ozone holes where before there were naturally none, and they bring about literacy where before there had been naturally illiteracy. On the other hand it is often very difficult to change things made by humans: for example cement anti-aircraft towers in residential areas are difficult to dispose of (since blowing them off would destroy most of the neighbourhood), and it is also difficult to do away with the illiteracy produced by television in humans who had already been able to read.

Instead of asking whether something is man made ('constructed') or not, it would be more appropriate to ask how much energy it takes for something to maintain its existence, and consequently how much energy it costs to remove it.<sup>29</sup> Decisive is not for example that social gender is a product of a historical construct. Much more important is the question, which occupied the first gender scientists such as Robert Stoller: Why is it easier for many people to change their natural sex than their social one? An operational change is often easier than a construct one. Today's common denotation, apparently found to be more politically correct, of *trans-sexual as transgender* belies this critical fact for the question of gender theory.

As Gianni Vattimo established, the paradigm of re-appropriation – the suspension of a merely declared appearance of foreignness in the 'truth' of own-ness – has controlled the whole course of modern philosophy, interrupted by only a few exceptions.<sup>30</sup> In a peculiar rarely questioned over-determination, this paradigm has also molded all of the emancipatory political movements in the last 40 years, particularly the post-modern. It was apparent in the students' neo-Marxism after 1968 in its critique of 'alienation;' in the alternative movement of 'self-fulfillment;' in feminism in the struggle against the 'object-status' of women and the 'fetishization' of the female body. And the idea that matter, and the other, could only make us unfree shaped the recent optimistic talk (even of Marxist theo-

29 Spinoza would have asked this question by saying, "How strong is the *conatus* of this thing, i. e. its *endeavour to persist in its being*?" (cf. Spinoza 1955: 137)

30 See Vattimo 1990, pp. 6, 28, 31.

rists!) about the apparent freedom and creativity of ‘immaterial work.’

However it is often rather clear and easy to see that emancipation and re-appropriation are not the same thing. For this reason many people in creative areas are prepared to work for very little money, when they are able to identify themselves to a high degree with their work. The struggle against alienation increases the readiness for self-exploitation; it is the perfect means of keeping wages at a minimum.

### 07 The fear of being an object

In a press announcement in the spring of 2006 about an art exhibit on alternative, non-Eurocentric access to Mozart, there was the following sentence:

There are those who write history, and those whom they write about, who enter historiography as mere objects.<sup>31</sup>

There is obviously a lot wrong with this sentence: Are those about whom history is written always ‘mere objects’? Or is it not often the most powerful? Those who ‘write history’ by their actions? Is it, then, better to be a subject? And is one a subject merely by writing?

Clearly this quote is not from a rigorous theoretical text, and one should not analyze too meticulously such a perhaps hastily written announcement by a non-theoretician. Nonetheless, the sentence is still interesting because it is symptomatic. It is in the press release because it is considered plausible; because it is expected to make sense to others (in particular, the supporting cultural politicians). And not unjustifiably – which says a lot about the philosophical leanings of today’s culture. The controlling philosophical matrix of humanist idealism engenders an enormous fear: *of being a mere object*. Driven by this fear people flee into activity, which however in fact rather serves their heteronomy more than its opposite. Subjectivity at any price; becoming a subject to the point of precarious self-exploitation is a typical cultural phenomenon of a neo-liberal economy.

31 <http://remappingmozart.mur.at/joomla>, accessed: 2006-08-04

The longing for subjectivization regularly leads to such reversals. So for example in the discussion of sexual harassment, which since the middle of the 80s has left its mark on many fields of society. This discourse is not just the countermovement and reaction to the previous, since the 60s flourishing discussion on sexual liberation. In fact already ‘sexual liberation’ relied on the principle of a romantic, subjective insistence on one’s own wishes and the effort to assert them vis-à-vis the existent social patterns. Exactly to the extent that one succeeded in asserting and liberating ‘sexuality’ from prevailing ‘alienating’ institutions and rules (like marriage, family, monogamous heterosexuality, etc.), sexuality itself then had to appear as an institution and outside convention – therefore as alienating and harassing. Exactly the romantic ego, that initially identified with its sexuality and experienced the rules of society regarding it as alien and fought them, in a next step then also experienced sexuality itself as something alien, societal and unsettling against which it had to defend itself. What was left over was a pure and totally subjective ego that could no longer tolerate anything alien. Indeed this pure subject had also lost every possibility for action; it was only victim. Also here there was a paradoxical reversal: *precisely the pure subject appealed to itself in the fantasy – apparently charged with pleasure anxiety – of being a passive thing*.

The countless discussions arising from victimization determined to a large extent the emancipation politics of the 90s. The discussion of victims played a very welcome and affirming role for neo-liberal politics: since with each victim one could effectively distract attention from an earlier one – and with all of them together even from the on-going massive re-distribution of societal wealth in favor of a small neo-liberal elite. In accordance to the compulsive innovative logic of their trade, a certain sector of the art world and its curators took on a leading role in the discovery of newer – and conveniently ever increasingly distant victims.

The curious sympathy for the weak is the consequence of forced subjectivism and the corresponding struggle against every form of ‘alienation.’ However this development means simultaneously the moralization and with it the depolitization of politics: because when weakness is not only weak but by being weak is also good, then everything strong – and therefore also each actual successful emancipation – will be bad or even evil. Those who value the weak above all else will always manage to make sure that they remain weak. The increasing awareness and obligingness of post-modern societies for all accusing forms of expression

of the weak, and the increasing spread of its resentment filled world view, is therefore seemingly not a sign of 'pluralistic' liberalization and emancipation, but rather a cheap way of placating; a cunning way to make sure that decisive processes in society remain undiscussed and untouched. If however one does not just want to tearfully lament but also wants to win, then one has to be prepared to develop strength, to demonstrate it, and to make sure that one's own initiative in the reality of society becomes material - and thus takes on an admittedly 'alien' appearance. If we really want to be free, then we must not be afraid of the fact that every real freedom will take on an objective form.

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# Celebrating Althusser's Legacy

# Fernanda Navarro

## Abstract:

My intention in this article is to stress the fact that Althusser's main work does not end with *Pour Marx* nor *Lire Le Capital*. There is a late Althusser, less known, but just as brilliant and provocative and indeed more visionary in his "Aleatory Materialism".

This is what I tried to stress, plus the fact that it is precisely this that makes him more actual today in 2015.

## Key words:

Crisis, Critique, "Materialism", aleatory, interstices.

1. Althusser's use of "*Crisis and Critique*" as key concepts
2. Meeting Althusser in the '80's
3. Aleatory Materialism
4. Althusser's influence and revival

"Crisis" and "Critique" are concepts that allow us to descend into the vast universe of language, in all its different fields. We acknowledge their value when we approach the diversity of meanings and interpretations that appear in most texts, philosophical, political as well as scientific. This can be said concerning many authors, but in Althusser's work it is more than evident.

Beginning with the concept of "crisis": any dictionary will explain it in the most obvious way regarding a dramatically negative circumstance, be it personal, social or political. As most of his readers know, our philosopher gave it a completely different, positive sense. A clear example was when he cried *Vive la crise!, en fin la crise!* at a time when most of the audience concerned was mourning. I am obviously referring to what was finally revealed, and had been kept silent, by the XXth Communist Party Congress in the Soviet Union.

At that time, Althusser considered the meaning of "crisis" not as chaos or death but as a catharsis, a possible *renaissance* or transformation.

Suddenly I ask myself, would he would now apply that same concept if he lived today, year 2015, but this time referring it to Capitalism? Could we imagine him saying "Vive la Crise"? Or would he rather discuss it with either Immanuel Wallerstein or Thomas Picketty in order to come closer to the 'true' forthcoming road that awaits us?

As far as "Critique" is concerned, all those who have studied the

history of philosophy know that there is a wide scope of meanings related to this concept, far beyond its common use where its sense tends to be negative: a criticism or fault that may be pointed out, in front of us or behind our backs. Kant is a clear example of a different use or meaning of the term. From his *Critique of Pure Reason*, to the *Critique of Judgment*, he uses it in the sense of setting up the basis or conditions for the possibility of any idea, concept or category .

Here again, Althusser has a different approach: more than simply using the word "critique" in his writings, he makes a practice of it. (as if reminding us Marx's emphasis on that same word 'practice' in the *XI Thesis on Feuerbach*). Thus, he practices the *critique*, even in such 'delicate' concepts as *Materialism*, for example, producing a different interpretation, closer to *criticism* . We can see that the late Althusser questions Marx's use of the term when he bluntly admits that the Materialism he himself is referring to "evades or avoids any *subject* (be it God or the proletariat)". It is then that he explains the "process without a subject... which determines the order of its development, without an assigned end".

Here is the foremost conclusion in his own words:

"This materialism is opposed, as a wholly different mode of thought, to the various materialisms on record, including that widely ascribed to Marx, Engels and Lenin, which, like every other materialism in the rationalist tradition, is a materialism of necessity and teleology, that is to say, a transformed, disguised form of idealism."<sup>1</sup>

And he adds:

"Precisely, in as much it represented a danger for the philosophical tradition, it made a deviation interpreting it as an *idealism of freedom*"<sup>2</sup>

Here we have a clear example with regard to Althusser's **critical** use of language, claiming other forms of representing or interpreting a concept (in this case, that of *Materialism...*) *quite distinct in the* history of philosophy.

The consequences of the above are profound, reaching its height in the paradox explicit in Althusser's Conference in the University of Granada, Spain in 1976. There he points out that Marx considered that in order to elaborate a philosophy as such - even in opposition to it - leads one to play the enemy's game and contribute to the dominant bourgeois

.....  
1 Althusser 2006, p.167-8

2 Ibid.

ideology... thus falling on the side of the State. It is well known what the State meant to Marx and why, in the end, he teleologically mentions the non-State.

Referring to Jacques Bidet's research work in *Que faire du Capital? Althusser* tells us that

"Marx in fact never wholly freed himself of Hegel, even if he shifted to another terrain, that of science, and founded historical materialism on it."<sup>3</sup>

When I asked Althusser whether this rupture was total, complete, he answered: "No, it only marked a tendency ... we are faced with a new task: that of determining the type of philosophy which best corresponds to what Marx wrote in *Capital*. Whatever it turns out to be, it will not be a 'Marxist philosophy'....it will be a philosophy for Marxism."<sup>4</sup> It is on this quest that Althusser embarked, and he set for himself the daring task of elaborating *Aleatory Materialism* in the last period of his life, as an answer to that "philosophy for Marxism" (which we shall develop later on).

### **My aleatory Encounter with Althusser**

I had the pleasure of meeting Althusser at a timereferred to as "between his two deaths" (1980-90), when his name passed from a myth to a mystery... yet later on, many had to acknowledge that he kept reflecting and rethinking, questioning and writing in this period which, in spite of undoubted suffering, was also rich in new ideas and conceptions. There were even those who regarded this last period as a turning point in his philosophical writings.

Along these lines, I would like to include a few of these new ideas and conceptions, since I had the unexpected opportunity to go over his papers and manuscripts directly from his desk, whose photocopies I still keep, due to his generosity.

It was a rainy day when he showed me an antique wooden armoire (closet) where he kept manuscripts (many of them unedited!) and said: see if there is anything you find interesting. I couldn't believe my eyes. It was then that the idea of elaborating a book came to my mind... it was

.....  
3 Ibid., p.257

4 Ibid., p.258

too rich a gift to keep to myself. That was the origin of the book-interview, now translated into 5 languages... written by two hands (with correspondence during 2 years, across the Atlantic) starting in 1984 in Paris, - including photos and recorded interviews - and then again in 1987. II along, we kept the mailman busy, as the French, Spanish and Italian translations show.

What did I find there? First, the astonishing, dreadful dream of 1964 where he wrote that which he actually committed 16 years later. The difference was the person addressed: instead of his mother (in the dream/letter) it was Helene, his wife, in real life. In reading it, I wondered how, if and when would be the right moment to show him that dream. I finally chose the day he visited Dr. Dyatkine, the psychoanalyst he visited every week. After reading it, he calmly told me: "It is undoubtedly me who wrote it, but I had completely blocked it out of my mind." A few minutes later he asked me if I would go with him to the doctor's appointment. We took a taxi near his *new* apartment house, in a *new* district, far from the Ecole Normale Supérieure, under a *new* name at the building's entrance: M. Berger (his grandfather's name). We came back and calmly had lunch. (Later, in my book, in a part of our correspondence, he thanks me for keeping him company that very day).

With regard to his whole work, it was not until after his death that his famous "L'avenir dure longtemps" (The Future Lasts Forever) was published, revealing the whole tragedy with exceptional honesty. (As many close friends knew, he suffered from mania/depression since his residence in a German prison camp during World War II, a fact that explains the tragedy).

Going back to the indescribable surprises that awaited me in his armoire, I found a philosophical novel where he welcomed a number of famous philosophers of different centuries and traditions to discussions in a great party, reminding the reader of Plato's "Banquet". Also, there were long pages dealing with information unknown until after his death, when it was published under the title of "Stalag" (the above mentioned prisoner's camp in Germany where he was kept for 5 years!)

But definitely, the one that thrilled me the most was that on Epicurus and his worlds, written in 1982, which came to be known somewhat later as *Aleatory Materialism*, where he gathers the materialist tradition barely acknowledged by the history of philosophy in the Western world.

Here I want to include a few words of another contemporary French philosopher, Clément Rosset, because I feel he somehow shares the above line of thought, stressing the aleatory, **hazard**:

"The History of Western Philosophy opens up with an announcement of mourning, of sorrow, due to the elimination of notions such as **hazard, disorder and chaos...**

From then on, a common philosophical program was set up searching to reveal an order and manage the apparent disorder to allow the emergence of constant and intelligible relations, with the purpose offering humanity a greater "well being" compared to the negative effects of blindly walking without any intelligibility.

In spite of the strength of this predominant logical current in search of order, wisdom and reason...as well as progress: experts in "logic of reparation" who have erased **hazard** from the horizon of philosophical conscience, there have been -nonetheless- thinkers who have remained apart, assigning themselves the opposite task...they are the tragic philosophers whose desire has been to dissolve the apparent order so as to find the chaos and **hazard**, buried by the logocentric rationality engaged in preserving the relative permanence of a certain order that assures the illusionary fixed stability of a *certain being*. "<sup>5</sup>

After this parenthesis which I found interesting to include, we may come back to my frequent visits to our "Maitre à penser". One of the simple questions I remember asking was related to what he considered as the best way to teach philosophy to young students, like my own. His answer was: "philosophy cannot be taught, only practiced...just like swimming". Months later, I couldn't believe that this *encounter*, deeper in dialogues every day, would end up in a long interview finally edited as a book (the last one published during his life-time). Thus, I indeed learned that life is full of surprises thanks to **hazardous** or aleatory *évenements!*

The questions continued. I asked him how he explained the fact that among the authors he mentioned as having influenced him there was not one Marxist thinker. I was referring, of course, to Foucault, Lacan, Bachelard, Canguilhem and Cavailles.

His reply came quickly: "It is simply because what has been done with philosophy in the USSR in recent decades is absolutely crashing, appalling. The poverty of theoretical concepts held by Socialist Realism and Dialectical Materialism simply proves the surrender of intelligence, whereas the authors to whom I refer to not only allow us to think but also open new ways of thinking, new paths. We must remember, he added, that

what is important is not the object of reflection but the *mode* of reflection"

Jumping to his last writings, we may now consider directly *Aleatory Materialism* as a possible *philosophy FOR Marxism*. Following his own description, he continues the line of Epicurus who escapes Democritus' determinism based on the parallel fall of atoms in a void. Epicurus, instead, proposes the aleatory deviation of the atoms to the point of making the encounter with another atom possible in their fall... and these kinds of encounters *give birth to a world*. This aleatory deviation has serious implications: among them that the origin of the world was no First Cause nor Reason. Without the *clinamen* the atoms would not be more than isolated and abstract elements, without any existence nor consistency.

But once provided with existence, the world is constituted by the main entities: atoms and void (vacuum). This turns out to be a philosophy based on categories such as being and not-being, void, limit, nothingness, relativity and freedom. Consequently, it announces the elimination of all pre-established finality (teleology), be it rational, ethical, political or aesthetic; thus manifesting its aleatory character.

A most important issue I want to point out is that it is precisely there where the so called *Interstices*, or open spaces appear (to which we will come back later).

In this same line of thought, Althusser included all of the materialist tradition which was barely acknowledged in the official history of philosophy. All those rare, non-apologetic thinkers who were able to avoid being caught in such dichotomies as materialism-idealism and who claimed no First Cause, no Sense, no Reason (Logos), no End.

He added that this materialism does not call for any subject but rather proposes a process **without** a subject, referring to Machiavelli, Hobbes, Rousseau, Marx, Nietzsche and Heidegger and to their respective categories: limit, margin, void, lack of center and freedom. *Aleatory Materialism* is thus a Materialism of chance, of contingency, **not** in the sense of an absence of necessity but in the sense of necessity conceived as a **devenir**, a **becoming** necessary for contingent encounters.

In this view, Materialism needs not conform to any idea of a system in order to be considered a philosophy, because what constitutes a philosophy as such is not its justification in discourse or demonstration, but the position for which it stands in the philosophical battlefield, as Kant's "Kampfplatz" implied.

For our author, *Aleatory Materialism* represents the highest point of Materialism because of the compelling impulse it has to open the world

to the event, "l'événement", to all living practices, including politics...in an unpredictable way, modifying all fixed premises and data. Here, among other examples, he referred to Wittgenstein's proposition: "the world is alles was das fall ist" (the world is everything that takes place, or is the case" in B. Russell's translation)...an astonishing proposition because - as Althusser agrees - there exists nothing but cases, particular situations, singular things in the world that simply fall over us, in spite of us, without any notice, and each of them has a proper name.

### **Althusser's influence in Latin America (1965-1977)**

Many of us - philosophy teachers and students - in this part of the American Continent have concluded that, after this period, it was impossible to approach Marx or to conceive Marxism in a pre-Althusserian manner. In other words, one cannot read Marx without considering Althusser's theses, regardless of one's own position for or against them. The simple fact was that Althusser could not be ignored. Was this due to the clever way in which he updated Marxism, introducing linguistics, epistemology and psychoanalysis in order to rethink Marx? Or was it due to his project *Returning to Marx* which left out all litany and dogmatism, proving that he was an unusual thinker capable of questioning western rationalism as well as its dominating structures? Or was it thanks to the ethical stature of a man engaged with his own time, searching to inaugurate new possibilities for a different society and a different consciousness? Hard to say! The fact is he provoked passionate, polemic discussions that went beyond the normal academic tone reserved for philosophers, from Mexico to Argentina, where his writings were studied intensively from 1967 to 1978... not to speak about his recent revival (2015) in many countries.

### **Another unexpected influence of the late Althusser, in Mexico: the *Interstices*. (1994-2015 still in action) What are the *Interstices*?**

The *Interstices* refer to the popular movements and struggles of marginalized, oppressed people that have emerged all over the world, such as the pacifist, ecological, feminist, gay, lesbian, student, Indian and immigrant movements. Together, they bring new ways of functioning and organizing without dominating structures.

These movements, Althusser added, have followed the line of Rosa Luxemburg rather than that of Lenin. Our philosopher was convinced of their priority, as opposed to those with rigid, vertical structures like those adopted by political parties, making the practice of democracy difficult, if not impossible. I would like to quote our author more closely, from the notes I still keep from that time, 30 years ago! Among them I found the following, of which I only will quote a few lines:

"Everything in this world is in a constant, unpredictable flow. If we want to give an image of it we must go back to Heraclitus or Epicurus. Yet if we want to give a more recent image of it we must follow Deleuze in order to avoid Descartes's hierarchical representation of the world as a tree but rather as a rhizome: Deleuze's horizontal root. Yet I still prefer Marx's image: 'the gods exist in the *interstices* of the world of Epicurus. In the same way that mercantile relations existed already in the interstices of the slave world"

Althusser adds something more: "the proletariat is found in the margins of the bourgeois society. The question now is to place the margins in the center".

The difficulty **today** is the dispersion and lack of connection of these multiple alternative movements, or *interstices*. He goes on making a last, unexpected recommendation, that I consider a visionary approach:

"In order to open these *interstices* that announce a more just society, we must learn -from and with the people- a language in which they may recognize themselves...thus ending up in a new conception of a real materialist and aleatory history"

He summed it up precisely:

"In order to change the world, from its basis, we must think differently, speak differently, in order to act differently and conceive the horizon of our actions in a different manner, in order to reach and propose a different conception of history: materialist and aleatory".

This is an obvious refusal to today's official political practices, so degenerated and sealed by corruption and violence. How to overcome this? **Organization** was and still is the key word.

In his *Theses de Juin* (of which I keep a copy), still unedited during his life-time, he made the following brilliant assertions: "To think of an International Liberation Movement would be utopian. The most we can conceive of is an International Center of Ideological Convergence for Liberation, capable of unifying alternative and revolutionary movements that are appearing everywhere, searching a new strategy and new practices and principles as well as communitarian forms with transversal relations. A Center of Information without the pretention of **Directing or Taking Decisions** since this belongs to the militants of each region or country. In short, a **Center of/for Encounters** where interchanging (sharing) ideas, positions and experiences may take place. **This**, he said, showing his visionary approach, **will first come true in the Third World countries"**.

He considered this a possibility of a real materialist and aleatory history.

**A new way of thinking in action caught our attention in my country, Mexico, in 1994 (after 10 clandestine years).**

We all remember the date of Althusser's death: 1990, 4 years before this Mexican *interstice* was publicly known, showing a clear alternative way of organizing - expressing total refusal to integrate to the capitalist values and ways of life: The Zapatista Movement is its name, the southern State of Chiapas its place.

**The link between the Zapatista Movement and Althusser: An identity and a philosopher's name revealed:**

In February 1995, Subcomandante Insurgente **Marcos**, one of the leading figures of this Movement, the only mestizo, (not 100% Indian) was assigned "to be the voice", rather than lead, of the Zapatista National Liberation Army (EZLN). He turned out to be an Althusserian Philosopher. From then on, he became known as a brilliant thinker and writer.

How was his identity discovered? When a huge mobilization was geared up to apprehend him through the press and TV, where Marcos's double picture appeared, with and without the ski mask, as "Wanted". But what was astonishing for us was the end of the clipping: "*Rafael Sebastian Guillen* (his supposed name): *An Althusserian Philosopher.*" He had actually studied philosophy at the National Autonomous University of Mexico

and the thesis he graduated with was on Althusser's *Ideological State Apparatus*.

The geography turns out to be meaningful as well: Chiapas is inhabited by the millenarian Mayan culture which is known for having discovered (with high achievements in) Mathematics and Astronomy. Up to our day, their cultural heritage is known and felt in various ways, especially in their sense of community whose horizontal structures produce far more human relations and practices than our so-called western "civilization" today.

Another philosophical difference concerns Monism versus Pluralism. They originally rejected Monism even in religion. Before the Spanish Conquest they believed in a plurality of gods, not in a single true God; afterwards, monism was to be imposed by the cross and the sword.

Another interesting difference is their language structure, quite distinct from ours whose origin is to be found in the Greek-Latin tradition. What marks the difference? The fact that in their grammar there are only subjects, and no objects at all. Why? Because for them *everything is alive*. Not only human beings but also animals and vegetation. This entails important consequences that go beyond an Anthropocentric conception, reaching a Biocentrism.

This is reflected in their respectful relationship with Nature, another trait which leaves our Western civilization far behind. They have a completely different conception of nature, considering it their Mother Earth, and leaving out private property entirely! They work it collectively. This has been a source of conflict with Mexican authorities since 1994; following their tradition, it is impossible to think of selling or buying land. "The land (territory, earth) does not belong to us, we belong to it" they say.

Another difference, regarding their language, is that there exist no antagonistic dichotomies such as body-soul, good-bad, black-white, conqueror-vanquished (this they learned after the Conquest).

In as far as their self-government is concerned, there are 2 key concepts that explain it: **Autonomy and Territory**. The last one has been the hardest to achieve and is still the cause of constant aggressions from the government, through paramilitary groups, etc.

What turns out to be outstanding is that in spite of the constant above-mentioned aggressions, they have been able to cope, showing great courage and **organization** in building an autonomous education system, health services, self-government with inherent gender equality

and more recently, agrobiology.

They have finally established themselves in 5 different zones in the state of Chiapas, with collective self-governments in each one (including women) and each must follow their 3 main principles, after being elected by the community: 1) rotativity 2) revocability and 3) transparent declaration of their deeds, duties and expenses.

But there is still a higher level of authority: the Assembly. Again a blunt pluralism versus a personal authority: be it President, King, Patriarch or Messiah, quite a lesson for our actual governments around the *civilized* world!

I couldn't end this paper without touching one key concept that stands out in the Zapatistas' way of thinking and acting: the reformulation/resignification of the concept of **Power**. What did they mean when, in 1994 they took up arms and at the same time made it clear that their aim was not to seize power, a statement that inflamed political parties both from the Left as well as from the Right? "What on earth can one do without Power? they asked? the Zapatistas silently responded "Anything different from Barbarism, per chance"?

At the same time this position evoked the admiration of many who are looking beyond the traditional political spectrum. They understood it meant a different way of relating to power. Marcos, among other things, said that "the only virtue of Power is that, in the end, it inevitably produces a revolution against itself".

History has taught us that even in the outstanding cases when tyranny or dictatorships were overthrown by revolutionary liberating forces, disillusionment sooner or later followed when we witness that the basic principles of justice and freedom, which led the struggle, begin to decay. It is as if there were some dominating traits inherent to Power itself which gradually end up in a repetition or reproduction of the rigid, arbitrary government dominating structures which were overthrown. Not to speak of the price it meant for the people (always anonymous) who gave their lives in vain! We can name a few cases in Central America during the last decades: Nicaragua comes to my mind.

Marcos also said "our people taught us that it was not a matter of substituting one domination with another domination; that we should convince, not conquer by vanquishing and crashing"...in order to reach a real transformation.

Another reason for choosing a different road and saying no to the seizure of Power is that it is incompatible with real Democracy (not only in electoral terms), because Power implies domination, hierarchy, authority, and imposition, and is unable to listen to others. The Zapatistas consider and practice other kinds of Democracy, not only our representative electoral one, but the participative and communitarian one, where the word "we" stands out over the word "I". "Our democracy does not fit in the ballots" they declared, after deciding to do everything in and through their Assemblies where everyone has the right and obligation to speak and be heard.

This was when they revealed a peculiar ancestral slogan: *Mandar Obedeciendo*: "Govern by obeying": meaning that whoever is elected to be an authority (never a single person but collectively) must obey the needs, claims and suggestions of the people being led. The authorities receive no payment, and when their period is over, they go back to their usual activity in the community.

After having been with them in several visits year after year since 1994 I can attest to the fact that, after 20 years, the Zapatista Movement has proved to be one of the most vital, successful and exemplary *interstices* up to now; and this is the reason for which I wanted to address it in this chapter, knowing that it is barely known abroad mainly due to the State's manipulation of the mass media, since this Movement represents everything the powerful ones want to destroy. Many times they have tried to. But due to the strong determination and **organization** as well as the values they have built in their autonomous self-governments, they have resisted, giving hope to many Mexicans and all those who have visited them from abroad, in their creative, original Forums, Meetings and Congresses when they have received thousands of people from the five Continents, who after visiting them, enthusiastically have organized solidarity committees in their own home-towns or cities, including some in U.S.A. Just to mention a few examples: from the very beginning there was a group of students from Texas that came to help build the first Secondary school (Junior High) in a Zapatista community: Oventic. It was highly rewarding to see how language was not a barrier between the two groups: North Americans and Mexican-Indians, working, laughing, playing and sharing meals together! The same happened with people from Greece, Spain, France and Italy, this last country rendering an incredible "gift": electricity for a whole community called La Realidad, as well as a

doctor who has been in a hospital for over 17 years, teaching them scientific medicine (even surgery) in combination with their natural, herbal practice. I could mention other valuable cases, free from all government support since they decided to never again receive a single penny, or "charity", from the Mexican State. They are well known for being proud of their dignity.

Today, twenty years after their ¡Ya Basta! (Enough!) on January 1°, 1994, when they took arms for only 12 days, dialogue continues to be their strongest weapon. There still remain many active solidarity committees in several countries that keep coming to their events in Chiapas and beyond. For example, on June 20th, 2015, a "Journée Zapatiste" was organized by Paris VIII University, to which I was invited. In spite of our government's interests in wiping the Zapatistas off of our map, they haven't been able to do it. This, however, has not stopped the governing class from continuous aggressions towards the recuperated territories, without which Zapatistas could not be Autonomous; Autonomy being the key to building new human relations and values and to make their famous slogan true: "We want to build a world that holds (includes) many worlds"...showing that in spite of being a marginal movement, it is based on universal grounds and values and has been successful in influencing other movements such as the *Altermundistas* in Seattle, (1999) up to the *Indignados* all over the globe in 2011, including Occupy Wall Street in New York and beyond...not to speak of the native groups in Latin America: Bolivia, Ecuador, Paraguay and elsewhere throughout the globe.

The Zapatistas have influenced people far beyond the scope of the Left: mainly the non-organized, non-militants in political parties: common citizens and intellectuals fed up with traditional politics. This is new. With great creativity and imagination they have organized all kinds of meetings. One of the last ones took place in 2013/14 called "La Escuelita de la Libertad, según los zapatistas" (The School of freedom, according to the zapatistas). It gathered altogether 5,200 people from five continents. They generously opened up their poor houses for us to share a whole week, day and night, living and working as they do in the fields and their schools, far from any luxury, but satisfying their basic needs with great dignity. My 27 students and I were astonished by their authenticity, and the brotherhood they practice among themselves - as part of their Mayan heritage, that stresses the capacity **to listen** to others.

Let me now quote the Zapatistas at the height of a most inhuman experience that happened just last year in May 2014, when armed persons

- paid by the local and federal governments - killed a teacher/guide of the "Escuelita de la Libertad".

In spite of this injustice they answered back with another lesson. Far from answering the provocation of those in Power, they kept an unexpected, disciplined attitude, saying:

**"We don't want vengeance, we want justice".**

This sentence is more than meaningful today in my country where all politicians, regardless of belonging to the left or to the right, have shown the greatest degradation of the governing class in general, acting with an incredible impunity, corruption and violence.

This New Year, hundreds of us celebrated with the Zapatistas the *First International Festival of Resistance and Rebellion against Capitalism* gathering an ever greater number of people along the lengthy road leading to the southern part of the country before reaching Chiapas. This included a great number of Indian groups with millenarian heritage as well, from many far-away corners of the country, willing to gather and take common, peaceful steps in following the Zapatistas' influence in their path towards liberation.

The conclusion being that to a considerable part of our population, this **interstice** has become a contagious alternative that provides us with some hope and oxygen...not only rage!

This brings us back to Althusser himself when he said: "These organized minorities or *interstices* that give place to 'possibility' as a category, coexist already at a micro-scale and are working on an alternative platform seeking a different kind of politics that may allow a different kind of human practice and human relations, one sharing a common goal: to build a more just society, free from ideological manipulation, misery and oppression".

He concluded that the interstices should be not centralized, but local, not international, but regional. They should find their unity in objective, intersecting lines, by communitarian forms with transversal relations.

Reaching this final step, I ask: couldn't we conclude that he would agree with this approach if he had lived to see it? Knowing there is no possible answer to it, I go back to my first pages, following this daring line of thought in order to close the circle.

Considering what I have stressed above and given his visionary

approach, couldn't we have enough grounds and arguments to announce a different **crisis** today, in order to repeat with Althusser **"Vive la Crise! - this time regarding Capitalism,** (accepting the meaning of chaos and catastrophe since Capitalism still prevails) but also considering another, positive meaning which favors new revival given that the fact that multiple *interstices* have emerged intertwined within the Capitalist/Neoliberal stage?

How? Through an all-embracing glimpse of the *interstices* or open spaces in widespread geographies all over the globe, who are gradually and silently strengthening their **organization**. How? By opening up consciences in the hope they will gradually extend themselves imperceptibly like Deleuze's rhizome and fulfill Althusser's recommendation of non-centralized forms.

In closing, we can agree with Derrida's words at Althusser's funeral:

"His work is, in the first place, great by what it attests to and by what it risks."<sup>6</sup>

What he never knew was how far -in those widespread geographies along the globe- his ideas would land and start to bloom.

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6 Derrida 1993, p.243

# The Interpellated Subject: Beyond Althusser and Butler

## Jacques Bidet

### **Abstract:**

According to the theory of "interpelation", capitalism brings forth a "subject form": a subject who, assuming his subjection, takes on its guilt. Through this "linguistic turn" within marxism, Althusser endowed social structure with speech. But how could social relations "interpelate"? Through which voice does it make itself heard? And what sort of guilt could be at stake here? The meta/structural approach can take on this program of research, whereas Althusser's classical Marxism lacked the means. It thinks class relations through two class factors, namely, the market and the organization, instrumentalists in capitalism at the two poles of the dominant class. These are the two rational mediations underlying the immediacy of modern discursivity, shared by everyone in an amphibiological interpelation. The same demand - freedom and equality! - is made by the powerful and the people-multitude. This is the metastructure, the posed-presupposition of the structure within which class struggle is already articulated - one voice common in the "differend". Modern society carries within itself the principle of its self-critique, charged with guilt and peril. But the guilt of the modern is not that of breaking the law, but of bowing to it to comply. This supposition underlies all emancipatory speech.

### **Key words:**

Althusser, Butler, interpelation, subjection, culpability, metastructure, linguistic turn, "differend", subject, Marxism

Today the question of a "subject form" generated by capitalism arises again in anthropological and political debate. Althusser has provided a famous formulation of it in terms of "interpellation." Here I suggest radically reinterpreting this interpretation and redeploying it on a more realistic socio-political register, in terms of what I designate as the "metastructural" approach of modern society.

In a 1969 manuscript, partially published in 1970, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses," Althusser defined ideology as "the interpellation of the individual as a subject." He set the stage for the paradox of a subject constituted as such through the injunction to conform to a law. A subject is only a subject at the cost of its voluntary submission. This is, in fact, a true paradox. Especially if we add that the consciousness that recognizes the law thereby recognizes itself as guilty.

Some time ago, Judith Butler revisited this famous fragment.<sup>1</sup> She connects the three questions thus posed – “Who interpellates?” “What subject is thus constituted?” “What guilt?” – to a figure, a “trope,” whose paths and detours she analyzes from Hegel to Foucault, by way of Nietzsche and Freud. In accordance with Althusser’s analysis, she emphasizes that the capitalist order calls on definite social practices that the subject, after its formation, winds up “mastering,” but in this mastery its own subjection is realized. To injunction responds obedience, which is also an admission of guilt. This is how the interpellated “turns against himself or herself.” But it is from such a reversal that he or she proceeds as a subject.

These three questions are inseparably linked: the nature of the fault is clarified only provided that we know who is speaking, to whom, and in what way, or by what means. They belong to the same decipherment, which I presume here has not yet been completed. *It remains especially to understand how “social relations” can “interpellate,” what voice can make itself heard, and what kind of guilt is involved.* This will, therefore, be the object of my investigation.

It seems to me that the difficulty lies in, among others, the double register of Althusser’s discourse. The anthropological, “generic” register is indeed a question of *the* subject as such and its constitution in the social language game. The “specific” register, that of so-called capitalist social relations, is also a question of a subject defined historically, emerging in the conditions of a particular social structure, with the particular practices it implies. To link generic and specific is the challenge assumed by the historical materialist investigation opened up by Marx (and reclaimed by Althusser), which thinks about history by means of “periods,” and by successive revolutions, rather than by evolution. However, these two registers refer to two distinct theoretical tasks. One of them is based on interrogating this text about the general lesson it promises: this is what Butler does, whose analysis concerns, primarily at least, the “eternity” of interpellation, in the sense in which Althusser says that it has to do with the unconscious. But another theoretical task is no less based on reconsidering this text in the register of the historical specificity presupposed. What then of the relationship between historical variation and the presupposed invariant, the eternal of a “human nature”? Between what changes and what does not change? Or, in Althusser’s words, between “what can no longer last” and what “will last a long time”?

1 .....  
Butler 1997. See Chapter 4

## 1. Domination in terms of “Ideological State Apparatuses” *Althusser intends to provide Marxism with “the theory it lacks”*

“Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses,” published in the form of an article in 1970 in *La Pensée*, is extracted from a long manuscript dated 1969, originally intended for the collection *Théorie*, and explicitly devoted to the “capitalist relations of production.”<sup>2</sup> The envisaged work embraces the various ideologies (familial, union, political, cultural, etc.) that appear in this context and the “apparatuses” by means of which the latter materially exist. The author argues that the “reproduction” of capitalist social relations depends on the academic Ideological State Apparatus and that the “functioning” of these relations depends on legal-moral ideology. The fragment published in 1970 takes up what is essential to the manuscript’s final chapter – Chapter 12, “On Ideology” – which it broadens and generalizes, enabling us to pass from the specific to the generic. The transition that links Chapter 11, “The Legal Ideological State Apparatus” to Chapter 12, “On Ideology” is unambiguous: “Now that we believe we have succeeded in defining ‘law’ as an Ideological State Apparatus that fulfills an absolutely *specific* function in capitalist social formations ... we can and must say a few words about ideology *in general*” (pp. 169-70, my emphasis). Althusser specifies that what he has in mind concerns all “class societies” (p. 176).

It is remarkable that this context – that of a manuscript devoted to analyzing processes that are presumed to be specific to capitalism – had been systematically ignored, strictly repressed, by the supposed spiritual inheritors of Althusser. It is significant that this “1970 manuscript,” published twenty-five years later, only appeared in the English language<sup>3</sup> nineteen years after the French edition – in a cultural environment in which Althusserian “interpellation” had, however, encountered great success. A good generation had to pass for this writing to resurface. To connect this fragment to the totality it came from was doubtless naturally to blur the father’s original image. Indeed, we could not underestimate the

2 .....  
Published in 1995 by Presses Universitaires de France under my editorship, with the title *Sur la Reproduction*. The pages cited refer to the second edition, 2010, with a preface by Étienne Balibar. The double references, marked //, refer to the two versions of this text: the version of Chapter 12 and the version that appeared in *La Pensée*, as it is reproduced in Appendix 2 in *On the Reproduction of Capitalism*, pp. 232-72.

3 Althusser 2014.

wide gap between the convocation of authorities as legitimate as Freud, Pascal, or Spinoza, intervening in the final chapter, and the reference, throughout the manuscript, supported by “Marxist-Leninist philosophy,” tied to “Marxist-Leninist science” (p. 181), and so on. There is every reason to be surprised by the emphasis and constancy with which Althusser declares his attachment to the “party of the vanguard of the proletariat” (p. 134). Up to the improbable.<sup>4</sup> It is tempting to put this accumulation of rather hyperbolic professions of faith down to a passing exaltation.<sup>5</sup> In any event, it is clear that Althusser, here as already in “Freud and Lacan,” published in 1964, aims to intervene on the political orientation of his party from within, choosing for this its most representative academic publication. He follows a certain “party” style, marked above all in the manuscript (even so, let us note that it could have been corrected and that it was not finally published by its author). However, we shall neglect this particular relation to the “party” to which he demonstrates his loyalty. And we shall stick to the other side of his remarks: to the much less orthodox ambition, clearly displayed in the text, of providing Marxism with the “theory” it lacks. For it is a question of nothing less than passing “from a ‘descriptive theory’ of law to the threshold of a proper theory of law” (p. 166). Therefore, what theoretical innovation does this intervention claim, considered in the totality of its manuscript redaction?

It is a common trait of philosopher-commentators on Marx to turn, as if by professional instinct, toward the “generic” register – whether it is a question of labor, of production, or ideology – and to consider that the “specific” is outside of their field of responsibility. It remains that general theorization supposedly comes in response to questions that are posed in the various historically particular configurations which could well, as an indirect consequence, interfere in the proposed generic concept – “ideology,” as it happens. Here we shall risk going back to the examination of this text by inquiring into the conditions in which are linked the moments of the “specific” and the “generic” in a materialist theory of “ideo-

4 “Here we shall be advancing cautiously on a terrain on which Marx, Lenin, Stalin and Mao have long since preceded us, but without systematizing, in theoretical form, the decisive progress that their experiences and procedures implied. Why? Because these experiences and procedures were restricted in the main to the terrain of political practice” (p. 74). “Stalin neglected these questions” (p. 92). To what unlikely reader is this manuscript addressed? Who among the subscribers to *La Pensée*, for example, still referred to Stalin in 1970?

5 One can also link up discourses by Deleuze and Foucault, who at the same time were enthusiasts of “proletarian revolution” (Deleuze and Foucault 2004). Another allegiance, a similar profession of faith.

logical interpellation.”

### ***Althusser’s initial ambiguity: power as domination***

In contrast with a rather perfunctory “Marxism,” Althusser reveals that the domination of the capitalist class is not only to be understood on the basis of the repressive capabilities conferred by private property of the large-scale means of production, but that it is just as much to be found in the complex ideological fabric of juridical, political, cultural institutions, and so on, through which bourgeois power is realized, as Gramsci had insisted. The concept of the State Apparatus, of Leninist origin, allows the state in the Marxist sense of the term to be identified, that is, as a class relation – in contrast with the standard pair state/civil Society – that is to say, state power as class power, and not only as the power of the public institution over individuals taken in their private relationships. Althusser thus counts among the actors of this realization that marked the “1968 generation”: all large-scale institutions of society take part in domination and class struggle.

He certainly intends to be careful not to turn the state into “a mere instrument of domination and repression in the service of objectives, that is, of the dominant class’s *conscious will*” (p. 72). And that is why even his problematic of ideology, understood as the *other* factor of hegemony, tends to be: “Ideological State Apparatuses” versus “Repressive State Apparatuses.” All the same, on this terrain he engages with the terminology of “Ideological State Apparatuses,” in an uncertain metaphorical register. He is certainly right to call for considering the specific “materiality” of the institutional devices of class, their ability to reproduce themselves, their compulsive rituals, and so on. But although Gramsci showed that these institutions, constitutive of what he calls “civil society,” are instances of confrontation *between* classes, the notion of “State Apparatus,” which designates them for Althusser, reintroduces an abruptly asymmetrical concept, that of the instrument of power of one class over another.

It is not a question here only of a defective connotation of the metaphor. For the latter actually responds to his conception of “power.” The power of the dominant class is to be understood, he writes, as the “excess” of its force in relation to that of the dominated class. “For class domination does indeed find itself sanctioned in and by the state, in that *only the Force of the dominant class enters into it and is recognized there.*

What is more, this Force is the sole ‘motor’ of the state, the only energy to be transformed into power, right, laws and norms in the state.”<sup>6</sup>With Foucault, we could object that power is nothing without the resistance opposed to it. Althusser would doubtless agree, for he holds that, despite power from above, class struggle from below doesn’t cease, and he surely depicts that it has an impact in the institution. But the conceptuality of “Ideological State Apparatuses” does not seem naturally to show that this is so. The “voice” that the “apparatus” makes heard is that of the “master,” who calls for free servitude. Such is the guiding line of the analysis. Does this not presume that power from below would be mute? Would it also be without a share in the history of modern times? This conceptual disequilibrium seems to be overcome only at the cost of a theoretical-political voluntarism that, faced with the injunctions of ideology, exalts the “primacy of the class struggle.”

We shall not examine here in its entirety Althusser’s “politics,” which takes some distance from the traditional scheme of socialist revolution conceived of as a passage from capitalist market society to a democratic order planned by all. We shall retain the care that he has, in various writings, made to highlight a conceptuality of “overdetermination” and “conjuncture”<sup>7</sup> – without speaking about “the relative autonomy of the State.” And one can agree with him here when he refers the politics of emancipation to the “political intervention of the masses” – which he designates as the “(political) dictatorship of the proletariat” (p. 63n. 10), in the sense, in fact, in which others would speak today about “radical democracy.” But it is doubtful that the theoretical perspective he specifically proposes in this text, that of the “withering away of law and commodity exchange,” linked to the reduction of planning to a simple “subordinate” technical “means” (p. 62), can illuminate the ways of the future. It is not in this kind of second chance for historical socialism that we shall find an agenda for the century that has opened.

6 Althusser 2006, pp. 109-10.

7 See, among others, the excellent book by Sato 2007.

## 2. The concept of interpellation: a “linguistic turn” at the heart of Marxism

### *How Althusser gives speech to social structure*

I would propose here that Althusser, whatever his reading of history and his projections of the future, bequeaths to us an authentic theoretical-political heritage, worthy of being reclaimed for the interpretation of the present time: his theory of interpellation, which reexamines Marx’s philosophical-political investigation. It aims to link the socio-economic matrix that defines “capitalist social relations” to an anthropology of the modern subject. *And it does so by means of this tour de force that consists in endowing the legal and political authority inherent in the economic “social form,” with a faculty of “speech.”* Through the “ideological apparatuses” is imposed a *command* that proceeds from the class relation taken in its totality (according to the “knotting together of superstructure and base,” at least if we follow the proposed explanation, pp. 202-204). This is how Althusser refers to *interpellation*, the injunction to “submit yourself,” at the same time as the “I obey” who responds to it, to the historically specific *social relations* in which it is heard. In doing so, it seems to me that he initiated at the heart of Marxism a true “linguistic turn,” and of a different kind that the one proposed by Habermas, consisting not in *substituting* the paradigm of language for that of production, but in *relating* them to each other in a social relation in which every action, especially of production, is at the same time, an “action of language.”

In my opinion, it remains the case that Althusser thus advanced a program for which he didn’t have the means. What is necessary, in fact, for “social relations of production” to “interpellate,” to give *rise* to an interpellation? There must be possible a conceptual chain that links the order of *structures*, of “relations of production,” to that of *discourse*. Let us say it bluntly: such is precisely the “meta/structural” research program, which relates modern class “structure” to its “metastructure,” understood as the declarative, interpellative presupposition, posed by the structure itself in the practices to which it gives rise.<sup>8</sup>The metastructure is posed as that by which the structure is to be understood. The question

8 Such is the central thesis I stated for the first time in Bidet 1990, and which I have not ceased to develop since then. But it is indeed, in my eyes, Marx who introduced this problematic of the metastructure (which he analyzes as a market economico-discursive relation) constituting the presupposition posed by the (capitalist) structure.

of interpellation, understood in Althusser's terms, in this sense is the central object of a meta/structural theory, its *raison d'être*. The concept of *superstructure*, to which it refers, which designates what is supposed to be "above," indeed cannot act as *metastructure*, which designates what is assumed "before": the *presupposition posed by structure*. The meta-structural problematic therefore fully takes up Althusser's heritage, the "linguistic turn" he supposes, in the context of his own version of historical materialism. More radically, it therein takes up a theoretical-political position that – at least this is the thesis I am advancing – finds its origin in *Capital*.

### **Why Althusser has no means for such a program**

However, according to the analysis I am proposing, the Althusserian investigation leaves a blank, an indeterminate space, between "structure" as a class relation and "metastructure" as an interpellative presupposition. It lacks a conceptual chain. If we want to remove this epistemological obstacle, then the conceptual edifice proposed by Marx, his theorization of modern society, must be reconsidered in its entirety. As we have seen, Althusser's discourse remains inscribed in the limits of a traditional Marxism that aims to define a way leading from a world dominated by the *market* to a society *organized-in-concert* by all. The meta/structural problematic stands out from this residual orthodoxy. It takes the market and organization for what they are: the two primary forms of rational coordination, contemporaneous with each other, at the social scale. Thus it puts the theory of modern society back on its two feet: market and organization<sup>9</sup>. From there, it can go back to these two *mediations*, manifested as the two modern "class factors," in what *they give* as relays: to the *immediacy* of speech, to the inter-interpellation presumed to be constitutive of modernity. "As relays," since it is in the purportedly free relation of the market, just as in the purportedly free relation of organization, that the partners are *supposedly* treated as free, equal, and rational – that is, according to the standard of communicative action. "Supposedly" underscores that the social reality at question here is one of a *pretense*.

9 Which means that planning cannot be a simple (technical) "means," as Althusser intends. Arising from the "organization" form, a counterpart to the "commodity" form, it is not only, as he writes, "the organization of the productive forces" (p. 63f. 10), it is a social relation of production, and in this capacity, a "class factor."

In fact, this happens only in the critical process of the discursive relation between these two relations – in the language-based arbitration that the partners carry out between themselves, as opposed to the submission of one to another as a natural order. *In short, meta/structural theory not only claims and thematizes the linguistic turn initiated by Althusser, but it also realizes it by demonstrating in the market/organization pair, mediations of discursive immediacy, class factors that are constitutive of the modern class relation.* Or: the modern class relation as an instrumentalization of these two "mediations." In other words, meta/structural theory connects the "class relation" to the "speech" that interpellates while, on the basis of these two modern "class factors," defining mediations of interindividuality, understood in their modern pretense of being the relays of discursive immediacy. This is the sense in which I have allowed myself to propose that Althusser "did not have the means for his program."

These metastructural mediations of speech are never posed as such except in the class structure that instrumentalizes them into their contrary, with all the consequences that follow (alienation, exploitation, domination, and "abstraction"). And, in my view, it is from there, and there alone, that we can decipher this modern class structure, and envision how to propose a politics aiming at their abolition as class factors. I therefore invite one to consider interpellation according to its nature in modern class conditions: modern persons are interpellated as free, equal, and rational, that is, as being governed (supposedly at least, and this "supposedly" is not a rhetorical inflection but a theoretical determination) under the *aegis* of speech that is freely and equally exchanged. What analysis must be made of it and what consequences must be drawn from it?

In the Althusserian position, as it develops in the 1969 manuscript, there appears to remain in this respect something uncertain regarding the relationship between, on the one hand, a *historically situated legal ideology* (mentioned in Chapter 5), which presents subjects as "naturally free and equal" – in the context of a legal State Ideological Apparatus whose function would be, however, to strengthen the repressive apparatuses of modern capitalism – and, on the other hand, the *ideological process in general* (addressed in chapter 12), depicted by the religious ideology that would interpellate in terms of "submit yourself."

It seems to me that what is pertinent here, what is to be considered, is what modern (ideological) discourse says. Therefore, we shall suppose that modern interpellation *is* indeed what it says to be, and not – as Althusser suggests – a simple variant on religious injunction, or an injunction for which religion provides the "example." Interpellation is

certainly only metastructure: it is presupposed by the modern consciousness which is presented only as “instrumentalized” in class structure, in its constitutive contradiction. But it is thus uttered in a process of *class struggle*, and not, as one reads in Althusser, in a simple relationship of *domination/servitude*. The so-called “dominated” class – which it is more appropriate, in my view, to identify as the “fundamental” or “popular” class – appears as a subversive party in interpellation. Of a self-contradictory interpellation, to be understood contradictorily: on the utopian as much as ideological mode.

### ***How Althusser misses the paradox of modern interpellation***

From this moment on, we see the paradox of the relation between the *historical* and the *generic*, between the *modern* subject and the *human* subject. It is precisely that the modern class relation is constituted *specifically* in this reference to discourse *as such*, to the immediacy of communicative discourse, *presupposed* to govern mediations. That is to say, in the reference to “reason,” in the form of discourse equally shared between partners who are interpellated as free, equal, and rational, through two mediations, market and organization. According to these interactions, it is “understood” in “modernity” that we are equal in the last instance: a “popular prejudice,” Marx says in the first chapter of *Capital*. Modernity *is given* as the realization of our humanity. It is in this sense that modernity realizes the “instrumentalization” of reason. For the metastructural reference to freedom-equality-rationality is only given in the structural situation of unfreedom, inequality, and irrationality. The “free market,” with its discourse of freedom, defines the conditions in which capitalist domination is established. The universalisability of communicative action is the *reversed*, instrumentalized presupposition of the modern form of society. The universal is the twisted presupposition, “turned against itself,” of our historical particularity.

Althusser’s thesis is therefore unsatisfactory. He is certainly right to understand the interpellation inherent in the modern form of society in terms of the injunction to submission to the ruling order. Order always gives an order. It calls for obedience. But, as it happens, this does not at all contradict the literalness of a correlative injunction, an injunction to freedom. In fact, the paradox has to do with the fact that inter-interpellation is amphibolous. The same utterance, with two voices, “*We are free and equal*,” is given, by the symmetry it establishes between structur-

ally unequal interlocutors, in two contrary senses in the confrontation of the declaration: “That is”/“That must be” – and it is not a question of a moral obligation but of an injunction of power from below. One says: “*We are free and equal*, the case is settled.” The other says: “*We are free and equal*, and we will show it.”<sup>10</sup> “Interpellation,” as speech that is always already socially uttered, would be inaudible to the modern in the unilateral terms that Althusser lends: “Submit yourself! Kneel!” - a voice from above, an Olympian language act immanent to my innermost social being. It is equally and simultaneously that of “Stand!” “Get up and walk!” - an interaction from below. The interpellated body is torn between these two postures, these two opposing figures of *corporal hexis*. Amphiboly of the cry – “Equaliberty!” - common to the powerful and to the people-multitude. Class struggle is always already engaged, *una voce*, as hermeneutics.<sup>11</sup>

The problem of the ontological status of the metastructure calls for a “spectral” analysis, with regard to knowing what kind of voice is heard, where it comes from, and to whom it is addressed. The specter is not a *voiceover*, reiterating to infinity. In this sense, Althusser finds himself in an impasse when he seeks in religious ideology - that of “Kneel!” the very matrix of social interpellation in general. A *generic* conception of ideology is certainly required. But just as necessary is a concept of ideology in the particular form of modern society: a *specific* concept. But to presume that the “example” drawn here from religious experience could depict the ideological in general is obviously inappropriate for representing interpellation in the modern form of society.<sup>12</sup>

10 The book by Binoche and Cléro 2007, which notably includes a critical reading of the main elements of Benthamite utilitarian critique, reveals the earliness and the importance of the debate around this amphiboly of the declaration of the “rights of man.” In this sense, see Deleuze: “what counts” is the “regime of enunciation itself in that it can include contradictory utterances”, in Deleuze 2006, p. 344.

11 This is the theme of chapter 6 of my book L’État-monde, “Idéologies, utopies, cryptologies.”

12 It is worth noting that Althusser does not attack “faith” but (on the contrary?) “religious ideology.” “Authentic” theologians could recognize him as of their own, he who rejects every interpellation that would not be that of my pure freedom.

### 3. Ideology between the eternal and the historical

#### *Althusser, the Freudian domain, and the social field*

Before concluding, however, we must still examine the relation that Althusser establishes between ideology and the unconscious.

Operating on the successive statements of the authors she has chosen, Judith Butler elaborates the theme of the “ambivalence” between the power that interpellates the subject and the power of the subject thus constituted: the subject finds itself generated by its very subjection, to which it is attached, and on the basis of which it exercises a power that conceals, but finally exceeds, the power from which it proceeds. It is a question here of the emergence of the subject as such: in its attachment to subjection is formed a will, a capacity of resistance that realizes itself in creative excess.

Butler seeks to follow Althusser on this terrain, and more specifically on the terrain of psychoanalysis. For the generality of “*ideology in general*” – which, in contrast with “*ideologies*,” characteristic of various forms of society, “has no history” (p. 174//254) – is, he says, to be understood in the sense of “eternity,” which is that of the unconscious. If “eternal” means “immutable in its form throughout all of history,” “*ideology is eternal*, just like the unconscious.” A connection, he adds, “justified by the *fact* that the eternity of *the unconscious* is based, in the last instance, on the eternity of *ideology in general*” (p. 176//255).

If this is so, being a question of the “evocation” of the concrete subject, of its “promulgation” as Butler says, ideology in general seems to possess, in relation to ideologies, an anthropologically sovereign privilege. The subject’s concreteness, captured in its ontogenesis, is to be considered for itself below the historical variants of its particular socialization through certain “particular ideologies.” Here we encounter Althusser’s ambition to connect psychoanalysis to “historical matérialism.”<sup>13</sup> Referring to Freud, he recalls that, even before being born, the child finds itself always already interpellated, prey to the expectation and address of his or her entourage (pp. 192-93//265-66). We should note, however, that he does not cross the threshold of psychoanalysis: he does

13 See Althusser 2003, pp. 33-84, a 1966 manuscript, which seeks to think about psychoanalysis as a “regional theory arising from two “general theories,” the “GT of the signifier” and the “GT of historical materialism” (p. 64). On already finds here outlined the thesis of “interpellation,” in the same Lacanian context, according to which the unconscious is “structured like a language” (p. 56).

not pretend to enter into this field of knowledge. For, if “this business of the infant that is always-already a subject in advance” (p. 193) interests him, it is “on other grounds.” It is because it permits him to apprehend his own *societal* history: to follow the destiny of the “little child Louis” (*ibid.*), a subject first familial then academic, religious, juridical, political, up to ... “joins the Communist Party” (*ibid.*). Althusser thus remains, for his part, at the consideration of the constitution of the subject according to the sequence of the successive relations that await him during his existence in a definite society. The object of his research is, however, to establish the *point of articulation* between the historicity of the singular and the “eternity” of the general. The point of repetition and reiteration. And he believes it can be discovered in *interpellation* as such, whereby would be given, as always singular, ideology in general.

Therefore, he undertakes to consider this societal ideological as *ahistorical* (“general”) factuality. And he believes that he can elaborate the concept on the basis of what is supposedly an “example” (p. 194), that of religious ideology. By making use of such an “example,” however, he is led to define “ideology in general” in terms that can be judged to be singularly particular: either from the *religious* subject or, more precisely, from a specular configuration between subjects and the Subject. For there exists, he writes, “such a multitude of possible religious subjects on the *absolute* condition that here is a Unique, Absolute, *Other Subject*, namely, God” (p. 195//267). Thus one discovers oneself to be “a subject by the Subject and subjected to the Subject” (pp. 195-96//267). The great Subject is the master: he orders, he promises the supreme reward to one who obeys. Interpellation arises from *social domination in general*, as the principle of subjectivation.

#### ***Eternity of ideology? Self-criticism of ideology?***

It obviously remains to be seen if what is “general” in this sense is thereby even “eternal,” and in what sense. Is this eternity called to terminate or only to “last a long time”? And is it even then, finally, the ultimate object of Althusserian investigation: What is the end of ideologies? What is the “end of ideology” and of the class domination it makes possible? It is remarkable that, in a passage that will disappear from the final version, Althusser canceled this horizon of eternity on which in one way or another he deploys all of his discourse. After having mentioned various figures of the modern Subject – “The Fatherland, the National or

General Interest, Progress, the Revolution” – faced with little subjects, the “members of the organization, the voters, the militants, and so on,” he arrives, in fact, at this singular restriction: “Revolutionary Marxist-Leninist political ideology is of course distinguished by the fact, *without historical precedent*, that it is an ideology which has been heavily ‘reworked’, and thus transformed, by a *science*, the Marxist science of history, social formations, the class struggle and revolution. This ‘distorts’ the specular structure of ideology without doing away with it altogether (‘no saviour from on high ... no prince or peer’ says the Internationale, and, consequently, no subjected subjects! ...). In this way, the Internationale seeks to ‘*de-centre*’ political ideology itself. To what extent is that possible, or, rather, since it is relatively possible, within what limits has it proven possible so far? That is another question.” (p. 198)<sup>14</sup>

It will be said that this passage, finally suppressed, reveals a “private” political style. But really: it is the style of the singular subject who is apprehended *sub specie aeternitatis*, that is to say, in its most intimate relationship with “History” – with a capital “H,” as Althusser loved to write. As we know, “everything personal is political.” But this is not exactly the point that detains us. It is not the moods, the fluctuating hopes that could be those of a *political* militant (who carefully notes that he is writing on 6 April 1969, p. 190//263), to which I want to draw attention. I would stop on this surprising fact, which is significant to Althusser’s *theoretical* endeavor in general: he does not see “any historical precedent” for the critique of ideology whose bearer is “the Marxist science of history.”

The meta/structural thesis is obviously, on the contrary, that the modern form of society has from its beginning carried the principle of its self-criticism, a principle of rejected injunction, of guilt and threat, which is immanent to it. And this was first formulated precisely in religious language. We may recall the slogan of the Lollards: “When Adam dug the earth, and when Eve spun wool, where then was the master? Where then the servant?” This was a famous interpellation, on the banner of insurgents. It was a foundational version of “we are free and equal.” And we could also invoke in this sense the *Liber Paradisum* of Bologna, 1250. *Inter*-interpellation, because there is none other, in the *social* fabric at least.

14 A long note takes up in detail this “other question,” that of the possible future of communism and humanity. It reveals to us an Althusser who defers his hope on the very crisis of international communism: (...) “They will discover in them varied examples of ‘decentralization’ at work, examples that are, to be honest, oddly heterogeneous and not always ‘reworked’ or ‘monitored’ by Marxist-Leninist science. Yet the day will come when the reunification of the international communist movement is ensured in forms ensuring as much ‘de-centring’ as possible. Paziienza.” (p. 199n. 33). In short, crisis will finally destroy the old Stalinism and open up a liberatory communism.

Since its historical beginnings, the modern metastructural voice, still mixed with a lot of others, is contradictorily ideology and utopia, illusion and critique. Amphibolous.<sup>15</sup>

### ***What should be done with the trope proposed by Judith Butler?***

If this is so, we shall observe that this ascent from Althusser to Marx has for its result to *exclude*, in all rigor, the feature proposed by Butler: subjection, attachment to subjection, the development from the depths of self-alienation of a capacity for resistance and creation. In the last instance, Butler appeals to “rage,” which alone can turn melancholy against the state by reappropriating “aggression in the service of the desire to live.”<sup>16</sup> She turns the law, which expects submission, into the protagonist of the drama. Marx, by contrast, thinks about the state in its immanence to a definite class structure, which is only understood on the basis of its presuppositions – whose positive content we have seen. From this moment on, if it is true that the “interpellated turns back upon himself or herself,” it is a question of a “turning back” in an inverse sense. It is a question of this “reversal” from which emerges a particular subjectivity, namely, the subject of the subjected class. For what is found turned back in this way is a market relation that was declared to be free, equal, and rational. From this “popular prejudice” of equality, which Marx says is characteristic of modern times, we have seen that metastructural analysis provides an “enlargement” by showing the duality of “mediations” and their interference in an illocutionary discourse. Here is the *posed presupposition*. The law given as transcendent, by which the structural power of class is affirmed, therefore does not constitute its point of origin. It constitutes the reversal of a freedom posed *metastructurally*, in the *structural* relation that instrumentalizes it as “original” – or at least as an extraction prior to all servitude. Such is the work of the capitalist relation of class. It is to the one we declare explicitly “free” that we say: “Sell me your labor force, commit yourself to our ranks.” The law proposes a *voluntary* servi-

15 This is the way that we can, it seems to me, take up Althusser’s idea, as he formulated it already in Althusser 2005, p. 234, according to which “ideology” can also be “revolutionary.” If, however, we link this thematics to that of interpellation, it is necessary to have an adequate concept of the latter, opening onto “utopia” as much as onto “ideology.” In this sense, see the analysis proposed of *Liber Paradisum* in Bidet 2011, pp. 209-212.

16 Butler 1997, p. 187. See the commentary by Le Blanc 2004, pp. 45-65.

tude: here is the principle of “rage,” of “indignation,” of the experience of injustice that are characteristically modern. Such a “law,” which says not to be one of these, can only be uttered in terms of an *illocutionary* discourse addressed from each to each, as between those who are free and equal. That is to say, by reminding the will that one intends to submit, by reminding it that one can want something else. This interpellation contains, then, immanent to itself, its contradictory double: “Recognize yourself as being free, know that you are in advance freed from a law that is not yours.” This is why to this interpellation there is no univocal response in terms of submission.

It is true that the Marxian scheme is complicated in that it elaborates a *structural* figure endowed with a *tendencial* potential. The object of *Capital* is not only to figure out the conditions of a turning back T1, from which proceeds the subjected subject, but also the historical path that could lead to the turning back T2 of this turning back T1. As we know, Marx conceives of this “negation of the negation” as the final abolition of the free market for the benefit of a common plan, of organization freely defined by all. In this perspective of the historical passage from one mediation to another, he identifies the second with the very order of coordination, that is to say, the rule of speech equally shared by all. What metastructural analysis reveals is that one can only expect that a regime of speech would come in a “socialization” understood in these terms. *Organisational* mediation is in fact itself a class factor.<sup>17</sup> We are thus led back to reconsider the structural order. If class structure is the combination of these two class factors that are the market and organization, according to the mode of *interindividual* relations that each of them features, *speech never happens* – in speech-acts inherent in practical interactions, especially economics – *except as charged with its own contradictory class content*. From this moment on, interpellation arises from a hermeneutics of class struggle.

The psychic apparatus implied in this social apparatus is therefore to be understood in terms other than those of the trope conceived by Butler. It is not “ambivalence,” in the sense in which she understands this term, but *amphiboly*: modern class power and one who claims to abolish it speak in the same language of freedom-equality-rationality. For the discourse of the moderns, this “concept” is the only one admissible. The

<sup>17</sup> This factor reveals itself in two different contexts. On the one hand, in the societies that for a time abolish capitalism, competent leaders, masters of organization, henceforth themselves alone form the dominant class. On the other hand, in modern society in general, where they constitute, faced with capitalists, masters of the market, its other pole.

nation-state, which understands the subject as citizen, is its cradle. But it *exists* only as a class state. Metastructural interpellation is thus the imprint of an “original,” insurmountable impurity, posed only in the national class relation. Love of common earth, happiness of the language, purity of the race – outpouring of our identity in our little differences, which enables movies to have a “national” success – this is what competent rulers know how to put into words and spectacles, in performances in which we are invited to recognize ourselves. This happens all the time, one will say. But the point of modernity, however, is precisely that it is exposed to citizen symmetry. Rulers embody not only in the law, but also the fact that, supposedly at least, *we make the law*. Revolutionary instability, by which the trope, always renewed, is ceaselessly canceled. Before reappearing again. Not a sovereign Voice, of an *Other* to *resist*. But this common discourse we take together. The question it raises is not to know how the governed can resist the interpellation of those who govern, but how the speech shared by all could be sovereign.

Therefore, the philosophical novel imagined by Butler cannot be enlisted for a theory of the present time. At least not in a “general” way. It finds its truth only when we enlarge the framework of the analysis. In fact, the metastructural amphiboly dissolves from the moment that we go beyond relations among nations, the colonial relation, and more broadly the “systemic” order through which the “world-system” exceeds class structure as it is established in the nation-state. Here, the Butlerian trope demonstrates its immediate effectiveness. Subjection, without another word, is indeed what is demanded of the colonized as such. It is *the other* interpellation, just as constitutive of modernity. An entire anti- or post-colonial literature illustrates this fact that it is precisely through the assumption of this cultural subjection that a new subject, who is neither colonizer nor colonized, has found, by turning against it, the means of its uplift. The pride of being *black* or *indigenous*. By analogy (in the other social dimension, that of the social relations of sex): *gay pride*.

Everything would be simple if class “structure” and world “system,” in the sense that meta/structural theory gives to these terms, were not immanent to each another. In the world-system, the voice of structure cannot fail to be heard (it took little time for the soldiers of Toussaint Louverture to appropriate *La Marseillaise*). And in the structural context of the nation-state, the colonial interpellation of the world-system is imposed with violence. Sometimes it happens, in so-called “post-colonial” literature, that one attributes to the “republic” misdeeds that pertain to its relation to the *system*. This relation is immanent, it is true, and it is in-

deed a question of the republic. But it is provided that we not confuse the two *apparatuses* that we can understand the dialectical subtlety and the contradictions of their perverse interpenetration. It is necessary in every way both to criticize and to defend the “Republic.”

#### 4. From the unhappy consciousness to a politics of power

##### ***Of what can modern human beings be guilty?***

Here, with the figures of criticism and self-criticism, the question of the guilt of modern human beings inevitably reappears. *What* guilt, in fact? In order to answer this question, it has to be considered again on the specific terrain of *modern* historicity. Taking up the thread proposed by Butler, who invites us to reread the *Phenomenology of Spirit* according to the sequence that runs from the section “Master and Slave” to the following one, “Unhappy Consciousness,” it will then be asked of what the modern subject, interpellated as such, can be “guilty.” I would venture the following response, which could at first be judged trivial: *if modern interpellation is what it is said to be, modern guilt is not to break the law but to comply with it.*

The *presupposition* posed by modern social relations is that of freedom-equality-rationality, according to which we truly proclaim that there is no other law than the one we pose equally in every freedom as the law of freedom. Inter-interpellation constitutive of the modern institution. If there is guilt, it is because this presupposition is posed only in class relations that confer its amphibolous nature on it. The modern subject is guilty because it is originally, in its very constitution, caught up in the amphiboly inherent in class structuration. In the beginning, always recommenced, is the *logos*, the voice that interpellates. But its message of freedom is the presupposition of domination. The voice of the dominant has certainly ceased, in modern times, to be understood as a *transcendent* Speech, and as such capable of instituting in this capacity subjects who would only be beings of response. For in modernity we precisely do not pose as subjects except by posing that there is no rule to follow other than the ones we utter together. There is no other subject recognized than the citizen, inasmuch at least, as we have seen, that one abstracts from the “world-system” (this is the *other* “systematic” aspect of modernity, which goes beyond the present, strictly “structural” - more precisely, “meta/structural” - analysis.

Transcendence has not disappeared, however: from this moment

on, it resides in amphiboly. The voice is amphibolous because it is the voice of a “we” cleaved into a class relation, which is found *denied* in the complicit identity of enunciation. Emancipation and domination in the same utterance. “*We are* free and equal”: draped in equal and symmetrical rights that distribute privileges, in identities that forge exclusions, lulled, drugged by the music of freedoms that generate predations. Power equally constituting, always already unequally constituted. How could we not be always already, originally guilty?

Here the religious paradigm appears to be highly problematic. Thus Butler emphasizes, far from being a simple example, it conveys a definite content, in reference to Christianity, which makes it inappropriate to configure ideology in general. We cannot, however, remain here. The drama of the Althusserian fable of interpellation applies to the theological performance: see the powerful catharsis that brought happiness to so many unhappy readers of this now-classic passage – an appeal to “conversion.” But what sets the scene is not Christian guilt, it is *modern* guilt, which is to submit to a law established from above. “The subjects ‘go’: they recognize that ‘it’s really true’, that ‘this is the way it is’ and not some other way, that they have to obey God, the priest, De Gaulle, the boss, the engineer, and love their neighbour, and so on. The subjects go, since they have recognized that ‘all is well’ (the way it is), and they say, for good measure: *So be it!*” (pp. 197). The reader of Althusser is invited to *recognize himself or herself* in those who kneel in this way before the capitalist order (or before “the personality cult,” pp. 198-99n. 33). Metastructural analysis, however, leads one to think that it does not proceed so simply: the modern discourse of interpellation calls one to confess a *modern* guilt, which is not that of disobeying the law but, on the contrary, of submitting to it. We have the original sin we deserve. And the original sin of moderns is not that of the ancients (Christians).

The Althusserian formulation conceals what it should reveal. For the guilt that arises does not, in the last instance, refer to a Great Subject, the declared “instituter” of a good order, to the Unconscious whose voice would govern my consciousness: it is not in this respect that it is a failure. It refers – and this is what escapes Althusser – to the very presupposition of metastructural inter-institution, which, in fact, is indissociable from an *essential doubt*, constitutive of its unhappy consciousness. For what about my pretense to be free, to serve, that is to say, to help produce, a law of freedom? This guilt is not reserved only for “intellectuals of emancipation.” It lives in all “citizens,” from the moment they engage in a cause, if only for a moment, advancing as spokespersons in charge of

enunciation. It haunts “conscientious” citizens, all those who have lifted, however little, the veil of ideology. And it doubles as a secret fear that we finally discovers that we too are in some way, prey to corruption.

A weak reading of Althusserian interpellation would be to rely on the finding of its immediately theological generic content. And to please them: “Yes, that’s right, I must recognize that I am a subject only when kneeling.” In reality, the fable, in all its force, refers, on the contrary, *to the modern claim to have broken the paradoxical spell of the subjected subject. And to the doubt that nonetheless haunts* the statement that “we are free and equal,” from the moment that it is caught in the amphiboly of class discourse. It refers to the confession of a modern Jansenist guilt, predestined for freedom, subjected to the vocation of being free, and in fact in chains, always guilty and unhappy, to live outside of the freedom that it announces, – and it is in this sense that the “unhappy consciousness” is a “bad conscience” (Sartre). Guilty of *obeying* and submitting. Of having always already betrayed the cause it proclaims, that of the truth announced in modern times, that of equality-justice among equally reasonable persons, that of the permanent revolution that modernity declares. And it is indeed the only thing of which Althusser could be recognized as historically guilty. In the name of which he once, as we know, denounced himself as a vulgar “impostor.” He could do no less.

### ***Interpellation from Althusser to Spinoza***

It is by taking up the Althusserian legacy of “interpellation” in this metastructural sense that we can envision the program that Butler outlines *in fine*, turning, under the invocation of Agamben, toward a Spinozist problematic of “power (*puissance*).” The metastructural presupposition of an inter-interpellation among those who are free-equal-and-rational in fact has for a counterpart a position of common power. This “original position” is not to be conceived as a simple *thought experiment*, à la Rawls. It imposes itself on us, as a position of a metastructural illocutionary that we cannot escape, because it is historically our own, the presupposition posed by all our public actions, in that they are also speech acts in the modern structure of society. Not a thought experiment of everyone as a philosopher. But the experience of everyone as a citizen in modern society. Elsewhere I have tried to formulate, in the encounter between Rawls and Habermas, this anarcho-spinozist principle U, of “equality-power,” immanent to modern inter-interpellation. In its pure generality,

in its abstraction of thought, it is stated as a *principle of power*: “To the greatest glory and power of the least among us!”<sup>18</sup> *Ad majorem pauperum gloriam!*, if I am permitted this imitation. To which should still be added: *et potestatem*.<sup>19</sup> “Abolish all forms of inequality, except those which would raise the power and the glory of the least among us!” Let us wager that this account prevails to a maximum of equality. Only such an injunction can be common to us, can be stated in terms of “us,” being only as such irrefutable. Only such an inter-interpellation can from this moment on be understood as a legitimate injunction to a common emancipation.

It remains to give it the positive content that it requires. Of course, this is what modern forms of thought that turn toward the future have worked on. Those, for example, that fall within the registers of “radical democracy,” “socialism,” “communism” or the “common,” depending on the meaning given to these terms, or even of a political ecology. They seek to define the positive conditions of the emergence of the new “subject” thus interpellated, who would escape alienations and dispossessions, pathologies and forms of suffering inherent in the destructive nature of capitalist modernity. Thus is deployed a social critique in multiple registers, which is only as valuable, however, as the theory of society on the basis of which it defines itself.

This is what the metastructural hypothesis tries to do.<sup>20</sup>

*Translated by Ted Stolze*

18 This point is argued in Bidet 1999, p. 442 et passim.

19 The imitation pertains to both the famous motto of the Jesuits, *Ad majorem Dei gloriam*, “to the greater glory of God”, and to the fragment of the Book of Revelation [17:13] that Marx cites in the Latin of Jerome, in chapter 2 of Volume I, as a form of remaking the Hobbesian pact: “illi unum consilium habent et virtutem et potestaten suam bestiae tradunt...” [“These have one mind, and shall give their power and strength unto the beast.” – Trans.]

20 I can only refer to the writings through which this research has developed: Bidet 1999; Bidet 2004; Bidet 2011; Bidet 2016.

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# The Concept of Structural Causality in Althusser

Vittorio Morfino

## Abstract:

Althusser claims that 'the immense theoretical revolution of Marx' is the concept of structural causality. Although only drafted through a series of terms such as *Verbindung*, *Gliederung*, or *Darstellung*, for Althusser this concept lies at the core of *Reading Capital*. The aim of this paper is to show that Althusser's interpretation of Marx is grounded on a conception of causality whose philosophical structure depends on three different thesis: the constitutiveness of relations, the contingency of relations, and the plural temporality.

## Keywords:

structural causality, ontology of relations, time, Althusser, Marx

### 1. The definition of the concept of structural causality

If there is a place in which Althusser attempted to formulate a theory of causality, it is certainly 'The Object of *Capital*', where his reflections on the dialectic in 'Contradiction and Overdetermination' and 'On the Materialist Dialectic' converge. The question at the center of the text is the novelty Marx introduces in *Capital* in relation to the discourse of political economy: if political economy poses economic phenomena within a smooth, homogenous space, Marx's theory poses economic phenomena 'in a *region* determined by a regional structure and itself inscribed in a site defined by a global structure'.<sup>1</sup> We find, in Althusser's spatial metaphor, an attempt to think the complex and deep space of the economy inscribed in the complex and deep space of history. Therefore, in order to think economic phenomena it is necessary to construct the concept of structure that produces them, i.e. the unity of productive forces and relations of production, which however cannot be defined outside of the global structure of the mode of production. This means not only that economic phenomena are not given, but also that a model of linear causality can not even be applied to them; 'to build the rigorous discourse of the theory of history and the theory of political economy' it is necessary

1 Althusser 1965b, p. 202 (397, 253). TN: Morfino's citations are to the French text and Italian translation. In the footnotes, the first page number refers to Ben Brewster's English translation, the first number in parenthesis to the French edition, and the second number in parenthesis to the Italian translation. I have occasionally altered Brewster's translation for reasons of syntax structure or clarity, indicating it each time and providing comments on these changes when necessary. I have changed all of Brewster's references to 'effectivity' to 'efficacy', and unless otherwise noted, all italics in the quotes are Althusser's.

to produce a new philosophical concept. In other words, the *coupure* with which Marx inaugurates the new scientific space of the economy and history requires a philosophical revolution, the production of a new concept of causality. Althusser thus formulates the fundamental epistemological problem posed by the redefinition of the object of political economy as follows:

*By means of what concept or which conceptual ensemble is it possible to think the determination of the elements of a structure, and the structural relations between those elements, and all the effects of those relations, by the efficacy of that structure? And, a fortiori, by means of what concept or which conceptual ensemble is it possible to think the determination of a subordinate structure by a dominant structure? In other words, how is it possible to define the concept of a structural causality?*<sup>2</sup>

However, Marx himself does not pose this problem as a problem—he did not produce the concept of the efficacy of a structure on its elements. Instead, ‘he set out to solve it practically in the absence of its concept, with extraordinary ingenuity, but without completely avoiding a relapse into earlier schemas, which were necessarily inadequate to pose and solve this problem’.<sup>3</sup> These inadequate schemas are the two systems of concepts produced by modern philosophy in order to think causality: the mechanistic model of Cartesian origin and the expressive model of Leibnizian origin. If the first could not express the efficacy of the whole on all its elements ‘except at the cost of extraordinary distortions’,<sup>4</sup> the second was conceived precisely for this purpose and yet presumes that the nature of the whole is spiritual. Of course, in modern philosophy there would be an author who posed this problem in attempting ‘to outline a first solution’,<sup>5</sup> namely Spinoza, but ‘as we know, history had buried him in impenetrable darkness’.<sup>6</sup>

Althusser isolates several of Marx’s terms which indicate the attempt to think structural causality: the terms *Beleuchtung* in the 1857 *Introduction to Political Economy* and above all *Darstellung* in *Capital*, but also the metaphors through which the capitalist system thinks: *Triebwerk*,

2 Althusser 1965b, p. 205-206 (401, 256). Translation modified.

3 Althusser 1965b, p. 207 (403, 257).

4 Althusser 1965b, p. 206 (402, 257).

5 Althusser 1965b, p. 207 (403, 257).

6 Althusser 1965b, p. 207 (403, 257).

*Mechanismus, Getriebe*, and social metabolism. No less important in this sense are the terms *Verbindung* and *Gliederung*.

We will return to these Marxian terms, but for the moment we should turn our eyes to the concepts through which Althusser characterizes in his own terms, beyond those of Marx, the efficacy of a structure: the concept of overdetermination that Althusser himself declares to be taken on loan from psychoanalysis, the concept of metonymic causality coined by Miller, the concept of immanent cause in the Spinozist sense, and finally the concept of a theatre without an author.

Althusser broadly insisted on the concept of overdetermination in two essays, published in *For Marx*, on the theme of the specificity of Marxist contradiction with respect to Hegelian contradiction: what the concept points towards is precisely the type of specific determination implied by the structure in dominance of a complex totality. The concept of metonymic causality in this sense seems to suggest exactly the logic displayed in ‘On the Materialist Dialectic’ of condensation [*condensation*] and displacement [*déplacement*] between the principle contradiction and the secondary contradictions, and between the principle and secondary aspects of the contradiction.<sup>7</sup> Concerning this logic, we must not be fooled by the appearance of an arbitrary succession of dominations: because [...] the nodality of the development (the specific phases), and the specific nodality of the structure of each phase are the very existence and reality of the complex process.<sup>8</sup>

For this reason ‘*the absence of the cause [...] of the structure on its effects is not the result of the exteriority of the structure with respect to economic phenomena; on the contrary, it is the form of the interiority of the structure, as a structure, in its effects*’.<sup>9</sup> This implies that the effects are not an object, an element, or a space ‘on which the structure arrives to imprint its mark [*sa marque*]’.<sup>10</sup> On this point, Spinoza’s concept of immanent causality is helpful. The existence of the structure consists in its

7 TN: For a helpful discussion of metonymy and metonymic causality, cf. the conceptual entry in the *Cahiers pour l’Analyse* project, available online: <http://cahiers.kingston.ac.uk/concepts/metaphor-and-metonymy.html>.

8 Althusser 1963, p. 177 (217, 185). Translation modified. TN: As with the citation of ‘The Object of *Capital*’, I have referenced Brewster’s English translation first, with the pagination French original and Italian translation in parentheses.

9 Althusser 1965b, p. 208 (405, 258). Translation modified.

10 Althusser 1965b, p. 208 (405, 258). Translation modified.

effects, that is, the structure is 'in short only a specific combination of its own elements': it is nothing 'outside of its effects'.<sup>11</sup> In fact the concept of the theatre without an author indicates 'the mode of existence of the stage direction [*mise en scène*], of the theatre which is simultaneously its own stage, its own script, its own actors, the theatre whose spectators can, on occasion, be spectators only because, first of all, they are forced to be its actors, caught by the constraints of a script whose authors they cannot be'.<sup>12</sup>

What does Althusser mean with these references? In the first place he intends to clear the field of several ambiguities Marx had himself generated by understanding structure as an essential interiority contrasted to a phenomenal exteriority,<sup>13</sup> and, as a consequence, the path of knowledge as a transition from an abstract essential to a concrete existential (the passage from Volume 1 to Volume 3 of *Capital*). Actually, this movement never takes leave of abstraction, never exits from the concept, but passes from the concept of the structure and its more general effects to the concepts of its particular effects. The border between the concept and the existence of things is in reality insurmountable [*infranchissable*], because it cannot be a frontier, because there is no common homogenous space (spiritual or real) between the abstract of the concept of a thing and the empirical concrete of this thing which could authorize the use of the concept of a frontier.<sup>14</sup>

According to Althusser, the two models of causality provided by modern philosophy, transitive and expressive, end up reintroducing the conceptual couple essence and phenomenon:

These two models could quite easily find common ground in the classical opposition between *phenomenon and essence*. The ambiguity of these concepts is indeed obvious: the essence does refer to the phenomenon, but at the same time secretly to the *inessential*. The phenomenon does refer to the essence of which it can be the manifestation and expression, but at the same time, and secretly, it refers to what appears to be an empirical subject, to perception, and therefore to the empirical

11 Althusser 1965b, p. 209 (405, 258).

12 Althusser 1965b, p. 213 (411, 262).

13 Althusser cites a celebrated passage of Marx in which he affirms that 'every science would be superfluous if the appearance and essence of things were confused.' Cf. Althusser 1965b, p. 209 (406, 259).

14 Althusser 1965b, p. 210 (407, 259). Translation modified.

state of mind of a possible empirical subject.<sup>15</sup>

In this way, modern philosophy ends up accumulating these equivocal determinations in the real itself, localizing in the real a distinction between an essential interiority and a phenomenal exteriority, thereby defining the real as 'a reality at two levels'.<sup>16</sup>

## 2. Causality in *Capital*

Althusser identifies a certain number of terms in Marx which constitute if not the presence of the concept of structural causality, at least the symptom of its research: *Verbindung*, *Gliederung*, and *Darstellung*.

Althusser systematically translates the term *Verbindung* with the French term *combinaison*. *Verbindung* is drawn from the first section of *Capital*/Volume 2, Chapter 1:

Whatever the social form of production, laborers and means of production always remain factors of it. But in a state of separation from each other either of these factors can be such only potentially. For production to go on at all they must combine. The *specific manner (die besondere Art und Weise)* in which this combination is accomplished distinguishes the different economic epochs of the structure of society from one another.<sup>17</sup>

Althusser makes use of the concept *Verbindung* in 'From *Capital* to Marx's Philosophy', first by giving an account of thought as a determinate mode of the production of knowledge, constituted by 'a structure that combines [*Verbindung*] the type of object (raw material) on which it labors, the theoretical *means of production* available (its theory, its method, and its technique, experimental or otherwise), and the historical relations (theoretical, ideological, and social at the same time) in which it produces'.<sup>18</sup> And yet, in the same text Althusser returns to the term *Verbindung* in order to define the combination in different practices (economic, political,

15 Althusser 1965b, p. 210 (407, 260).

16 Althusser 1965b, p. 212 (409, 261).

17 Cited by Althusser in Althusser 1965b, p. 193-194 (386, 247). Cf. also Balibar 1965.

18 Althusser 1965a, p. 44 (42, 40). Translation modified. TN: I have adopted the same practice for citing Althusser's other essay in *Reading Capital*, referencing Brewster's English translation first, and the French original and Italian translation in parenthesis.

scientific, theoretical-philosophical) of ‘the different natures of the objects to which they apply, of their means of production and of the relations within which they produce’.<sup>19</sup>

In ‘The Object of *Capital*’ the term *Verbindung* returns to center stage with respect to the relations of production in the chapter dedicated to Marx’s critique of political economy. Here Althusser underlines how the relations of production are not reducible to the model of intersubjectivity:

[...] the *relations of production* necessarily imply relations between men and things, such that the relations between men and men are defined by the precise relations existing between men and the material elements of the production.<sup>20</sup>

Marx conceives the relations of production as a *Verbindung*, or, returning to the terms of the *1857 Introduction*, as a *distribution*, which consists in ‘a certain *attribution* of the means of production to the agents of production, in a certain regular proportion fixed between, on one hand, the means of production and, on the other, the agents of production’.<sup>21</sup> Althusser finds even further distinctions in Marx: on the side of the means of production, the distinction between the object and the instruments of production, on the side of the agents, between the immediate agents of production and the owners of the means of production:

By combining or *inter-relating* these different elements, labor power, direct laborers, masters who are not direct laborers, object of production, instruments of production, etc. – we reach a definition of the different *modes of production* which have existed and can exist in human history.<sup>22</sup>

This *Verbindung* of the preexisting determinate elements ‘would sincerely and truly constitute a *combinatory*’.<sup>23</sup> *Verbindung* understood as a combinatorial, therefore. However, all of this is in the first edition of *Reading Capital*, in 1965. In the second edition of 1968, Althusser fine tunes his

19 Althusser 1965a, p. 63 (64, 54).

20 Althusser 1965b, p. 193 (385, 246).

21 Althusser 1965b, p. 193 (386, 247).

22 Althusser 1965b, p. 194 (388, 248).

23 Althusser 1965b, p. 645. TN: Morfino refers to the ‘Variantes de la première édition’, included at the end of the French original cited in the bibliography.

analysis, affirming that this operation ‘might make us think of a *combinatory*’, but that the specific nature of the relations put into play from these different combinations define and strictly limit the field:

To obtain the different modes of production these different elements do have to be combined, but by using *specific modes of combination* or “*Verbindungen*” which are only meaningful in the peculiar nature of the *result* of the combinatorial.<sup>24</sup>

We will return to this point, but for now it is sufficient to notice Althusser’s affirmation that the concept of *Verbindung* constitutes the foundation of the refutation of historicism, ‘since the Marxist concept of history depends on the principle of the variation of the forms of this “combination”’.<sup>25</sup>

We come to the second term, *Gliederung*, which Althusser translates as ‘articulated-hierarchy’ or ‘structure’. It is drawn from the *1857 Introduction*, and Althusser cites two passages from Marx:

It is not a matter of the connection established historically between the economic relations in the succession of different forms of society. Still less of their order of succession “in the Idea” (Proudhon, in an obscure conception of historical movement) ... but of their articulated hierarchy [*Gliederung*] within modern bourgeois society.<sup>26</sup>

In its most banal conception, distribution appears as the distribution of products, and thus as further away from and quasi-independent of production. But before distribution is distribution of the product, it is: (1) the distribution of instruments of production, and (2) what is a further definition of the same relationship, the distribution of the members of society into the different kinds of production (subsumption of the individuals under determinate relations of production). The distribution of the product is obviously only the result of this distribution which is included within the production process itself and determines the *articulation of production* [*Gliederung*].<sup>27</sup>

24 Althusser 1965b, p. 195 (388, 248).

25 Althusser 1965b, p. 195 (388, 248)

26 Cited by Althusser in Althusser 1965b, p. 109 (282, 59).

27 Cited by Althusser in Althusser 1965b, p. 193 (386, 241).

Althusser makes use of the concept of *Gliederung* in section 13 of 'From *Capital* to Marx's Philosophy' concerning the relation of the logical and historical order of *Capital*, between which it is not possible to stabilize a biunivocal correspondence.<sup>28</sup> Such a relationship is, in fact, an imaginary problem. What must be produced instead is the *Gliederung*, that 'articulated-thought-totality' which allows the 'real *Gliederung*' to be thought, that 'real articulated-totality, that constitutes the existence of bourgeois society'.<sup>29</sup> Althusser adds:

The order in which the thought *Gliederung* is produced is a specific order, precisely the order of the theoretical *analysis* Marx performed in *Capital*, the order of the relation and the "synthesis" of the concepts necessary for the production of a thought-whole, a thought-concrete, the theory of *Capital*. The order in which these concepts are articulated in the analysis is the order of Marx's scientific proof: it has no direct, one-to-one relationship with the order in which any particular category may have appeared in history.<sup>30</sup>

In section 19 Althusser returns to the question in order to declare the refutation of every origin myth. Genesis and result should be distinguished—they cannot be thought together, because they are two different problems. Althusser writes:

Marx [...] clearly says that we must elucidate the knowledge of *Gliederung* (the articulated, hierarchical, systematic combination) of *contemporary* society if we are to reach an understanding of earlier forms, and therefore of the most primitive forms. His famous remark that 'the anatomy of a man holds the key to the anatomy of the ape', of course, does not say anything but this: correctly understood, it coincides with the other remark in the *Introduction* that it is neither the historical genesis of the categories nor their combination in earlier forms that enables us to understand them, but the system of their combination in contemporary society that opens the way to an understanding of past formations, by giving us the concept of the *variation* of this combination.<sup>31</sup>

28 TN: Brewster translates *biunivoque* as 'one-to-one', which helpfully captures its sense. The mathematical term biunivocal means a univocal correspondence between orders whose inverse correspondence is also univocal.

29 Althusser 1965a, p. 51 (50, 45).

30 Althusser 1965a, p. 51 (50, 45-46). Translation modified. TN: Brewster renders *liaison* literally as 'liaison', but I have opted to follow the Italian translation and the more common word 'relation'.

31 Althusser 1965a, p. 69 (72, 58-59). Translation modified.

In the forms of the order of scientific discourse there is indeed a diachrony, 'a regular order of appearance and disappearance',<sup>32</sup> but this does not correspond to a historical becoming; instead the diachrony of a 'basic synchrony',<sup>33</sup> 'the forms of the order of the discourse of the proof are simply the development of the "*Gliederung*", of the hierarchized combination of the concepts in the *system* itself'.<sup>34</sup>

In 'The Object of *Capital*' Althusser returns precisely to this problem, in conjunction with the chapter dedicated to an 'Outline for a Concept of Historical Time'. In clarifying the difference of the whole understood in the Hegelian sense from the Marxist sense, Althusser affirms, along with Marx in *The Poverty of Philosophy*, that 'the single logical formula of movement, of sequence, of time' cannot explain 'the body of society, in which all the economic relations coexist simultaneously and support one alongside the others'.<sup>35</sup> It is the specific structure of the totality that permits thinking the coexistence of its members and its constitutive relations. And this structure is a *Gliederung*, as Marx says in the *1857 Introduction*: it is 'the structure of an organic hierarchized whole',<sup>36</sup> 'the coexistence of limbs [*membres*] and their relations in the whole is governed by the order of a dominant structure which introduces a specific order into the articulation [*Gliederung*] of the limbs [*membres*] and their relations'.<sup>37</sup>

We come to the third term, *Darstellung*, which is taken from *Capital*. Althusser evokes the term *Darstellung* for the first time in section 8 of 'From *Capital* to Marx's Philosophy' when he introduces the idea of symptomatic reading. This is the practice of reading Marx 'arrived at in order to read the illegible in Smith', but it is also the practice of reading through which Althusser himself identifies in Marx the answer to a problem he did not pose, 'an answer that Marx only succeeds in formulating on condition of multiplying the images required to render it the answer of the *Darstellung* and its avatars'.<sup>38</sup> What Marx does not manage to formulate is 'the

32 Althusser 1965a, p. 73 (77, 61).

33 Althusser 1965a, p. 73 (77, 61).

34 Althusser 1965a, p. 73 (77, 62).

35 Cited by Althusser in Althusser 1965b, p. 109 (281-282, 193). Translation modified. TN: The adjective 'economic' is missing from Brewster's translation, but is present in the French.

36 Althusser 1965a, p. 109 (282, 186).

37 Althusser 1965a, p. 109 (282, 186).

38 Althusser 1965a, p. 30 (24, 29-30).

concept of the efficacy of a structure on its elements'.<sup>39</sup>The absence of this concept-word, then, is 'the invisible/visible, absent/present keystone of his whole work':<sup>40</sup>

[...] if Marx does "play" so much with Hegelian formulas in certain passages, this game is not just elegance or derision, but, in a strong sense, *the action of a real drama*, in which old concepts desperately play the role of something absent which is nameless, in order to call it onto the stage in person – whereas they only "produce" its presence in their failures, in the dislocation between the characters and their roles.<sup>41</sup>

This term returns to center stage in the final chapter of 'The Object of *Capital*', 'Marx's Immense Theoretical Revolution'. For Althusser, *Darstellung* is the key epistemological concept of the entire Marxist theory of value. *Darstellung* is 'the concept whose object is precisely to designate the mode of *presence* of the structure in its *effects*, and therefore to designate structural causality in itself'.<sup>42</sup> In the first edition of 1965 we find a long digression on the term *Darstellung* that is subsequently eliminated:

Moreover, in German "*Darstellung*" means *theatrical representation*, but the figure of theatrical representation adheres immediately to the sense brought by the word, which means "presentation", "exposition", and in its deepest roots, "position of presence", a visible and offered presence. To express its specific nuance, it can be instructive to oppose "*Darstellung*" to "*Vorstellung*". In *Vorstellung*, there is a position, but it is one that presents itself before, which presupposes, therefore, something that remains *behind* this pre-position [*pré-position*], something that is *represented* by that which was in front, by its emissary: the *Vorstellung*. In *Darstellung*, *on the contrary*, *there is nothing behind*: the same thing is here, "*there*", offered in the position of presence. The entire text of a theatrical *pièce* is here as such, offered in the presence of the representation (the *Darstellung*), but the presence of the *pièce* in its entirety is not exhausted in the immediacy of gestures or speeches of such a character: we "know" that it is the presence of a complete whole [*tout achevé*], that resides in each moment and each character and all the rela-

39 Althusser 1965a, p. 30 (24, 29-30). Translation modified.

40 Althusser 1965a, p. 31 (25, 30).

41 Althusser 1965a, p. 31 (25, 30). Translation modified. TN: Brewster translates *élégance* as 'raffishness', and *dérision* as 'sarcasm'; I have chosen to translate them literally.

42 Althusser 1965b, p. 208 (404, 258).

tionships between the characters given in their personal presence; but, however, it cannot be known, as the presence itself of the whole, as the latent structure of the whole, *if it is only in the whole*; and only sensed in every element and in every role. It is for this reason that, *according to the level at which it is situated*, we can say that "*Darstellung*" is the concept of the presence of the structure in its effects, of the modification of the effects through of the *efficacy of an absence*. It is in this sense that Rancière has utilized the *decisive* concept of "*metonymic causality*", elaborated with profundity by Miller last year, in the course of our seminar on Lacan. I believe that, understood as the concept of the *efficacy of an absent cause*, this concept is wonderfully useful for designating the absence in person of the structure in the effects considered from the close perspective [*perspective rasante*] of their existence. But we must insist on the other aspect of the phenomenon, that of the *presence*, of the immanence of the cause in its effects, in other words of the *existence of the structure* in its effects.<sup>43</sup>

Finally, after recalling the different metaphors with which Marx attempts to think the efficacy of a structure on its effects, Althusser returns to that 'highly symptomatic'<sup>44</sup> term *Darstellung* in order to place it together with the term 'machinery' [*machinerie*]: the *Darstellung* identifies the existence of this *machinerie* in its effects.

### 3. The schema of causality

The reference to Marxian terms seems to bring with it some ambiguities, as Althusser himself underlines: understanding *Verbindung* and *Gliederung* in the sense of a combinatory of elements, emphasizing in *Darstellung* the aspect of the efficacy of an absence. In order to bring out the novelty of Althusser's concept with clarity, it is necessary to highlight the deep philosophical fabric on which it is built. Such a fabric can only materialize in the integration of the following three theses:

- the thesis of the constitutiveness of relations, or the primacy of the relation over the elements;
- the thesis of the contingency of relations;
- finally, the thesis of plural temporality.

43 Althusser 1965b, p. 646. TN: Morfino refers to the 'Variantes de la première édition,' included at the end of the French original cited in the bibliography.

44 Althusser 1965b, p. 213 (411, 262).

In my view, it is only by thinking these three theses together that it is possible to define the Althusserian schema of causality.

To begin, let's take the first thesis, the constitutiveness of relations. Althusser repeatedly insists on the fact that structure does not exist without elements, and that the elements and the space in which they are arranged cannot exist without the structure.<sup>45</sup> Surely, the translation of the term *Verbindung* with combination and a reading of this in terms of a combinatoriality of elements could make one think of a preexistence of the elements, which then enter into different relations in different modes of production. The correction Althusser introduces in the second edition of *Reading Capital* seems aimed at avoiding the risk of thinking of invariable elements combined in different ways in different modes of production. Rather, it is necessary to think of the specific *Verbindungen* that have meaning only as a result of the combinatoriality.

But what are the elements that enter into relation? Althusser affirms that 'all of production, according to Marx, is characterized by two indissociable elements: the *labor process*, which deals with the transformations man inflicts on natural materials in order to make use-values out of them, and the *social relations of production* beneath whose determination this labor process is executed'.<sup>46</sup>

The first element can in turn be broken into three simple elements (labor power, object of labor, and technical means), the analysis of which reveals two decisive features: on the one hand the material nature of the conditions of the labor process, and on the other the dominant role of the means of production in the process. The first feature brings out, against the idealism of labor, the material conditions of the process that Marx thinks for the capitalist mode of production through the distinction between variable and constant capital, on one hand, and Sector 1 and Sector 2 of production, on the other. The second feature affirms the dominance of the instruments of labor in the process, which permits a fixing of 'the differential mode of unity existing between "man and nature" and the degree of variation in that unity'.<sup>47</sup>

This first element cannot be thought unless it is thought together

45 TN: I have purposefully translated "structure" in this passage both with and without a definite article. While an English presentation of the language of structure sometimes benefits from the definite article, it should be kept in mind that the concept of structure outlined here resists an invariantly understood definition, and that the same caveat applies to the concept of encounter.

46 Althusser 1965b, p. 188 (379, 243).

47 Althusser 1965b, p. 192 (384, 246).

with the second: the relations of production, i.e., the social conditions of the process of production. These consist in a specific *Verbindung* 'within a certain regular proportion fixed between on the one side, the means of production and, on the other, the agents of production',<sup>48</sup> and this gives rise to a determinate structure of production, a *Gliederung*. In Marx's analysis these elements are further split, on the side of the means of production, into object and means of production, and on the side of the agents, into immediate and non-immediate agents: 'The application of the specific relations to the different distributions of the elements present produces a limited number of formations which constitute the relations of production of the defined modes of production'.<sup>49</sup>

The mode of production is therefore a relational unity, a system man-nature, in which, however, the two terms always and only exist inside a relational structure constituted in its specificity by two dominant relations: the relation between labor and object established by the means of production, and the relation between agents and means of production established by the relations of production. However, the specific combination of the elements is not defined as only economic:

[...] the definition of the concept of the relations of production of a determinate mode of production—Althusser adds—necessarily passes through the definition of the concept of the totality of different levels in society and their peculiar type of articulation (i.e. their efficacy).<sup>50</sup>

Therefore, the elements do not preexist the relation in which they are combined, and in a strict sense they only have an existence as such inside the complex relation of the social whole. Not only is labor not given as a creative force outside of the specific relation with technical means in determinate material conditions inside of specific social relations—the economic is not even given as a universal element that is possible to invariably identify in the different modes of production:

[...] the identification of the economic passes through *the construction of its concept*, that presupposes, to be constructed, the definition of the specific existence and articulation of the different levels of the structure of the whole, such as these are necessarily implied by the

48 Althusser 1965b, p. 193 (386, 247).

49 Althusser 1965b, p. 195 (388, 248).

50 Althusser 1965b, p. 196 (390, 249). Translation modified.

structure of the mode of production that is considered.<sup>51</sup>

In this sense, the relations are constitutive of the elements insofar as they are the *Träger* (supports) of established places and functions '[of the] *relations of production* [and] political and ideological social relations'.<sup>52</sup>

We can now take the second thesis. The first thesis, which for brevity we can call the thesis of the primacy of the relation over the elements, defines the complexity of a social totality. This is not an expressive relationality, in which each relation expresses all of the others in a homogenous space, but a structural relationality that defines a complex, deep, and stratified social space.

Althusser thinks this first thesis together with a second that we have called the thesis of the contingency of relations. In section 12 of 'From *Capital* to Marx's Philosophy', referring to the concepts that permit the construction of a history of theoretical practice, Althusser underlines how the history of the sciences is 'profoundly steeped in the ideology of Enlightenment philosophy, i.e. in a teleological and therefore idealistic rationalism'.<sup>53</sup> The history of reason is not the continuous and linear development of an origin in which it was present *en germe*: 'We know that this type of history and rationality is merely the effect of the retrospective illusion of a given historical result which writes its history in the "future anterior", and which therefore thinks its origin as the anticipation of its end'.<sup>54</sup> The real history of the development of knowledge is in reality punctuated by 'radical discontinuities' and 'deep reworkings'. 'With this', Althusser concludes,

we are obliged to renounce every teleology of reason and to conceive of the historical relation between a result and its conditions as a relation of production, and not of expression, and therefore as what, in a phrase that is a blasphemy for the classical system of categories and demands the *replacement* of those categories themselves, we can call the *necessity of contingency*.<sup>55</sup>

51 Althusser 1965b, p. 197 (391, 249-250).

52 Althusser 1965b, p. 199 (393, 251). Translation modified.

53 Althusser 1965a, p. 47 (45, 42).

54 Althusser 1965a, p. 47 (45, 42).

55 Althusser 1965a, p. 48 (46, 43). Translation modified. TN: Brewster translates *un mot qui jure* as 'clashes with' rather than 'blasphemy'.

The decisive question is that of the relation of the result with its conditions. Even Hegel, in the *Science of Logic*, speaks of the 'necessity of contingency', but he does so in order to indicate the transcendental structure of the becoming subject of substance: the result is the result of its becoming. Althusser returns to the question in section 19, affirming that it is 'constitutive of Marx's theory, *precisely in the domain of the theory of history*':<sup>56</sup>

When Marx studied modern bourgeois society, he adopted a paradoxical attitude. He first conceived that existing society as a historical *result*, i.e., as a result produced by a history. Naturally, this seems to commit us to a Hegelian conception in which the result is conceived as a result inseparable from its genesis, to the point where it is necessary to conceive of it as "the result of its becoming".<sup>57</sup>

Marx takes an entirely different path: Marx's object of study is indeed bourgeois society as a historical result, and yet its intelligence does not pass through its genesis, but through the 'theory of the "body", i.e. of the *actual structure of society*, without its genesis intervening in any way whatsoever'.<sup>58</sup> The question of genesis and structure is therefore two distinct problems that should not be confused. The theory of bourgeois society as a historical result explains the genesis but not the contemporary structure, which is the object of a theory 'of the mechanism that produces the "*society effect*" peculiar to the capitalist mode of production'.<sup>59</sup> And returning to the question of the history of knowledge, Althusser affirms: 'we consider the result without its becoming, at the cost of making us accused of an lese-Hegelianism or lese-geneticism'.<sup>60</sup> In other words, the relational structure of a knowledge or a society is not contained in the history of its linear and gradual development.

Of course, the question returns in the chapter of 'The Object of *Capital*' dedicated to historicism. Here Althusser constructs, through several passages from Marx's *1857 Introduction* and *Capital*, a 'limit form'

56 Althusser 1965a, p. 69 (73, 59).

57 Althusser 1965a, p. 69 (73, 59).

58 Althusser 1965a, p. 70 (73, 59). Translation modified.

59 Althusser 1965a, p. 71 (74, 60).

60 Althusser 1965a, p. 72 (76, 61). TN: The term 'lese' derives from the French verb *léser*, meaning 'to wrong' or 'to do wrong by'. One non-verbal form is the noun *lése-majesté* signifying a crime, often high treason, against a sovereign power. Althusser adopts *lése* as an adjective, and I have chosen to follow Brewster's literal rendition despite its relative rarity in modern colloquial English.

of Marxist historicism, a limit form that consists precisely in thinking a perfect reciprocity of genesis and structure, becoming and result, logic and history:

We need only take one more step in the logic of absolute knowledge, think the development of history which culminates and is fulfilled in the present of a science identical with consciousness, and reflect this result in a justified retrospection, to be able to conceive all economic (or any other) history as the development, in the Hegelian sense, of a simple primitive, original form, e.g. value, immediately present in commodities, and to read *Capital* as a *logico-historical deduction* of all the economic categories from one original category, the category of value, or even the category of *labor*. Given this, the method of exposition in *Capital* would coincide with the speculative genesis of the concept. And this speculative genesis of the concept is identical with the genesis of the real concrete itself, i.e. with the process of empirical history.<sup>61</sup>

However, if this disarticulation of genesis and result is clear in *Reading Capital*, it is less clear how the category of genesis should be reformulated. And here a note from September 1966 with the title 'On Genesis', in which we find some important indications, comes to our aid:

In the schema of the "theory of encounter" or theory of "conjunction", which is meant to replace the ideological (religious) category of genesis, there is a place for what can be called linear genealogies.

To take up again, then, the example of the logic of the constitution of the capitalist mode of production in *Capital*:

1. The elements defined by Marx "combine" – I prefer to say (in order to translate the term *Verbindung*) "conjoin" by "taking hold" [*prenant*] in a new structure. This structure cannot be thought, in its appearance, as the effect of a filiation, but as the effect of a conjunction. This new Logic has nothing to do with the linear causality of filiation, nor with Hegelian "dialectical" logic, which only says out loud what is implicitly contained in the logic of linear causality.

2. And yet, each of the elements that come to be combined in the conjunction of the new structure (in this case, of accumulated money-capital, "free" labor-power, that is, labor-power stripped of the instru-

61 Althusser 1965b, p. 139 (319, 207).

ments of labor, technological inventions) is itself, as such, a *product*, an effect.

What is important in Marx's demonstration is that the three elements are not contemporary products of one and the same situation. It is not, in other words, the feudal mode of production that, by itself, and through a providential finality, engenders at the same time the three elements necessary for the new structure to "take hold". Each of these elements has its own "history" or its own genealogy (to take up a concept from Nietzsche that Balibar has used very well for this purpose): the three genealogies are relatively *independent*. We even see Marx show that a single and same element ("free" labor-power) can be produced as the result of completely different genealogies.

Therefore the genealogies of the three elements are independent of one another, and independent (in their co-existence of their respective results) and of the existing structure (the feudal mode of production). Which excludes any possibility of a resurgence of the myth of genesis: the feudal mode of production is not the "father" of the capitalist mode of production in the sense that the latter would be contained "as a seed" in the first.<sup>62</sup>

Thus, the theory of genesis should be substituted with a theory of encounter. The term *Verbindung*, which was attributed great importance in *Reading Capital*, comes to be translated more with '*conjonction*' (conjunction) than '*combinaison*' (combination), and the elements that enter into this conjunction, that take hold, are themselves in turn the effects of multiple and relatively independent histories. Only *après coup* can they be identified as the elements of a new mode of production, the capitalist one.

This second thesis, which we have called the contingency of relations, becomes intelligible though a third thesis, which I propose to call the thesis of plural temporality. If in fact the theory of genesis necessarily implies a preformationist model that hinges on a linear temporal schema, the theory of encounter has as a necessary base a schema of plural temporality. In this sense the nucleus of Althusser's theoretical project and the secret of the concept of structural causality is found in the chapter of 'The Object of *Capital*' dedicated to the 'Outline for a Concept of Historical Time'. Here Althusser rejects the Hegelian model founded on the dual

62 Althusser 1966.

axis of 'homogenous continuity' and 'contemporaneity'. In order to think the social totality in Marxist terms it is necessary to think of 'a certain type of *complexity*, the unity of a *structured whole* containing what can be called levels or instances which are distinct and "relatively autonomous", and co-exist within this complex structural unity'.<sup>63</sup> The keystone of Althusser's theory consists in thinking of a 'co-existence' that cannot be flattened out onto a 'contemporaneity'. We find the term *Gliederung* at the center of this definition: the hierarchy that this term introduces into the whole is not that of an expressive center, but an articulation of each of the levels which have a time proper to their specificity, i.e., a relative autonomy, and this hierarchy is founded on a precise dependence on the whole:

We can and must say: for each mode of production there is a peculiar time and history, punctuated in a specific way by the development of the productive forces; the relations of production have their peculiar time and history...; philosophy has its own time and history...; aesthetic productions have their own time and history...; scientific formations have their own time and history, etc.<sup>64</sup>

Here we do not have a plurality of independent times, but rather times that coexist in one and the same social whole without being contemporaneous: a coexistence without contemporaneity, which in order to be thought requires a different schema than traditional causality (succession) or reciprocal action (simultaneity). Althusser points us in passing to the adequate term, *entrelacement*. Making reference to the capitalist mode of production, he says that Marx, taking only the economic level into consideration, indicates the type of temporality in it as an 'interweaving of different times [*entrelacement des differents temps*], that is the type of "dislocation" [*décalage*] and the torsion of different temporalities produced by different levels of the structure, the complex combination of which constitutes the proper time of the development of the process'.<sup>65</sup> In another crucial passage Althusser refers to 'interference':

[...] it is only possible to give a content to the concept of historical time by defining historical time as the specific form of existence of the social totality under consideration, an existence in which the different structural levels of temporality interfere, because of the peculiar rela-

63 Althusser 1965b, p. 108 (319, 185).

64 Althusser 1965b, p. 111 (284, 187).

65 Althusser 1965b, p. 116 (290, 192).

tions of correspondence, non-correspondence, articulation, dislocation, and torsion which obtain [*entretiennent*], between the different "levels" of the whole in accordance with its general structure.<sup>66</sup>

Althusser thinks the thesis of plural temporality, or to use his own words, '*temporalité différentielle*',<sup>67</sup> together with the first thesis, that of the constitutiveness of relations: the terms *entrelacement* and *interférence* indicate that we are precisely not in the presence of the flux of unrelated and, in the last instance, unintelligible temporalities. But then plural temporality is also fundamental in order for the second thesis, the contingency of relations, to be thinkable. In the absence of a plurality of different rhythms, the encounter falls into the category of genesis: the necessity of contingency is not the breach of an empty and homogenous timeline, but rather the necessity of an encounter, an encounter which assumes more times, more rhythms. For this reason Althusser rejects both the continuous and discontinuous conceptions of historical time. Both options are a simplification of the complex temporality of the social whole.

If these three theses are thought together, therefore, a theoretical consequence of great importance results: the presence of the structure in its effects does not manifest itself as a temporal presence, but as an articulation, a weave of temporality. If there is a time of the structure, then it is non-contemporaneity, its impossible contemporaneity. Of course, Althusser insistently reaffirms that there is a determination in the last instance of the economic, and yet on the one hand the temporality of the economic does not play the role of the timepiece of being because even at this level we are not dealing with a simple and visible temporality, but rather a complex temporality that must be built conceptually; and on the other hand, because in every society it is only possible to determine the level of the economic by passing through the complex articulation that links it to the other levels of society. In reality therefore, structure, far from being a Parmenidean cage that imprisons becoming, is an articulated whole of temporality, a conjugation of elements, whose becoming is the precise product of its structural non-contemporaneity. In particular, the translation proposed by Althusser of the term *Verbindung* as 'conjunction' specifies the reciprocity of structure and conjuncture, a reciprocity

66 Althusser 1965b, p.120-121 (296, 194).

67 Althusser 1965b, p. 116 (291, 194).

that rules out, as rightly noted by Balibar, the classic theories of transition.<sup>68</sup> Precisely because structure is a weave of temporality, a complex conjunction [*Verbindung*] of elements that is structured in a *Gliederung* of relations with a determinate articulation, it is actually a conjuncture, as Althusser comes to say explicitly:

[...] it is only in the specific unity of the complex structure of the whole that we can think of the concept of these so-called backwardnesses, forwardnesses, survivals and unevennesses of development which *co-exist* in the structure of the real historical present: the present of the *conjuncture*. [...] To speak of differential historical temporality therefore absolutely obliges us to situate *this site* and to think, in its particular articulation, the *function* of such an element or such a level in the current configuration of the whole; it is to determine the relation of articulation of this element as a function of other elements, of this structure as a function of other structures, it obliges us to define what has been called its *overdetermination* or *under determination* as a function of the structure of the determination of the whole, it obliges us to define what might be called, in another language, the *index of determination*, the *index of efficacy* currently attributable to the element or structure in question in the general structure of the whole. By *index of efficacy* we may understand the character of a more or less dominant or subordinate and therefore more or less 'paradoxical' determination of a given element or structure in the current mechanism of the whole. And this is nothing but the theory of the conjuncture indispensable to the theory of history.<sup>69</sup>

Structure and conjuncture should be thought as reciprocal terms. Structure is not an invariant, deep form of superficial, conjunctural variations thought in a succession of contingent instants (whether continuous or discontinuous). Rather, structure is the complex articulation of the differential temporalities and relations in which the conjuncture itself consists: in this sense the present of the conjuncture is a deep, complex, and stratified present.

*Translated by Dave Mesing*

68 Balibar 1987.

69 Althusser 1965b, p. 118 (293, 196). Translation modified.

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# What Colour is Theoreticism? Faust Reading Althusser

Natalia Romé

“In the Beginning was the Thought”. This first line let me weigh completely. Lest my impatient pen proceed too fleetly. Is it the Thought which works, creates, indeed? “In the Beginning was the Power,” I read. Yet, as I write, a warning is suggested. That I the sense may not have fairly tested. The Spirit aids me: now I see the light! In the Beginning was the Act,” I write. (*Faust*, J.W.von Goethe)

## Abstract

Far from disregarding it, Althusserian “theoreticism” is a long detour through the problem of *thinking politics*. This Chapter focuses on some traces laying on the surface of *Lire le Capital*, through the references to a few phrases of Goethe’s *Faust* and its echoes within a Marxist *heritage*. Signs that indicate on the surface of the writing, the mode in which Althusserian thought exceeds the epistemological ground to enhance, through the tension between Theory and Practice, a problematic regarding time, that opens spaces for *political* thought.

## Keywords:

Althusser, theoreticism, political practice, theoretical practice, Faust

## I. Theoreticism among its limits

In the last page of “Les défauts de l’économie classique. Esquisse du concept de temps historique”<sup>1</sup> in *Lire le Capital*, Althusser ironically recalls the famous vindication of the greenness of life in opposition to the greyness of theory, in Goethe’s *Faust*. This elliptical reference introduced by Althusser, reminds us of a large genealogy of philosophical readings (Hegel, Marx, and Lenin, among many others) that suggest a connection between the development of the “theoreticist deviation” and the very possibility of political thought.

Several readers have considered that the political issue in Althusser’s thought is either a kind of belated emergence, or rather a sort of underground project.<sup>2</sup> In discussion with these arguments, I propose the thesis that, if it is possible to speak of an *Althusserian problematic*, it

1 “[sous] la condition également idéologique de penser cette distance [entre le concret empirique et la théorie] comme une distance elle-même empirique, donc comme appartenant au concret lui-même qu’on peut alors se donner le privilège (c’est-à-dire la banalité) de définir comme ce qui est ‘toujours-plus-riche-plus-vivan-que-la –theorie’... » Althusser, 1996, p. 308

2 Cf. Rancière, 2011; Negri, 1997, pp.139-157; de Ipola, 2007.

will be through the becoming intelligible of how the question of politics (and the problem of *political thought*) constitutes a paradoxical unit with the so-called “theoreticist deviation”. Thus, I understand that under the heavy burden of that name (which, after May 68, not only alludes to a certain theoretical perspective but also involves a political accusation) the central question of the critique of the theory/practice dichotomy is neglected. That is, the critique not only as a condition for the development of more accurate questions about theory, but as a *political intervention* in the philosophical field as well, through identifying the “proper” Marxist theory of what exceeds the theoretical field itself. Henceforward, Althusser will not get tired of underlining that the singularity of Marxism lies in the complex *conjunction* between theory and politics. And this is deeply related to the way he conceives the crisis of Marxism: neither a theoretical crisis nor a political one, but the crisis of its complex combination.

The Althusserian bet consists in the paradoxical movement of emplacing thought on the *liminal space* in which theory and politics become united and separated, making their *disjointed-unity* the structure of his problematic and its *improper condition*.

The philosophical value of the concept of “detour” has been already pointed out by Althusser himself and by other readers;<sup>3</sup> it includes different movements such as long postponements, brief nods, and exogenous issues placed at the center of more or less homogeneous volumes. Among this diversity of possibilities, the resource to the *dramaturgical metaphor* offers a detour to explore the scope of materialist dialectics.<sup>4</sup> Whatever dialectical materialism is for Althusser, it will result in a detour in which the theoretical question is overwhelmed by the political problematic which involves subject and time.

It could be said that the invocation of theater pursues the *deconstructive* effect of making thinkable what the theoretical field tends to leave unthinkable.<sup>5</sup> In this sense, the “theatrical practice” of Brecht responds to a certain materialistic homology with Marx’s theory. Brecht becomes the name of a process of transformation occurring *in* the theater; a revolution intended neither to eliminate the theater nor to produce

3 Cfr. Althusser, 2014, p.45; Montag, 2013, pp.5;46

4 That’s the case with “The ‘Piccolo Teatro’ Bertolazzi and Brecht. Notes on a materialist theatre” located at the center of *Pour Marx*, which introduces the dramaturgical metaphor in the axe of the search for a dialectical materialism, opening the path to a conception of non-contemporary time. There, the resource to the materialist theatre introduces, at the same time, the question of political action as a question of the action in history and the status of events. Cfr. Morfino, 2011.

5 Cf. Derrida, 1994

any anti-theater. A movement performing on its structure a similar *displacement* to the one Marxist theory effectively produced in philosophical *kampffplatz*. Far from seeking the removal of the philosophical or theatrical representations, the materialist position is nothing but walking through the fields of Theatre or Philosophy, assuming that *present absence* that, behind them, determines their form: *politics*. The critical movement that connects Brecht “theatrical practice” to Marx’s “theoretical practice” lays in the work of identifying knots of overabundance in the contentious fields of Theater or Philosophy to demonstrate how both of them “exist to suppress politics to which they owe their existence”.<sup>6</sup>

Hence, Theater should be read not by the virtue of what it says, but seeking that which it makes visible without seeing it itself. This is the way that the elliptical reference to *Faust in Lire le Capital*, and the broad sequence of philosophical and political evocations that this reference brings with it, should be read. It is inevitable to find there a critical dialogue with the Preface of *Philosophy of Right*, where Hegel invokes Goethe, referring to *absolute knowledge*, to assert the primacy of philosophy over religion and art: “When Philosophy paints its grey in grey, one form of life has become old, and by means of grey it cannot be rejuvenated but only known. The owl of Minerva takes its flight only when the shades of night are gathering.”<sup>7</sup> The question at stake is nothing less than the place of Philosophy itself. But, for Althusser, the problem is not resolved with a simple rejection of Hegelian Idealism. It requires action on two fronts, against the omnipotence of the Concept (or Theory) and the assertion of Life (or Praxis), to demonstrate the deep connection between them. Althusserian thought does not, however, proceed through mere denial, but through taking the inherent *aporia* of a discourse to its extremes. Althusserian theoretical practice works on philosophical discursive matter producing the simultaneous critique of abstract oppositions: “No doubt this proclamation of the exalted status of the superabundance of ‘life’ and ‘concreteness’, of the superiority of the world’s imagination and the green leaves of action over the poverty of grey theory, contains a serious lesson in intellectual modesty, healthy for the right (presumptuous and dogmatic) ears. But we are also aware of the fact that the concrete and life may be the pretext for facile chatter which serves to mask either apologetic ends (a god, whatever his plumage, is always lin-

6 “J’ai dit tout à l’heure que dans la philosophie et dans le théâtre, c’est la politique qui parle, mais que sa voix est en générale recouvert. » Althusser, 1997,[1968 ms.], p.549

7 Hegel, 1896, p.xxx

ing his nest with the feathers of the superabundance, i.e. 'transcendence' of the 'concrete' and 'life') or mere intellectual laziness."<sup>8</sup>

This fragment ironizes against the celebration of *practice*, understood as immediately grafted into the "concrete life", and as an affirmation of the *percipio* over the *cogito*. The phenomenological "inversion" leaves intact the essence of Idealism: the religious complicity between *Logos* and Being. Althusser identifies it as the core procedure of idealistic Epistemology, the myth of religious reading, intended as an immediate and transparent access throughout things<sup>9</sup>.

The vague reference to *Faust* gives, nevertheless, a new light to this Althusserian critique of empiricism, in so far as the problem of *practice* exceeds the theoretical field, and therefore, it warns against the risk of an idealistic conception of political practice figured as the specular inversion of the Concept.

In this sense, the development of the Althusserian problematic through several decades can be conceived in terms of a persistent effort to *disjoint* every form of identification between the "Problem of Knowledge" and the question about politics, recalled in the different reappearances of the *religious myth of the state of nature*. If this effort has been frequently misunderstood, it is not due to a lack of this topic in Althusser's work. Instead, it is because of the practical way in which he actually conceives the critical operation of the symptomatic reading, which requires *taking position* in a field that is already occupied. Hence, it should be said that these "misunderstandings" are not an aberration

8 Althusser, 1970 [1968] Althusser, 1970 "Qu'il y ait, dans cette proclamation des titres exaltants de la surabondance de la 'vie' et du 'concret', de la supériorité de l'imagination du monde, et de la verdeur de l'action, sur la pauvreté et la grisaille de la théorie, une sérieuse leçon de modestie intellectuelle à bon entendeur (présomptueux et dogmatique) salut, - nul doute. Mais que le concret et la vie puissent être un prétexte aux facilités d'un bavardage, qui peut servir à masquer, soit des desseins apologétiques (un dieu, quelle qu'en soit la griffe, est toujours en train de faire son nid dans les plumes de la surabondance, c'est-à-dire de la 'transcendance' du 'concret' et de la 'vie'), soit une pure et simple paresse intellectuelle, - nous en sommes également prévenus. » Althusser, 1996 [1965], p.308.

9 "Pour le jeune Marx connaître l'essence des choses, l'essence du monde historique humain, de ses productions économiques, politiques, esthétiques et religieuses -c'est bel et bien lire (lesen, herauslesen) en toutes lettres la présence de l'essence 'abstraite' dans la transparence de son existence 'concrète'. Qu'en cette lecture immédiate de l'essence dans l'existence, s'exprime le modèle religieux de Savoir Absolu hégélienne, cette Fin de l'Histoire, où le concept devient enfin visible à ciel ouvert, présent parmi nous en personne, tangible dans son existence sensible - où ce pain, ce corps, ce visage et cet homme son l'Esprit même : voilà qui nous met sur la voie de comprendre que la nostalgie d'une lecture à livre ouvert, et du 'Grand Livre du Monde' galiléen lui-même, est plus vieille que toute science, qu'elle rumine encore sourdement les phantasmes religieux de l'épiphanie et de la parousie, et le mythe fascinant des Ecritures où, vêtue de ses mots, la vérité avait pour corps le Livre : la Bible. » Althusser, 1996 [1965], p.7

tion of the reading. They are the result of a struggle within the different tendencies on an agonistic field; and therefore, the cost of avoiding the constructivist illusion of producing a new discourse, more real and more authentic.<sup>10</sup> Althusserian theory of reading requires recognizing that materialism is not another Philosophy, but the assumption of the most radical effects of the conflictive inherence of the philosophical field, which marks the surface of each philosophical theory with "inner" contradictions and ideological inconsistencies. The point is that this *political approach* to philosophy, which might be considered a typical late Althusserian thesis, can be deduced from the very *structuralist philosophical movement* -as Etienne Balibar describes it: "...from a structuralist point of view, the distinction between "philosophy" and "non-philosophy" has an essentially relative signification, or yet again, that what is important for thought (for the philosophical *activity*, we might say, recalling how Barthes once spoke of the *structuralist activity*) is always the task of finding the non-philosophical, or the limit, the non-philosophical condition of philosophy, and of managing, by means not only of a specific turn of expression but also of an invention of categories, to bring about its recognition as something new in and for philosophy. Structuralism presents itself, in a particularly coherent and radical way, as a practice of *immanent externality*.<sup>11</sup>

Similarly, Althusser's *intervention* is about insisting on symptomatic exceptions spread in the philosophical field, to reveal what they are aimed to forbid: political practice as its *immanent externality*. Moreover, it is only by means of a serious consideration of *political practice* as a limit of the theoretical field that we can understand the concept of *theoretical practice* itself.

"Hence, if we wish to preserve the spatial metaphor, the paradox of the theoretical field is that it is an *infinite* because *definite* space, i.e., it has no limits, no external frontiers separating it from nothing, precisely because it is *defined* and limited within itself, carrying in itself the finitude of its definition, which, by excluding what it is not, makes it what it is."<sup>12</sup>

10 Althusser knew this very well, and he was led to considering the formula of the "curvature of the stick" or through irony regarding the "vicissitudes of the comprehension". Cf. Althusser, 1993

11 "... (a "thought of the outside," as Foucault put it) in opposition to reflexive, foundational, ontological, or apophantic styles of philosophy." Balibar, 2003, p.5

12 Althusser, 1970 [1968] "...si nous pensions ce champ dans la lettre de la métaphore spatiale, comme un espace limité par un autre espace au dehors de lui. Cet autre espace est aussi dans le premier espace, qui le contient comme sa propre dénégation ; cet autre espace est le premier espace en personne, qui ne se définit que par la dénégation de ce qu'il exclut en ses propres limites. »

Faust's references allow us to acknowledge that the concept of philosophy that would be stated by Althusser years later, is already working, in same *practical sense*, among the pages of *Lire le Capital: that philosophical theories, idealist or materialist, bring in their own adversary*.<sup>13</sup> This idea gathers the most powerful Hegelian heritage *against* itself, insofar as it conceives materialist dialectics as an activity of thought capable of making visible the contradictory character of the Philosophical terrain. Thus, it is a practice of thinking that, by means of exposing its own tensions, achieves its main thesis: that philosophy has an outside which compromises it as an *immanent externality*.

At the first part of *Lire le Capital* the substantial reflection on reading, indicates this way towards the outside under the concept of *décalage*. This concept leads the theoretical field to its limits. And in this sense, the elliptical references to Goethe's *Faust* have a beautiful meaning; they reveal a *disadjustment*, but not *any disadjustment*. They exhibit the disadjustment of what it could be conceived as the greatest ideological operation of unification at Modern Age. An operation that is encrypted as humanist epistemology, and consolidates a strategic alliance between the two idealistic forms of Theory and Politics: one characterized by the illusion of cognitive immediacy, and the other by the divine image of free and creative action. Both of them concern the myth of the *state of nature* as the religious myth of reading. The state of nature is analyzed by Althusser in *Initiation à la philosophie pour les non-philosophes*, a text that has remained unpublished until recently.<sup>14</sup> The myth of Eden is supported by the idea of a fundamental identity between perception, intelligence, and language; a space in which the truth of things, *present* in the things themselves, could be pulled out by a straight gaze. According to Althusser, Christian Paradise is thus, the typical image of *empirism*, where the abstract and the concrete match perfectly and without excess. It is the myth of completely satisfied human being, a placed where no working is needed: neither for a living, nor *to know*. Therefore, Edenic relationships between men are as transparent as those that they build with nature. Conceived as an immediate union of body and soul, human being is guided, following the *movement of nature*. There is neither conflict nor crime, in Paradise; therefore, there is no need for Right or for Politics.

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Althusser, 1996 [1965], p.21

13 Althusser, 2014, p.95.

14 Published in French in 2014 by the *Presses Universitaires de France*, thanks to G.M. Goshgarian, with a preface of G. Silbertin Blanc.

It is here, at this point, that the symptomatic reading discovers the *outside* of idealistic modern philosophies, as echoes of the religious myth of the state of nature in which the idealistic discourse invests in a "deep materialist truth". Althusser points out in the Edenic scene, the recourse to *prohibition* as the symptom of divine omnipotence, where it finds – paradoxically—its own limits.<sup>15</sup>

Warren Montag has demonstrated how deeply Althusser seeks the hidden excess of the theological siege to philosophy, to discover the symptom of its forbidden surplus: "...interventions were nothing less than acts of theologico-philosophical sabotage, their strange and troubling formulas, the *sabots* thrown into the machine that produces the cover over the part of the present that we call the future, halting its operation and in doing so breaking the ties that bound us to destiny".<sup>16</sup>

*A long battle for the future* is fought at the ground of philosophy. It is always a double conflict against theology and positivism. Assuming the emplacement of philosophy *in* real history, Althusserian problematic stands for its right to exist. Therefore, it can't consist in suppressing completely the religious memory placed deeply at the history of philosophy. Materialism is a *position*, not an abstract notion posed against other abstract philosophical concepts. It is the result of an actual activity of identifying the forms of ideological unification in the historically configured philosophical field. This is the sense in which Althusser reads the religious genealogy of idealistic philosophies – from Locke and Rousseau to Kant – supported in the several forms of the *state of nature*. These idealistic discourses refer, in a displaced form, to the *opacity* of real existence; this is implied in their persistent effort to restore the imaginary immediacy of social relations. This reading allows us to understand why, when the ascendant bourgeoisie needs to reach masses to constitute its own ideological unification, it produces a mythical discourse that as-

15 Prohibition to take the "fruits of the tree of the Good and Evil" whose danger God knows well, but is unable to avoid.

16 In a paper entitled "Althusser and the problem of Eschatology" Montag identifies the religious genealogy of the famous phrase about the last instance, "*Ni au premier, ni au dernier instant, l'heure solitaire de la "dernière instance" ne sonne jamais*" and shows how the symptomatic reading works in it deconstruction: "In opposition to what Althusser himself called the theological model of expressive causality that dominated Marxist notions of base and superstructure, Althusser's Economy is an absent cause, a cause nowhere present but in its effects. Before and after, first and last, beginning and end do not apply to the God who exists only in his decrees, who acts by not acting and who arrives by not arriving. It is the occasion of his non-arrival that must be marked and celebrated, the end that does not come, the last that is not last, as if the true end, the end which God is, is not the end, just as the first is not the first. Althusser has played theology against theology, God against God, end against end, heightening the internal contradictions of a field in which both theology and philosophy are detained to produce new effects." Montag, 2015. My translation.

sumes a polemical form, a controversial texture (to the extent that it is compelled to take account of masses existence, their practical experience and material conditions).

Philosophical discourse is engraved with the mark of a siege: every philosophical theory is beset by its opposite because it reproduces, on its surface, the conflict in which it is *externally* committed. This “inner externality” -which might be considered close to the lacanian concept of *extimacy*<sup>17</sup>- concerns *political thought* itself, and reveals the enrollment of the philosophy in history. Philosophical abstraction becomes active insofar as it is *divided within itself*; and therefore, philosophical thesis can only be asserted under the paradoxical condition of taking into account its own denial.<sup>18</sup>

Symptomatical reading implies recognizing this condition as the very rationality of the philosophical abstraction itself, and if this thesis first appears in a “practical state” in *Lire le Capital*, Althusser will later make it the guiding principle of the materialistic position. It is neither the content of a positive discourse nor a prescriptive regulation over philosophical thinking. It merely aims, instead, to take statement of a fact: the (im)proper condition of philosophical discourse, that deals with a *former* conflict that is, nevertheless, always present. Althusser does not furnish a positive theory of the power of this sort of *ambivalence* of concepts, but this inhabits, in a practical sense, his theory of reading which hasn't stopped of *bearing its fruits*.

## II. Faust reading Althusser

It is well worth remembering that while reading *Capital*, Althusser identifies the “historicist misunderstanding”, where many philosophical genealogies seem to be tied up, as the primordial *strategic location*.<sup>19</sup> And that this quarrel with Historicism swirls around the so-called Althusserian theoreticism, which has been fiercely criticized. But it is this statement which requires the fairest consideration. The problem that emerges over this knot of readings, is the problem of *time*. The elucidation of this problem not only leads forward to the category of *overdetermination* as

17 Lacan, 1992. pp.71;139

18 Althusser, 2014, pp.97-98

19 Althusser, 1996 [1965], p.303

a way of putting into a new field the question of theoretical apodicticity, but also to the concept of a *differential temporality* that enables political thought. At this point we can see a detour into Spinoza (a theory of history and theory about reading, both of them taking into account the opacity of immediacy) and also into Freud's theory (the critique over a continuous and homogenous time).<sup>20</sup> Althusser understands that the materialistic concept of History demands a confrontation with the Hegelian notion of Time – in which the essence of History is reflected as such. For Hegel, Historical Time is the reflection in existence of the continuity of the dialectical development of the Idea. The relation between the social totality and its historical existence is a relation with an immediate existence. Therefore, the concept of time implies *expressive causality*, making existence an *emanation* of the Essence.

Althusser identifies the central features of Hegelian temporality as the *homogeneous continuity of time, and contemporaneity of time* (involved in the category of historical Present).<sup>21</sup> By this means, the Hegelian whole has a type of unity in which each element of the whole, whether an economic determination, a political institution or a religious or philosophical form, is never anything more than the *presence of the concept to itself* at a historically determined moment. This entails that the relational complexity of social practices is restricted to existence in a *contemporary present*. The status of the spiritual whole despises the effectiveness of the differences between the elements, and that's why the continuity of time expresses the *Presence of the Concept* in its positive determinations.<sup>22</sup>

The ideology of continuity and contemporaneity of time is the hard core of the concurrence between empiricism and idealism, and the consolidation of solidarity between immediate-spontaneous conceptions of practice and theoretical idealism. In the last term, ideologies of the *pure Theory* or *pure Practice* (or, of the pure frontier between them) have in common this conception of contemporary and continuous time, which, therefore, supports the specular relation concerning *the Theory* and *the Praxis*.<sup>23</sup>

20 Idem, p.288

21 Idem, p.276

22 Idem, p.277

23 « ...de ce qu'en un autre contexte et á d'autres fins Lacan a appelé la 'relation spéculaire duelle) pour ouvrir, en un autre lieu, un nouvel espace... » Althusser, 1996 [1965], p.57

Within this framework, the scarce but powerful phrases of *Faust* spread among the pages of Marxist tradition, draw a spectrum of nuances faced by Althusser as the main *enigma of heritage*. And thus, invite to a detour whose itinerary provides a glimpse at the variety of problems that configure its own theoretical conjuncture: Marxism, besieged by humanism and historicism; philosophy besieged by theology and positivism, and science besieged by technocratic thinking and relativism.

Burden and opportunity, the richness of these literary evocations lay in their capacity to reveal the *excessive* element that besieges Marx readings, *that* what they bring with them *beyond* them. This *heritage* is a dense legacy that inscribes Marx (with the several Marxist readings) into the history of philosophy; neither as an anti-philosophy nor as the recognition of its pure “philosophical condition”, yet as a *décalage* between readings that desestabilises philosophical ground. An event capable of stating what it is forbidden for Philosophy itself: the question about politics. By means of this movement of the reading, dealing with the contradictions of its own heritage, we may find on the surface of Althusserian writing, the blanks that allude to that which overflows its own theoreticist frame. At this point, *Faust becomes a reader of Althusser*, insofar as it involves a deeply interrogation about time inserted on the core of the “Problem of Knowledge”, that displaces the problem and leads it into an interrogation about *the limits of the theory*.

Althusser’s references to *Faust* recall, in some elliptical way, those from Hegel, Marx, Bloch and Lukács.

The phenomenological reading of Lukács finds and underlines in *Faust* a question about Time that concerns politics. Against the tragic and timeless conception of the instant that characterizes the universe of tragedy, *Faust* furnishes a conception of the “present instant” as the instant of the acknowledging. Neither a tragic nor a messianic perspective, this reading claims the *political* sense of the temporality of the “present instant” as a moment which opens itself to the world and that inscribes it in the continuity of time.<sup>24</sup>

Phenomenological and hermeneutical readings have the virtue of leading our gaze toward the end of the second part of *Faust*, characterized as “the fruition of action.”:

*I open room for millions there, a dwelling  
Not idly sure, but to free toil compelling;  
Green fields and fruitful, men and herds at home*

24 Cf. Jameson, 1974, p.140; Lukács, 1993.

*Upon the word new-wrested from the foam  
Straight-settled on the hill-streight, piled on hight  
By swarming tribes intrepid industry.  
Within a Paradise how'er so grimm  
The flood without May bluster to the brim  
(...)  
My will from this design not swerveth  
The last resolve of human wit  
For liberty as life alone deserveth  
He daily must conquer it.  
(...)  
Fain would I see such glad turmoil  
With a free people stand on a free soil.  
To such a moment past me fleeing  
Tarry, I'd cry thou are so fair  
(...)  
Now in the presage of such lofty bliss  
The highest moment I enjoy e'en this.<sup>25</sup>*

It is indispensable to think the Althusserian reading not as a simple rejection of phenomenological approaches, but their *critique* instead. A questioning that aims to capture what appears as an allusion, to get out what insists there, but cannot rightly be thought. Phenomenological reading exhibits the idealistic relationship between time and emanative causality in the Hegelian heritage, as a relationship that works at depoliticizing theory. And that, therefore, forclodes the possibility of thinking its own limits.

The temporality of an absolute and homogeneous presence is, according to Althusser, the principle behind the Hegelian formula according to which no individual can jump over his time. The ontological category of *present* prohibits all knowledge that brings us to the future...

The inquiry about that *excess* is actually placed at the final pages of *Faust*: the moment of the future and the masses, the departure time of solitude. This is the time in which the dichotomy Theory/Praxis has nothing else to offer. At this point, it seems that there is more in *Lire le Capital* than Althusser himself would have preferred to settle there: that inquiry is “present by absence” in *Lire le Capital*, under the form of a question about a knowing capable of thinking the future. This kind of thought can-

25 Goethe, 1912, p.332

not be a purely theoretical one, but it could be conceived in the *conjunction* between theoretical practice and non - theoretical practices. The opportunity of putting into shape this question depends on the opportunity of the combination of the theory with that which is not identical or immediate to it.

In the Preface of *Philosophy of Right*, Hegel states the task of Philosophy (the apprehension of what is *is*, because what *is* is reason). Philosophy becomes, from then on, an inquisition into the rational, and therefore the apprehension of the real and *present*. In this sense he submits that every individual is a son of *its time*, while Philosophy is its time apprehended in concepts. Hence, it would be as foolish to believe that a Philosophy can transcend its present world as to believe that an individual could leap out of his time or “jump over Rhodes”. To recognize reason as the rose in the cross of the present is to conceive clearly the *unity of form and content*.<sup>26</sup>

As Althusser has pointed out, this conception of the present constitutes the *absolute horizon* of all knowing, since it can only be anything but the existence in knowing of the internal principle of the whole. *Tomorrow is in essence forbidden for thought*.<sup>27</sup>

Althusser's reading take us to Marx own reading of Hegel, in the well-known passage of *Der 18te Brumaire des Louis Napoleon*.....where a sort of complex temporality arises: “The social revolution of the nineteenth century cannot draw its poetry from the past, it can only draw it from the future. It cannot start upon its work before it has stricken off all superstition concerning the past. Former revolutions required historic reminiscence in order to intoxicate themselves with their own issues. The revolution of the nineteenth century must let the dead bury their dead in order to arrive at its own issue. With the former, the phrase surpasses the substance; with this one the substance surpasses the phrase.”<sup>28</sup>

The core question rises *among* the Hegelian notion of time, as an Absolut Present, and that one which Althusser *reads* in Marx. It is within the *spectrum* opened by this difference of temporalities where the question of politics starts to take shape.

The ontological category of the Hegelian present prevents any anticipation of thought, any knowing that deals with the future. At this point

26 Hegel, 1896, pp.28-30

27 “...demain lui est par essence interdit.” Althusser, 2008, p.278

28 Marx, 1907, p.7

we understand why Althusser affirms that no Hegelian politics is possible, and that, in fact, *there has never been a Hegelian politician*.<sup>29</sup>

This quotation of *Lire le Capital*, about the lack of a hegelian politician alludes to the problem of political thought placed in the liminal space of theory. This liminal space cannot be considered by a Philosophy of the *adjustment* between substance and phrase. Moreover, we are led to think that this kind of philosophy finds its own task on the effort of resisting any *décalage* between substance and phrase.

This will be the great challenge for the materialist philosophical position: to give rise to a concept of time from the very *deconstruction* of continuous/contemporary time. This task would only be possible by assuming seriously the imaginary “problem of individual in history”<sup>30</sup> and developing instead the accurate concept of *political practice*; this is to say, to identify its *difference* with theoretical practice. The future of Marxist dialectical materialism depends on it, Althusser repeats this frequently. But, this means that it should be conceivable a sort of philosophical “necessity” capable of opening its own “inner space” to such a “knowing of the future”.

Can we guess, following Althusser, where could we find that “knowing of the future”? Could we consider it a “knowing”, in the strict sense of the term?

We can risk a thesis, searching –as Althusser would say- twenty pages forward: that kind of knowing claims for a *political thinking*. Not a theory *about* politics, but the *political reading* of an actual conjuncture: “... the analysis of the structure of a *conjuncture*, the displacements and condensations of its contradictions and their paradoxical unity, all of which are the very existence of that 'current situation' which political action was to transform, in the strongest sense of the word, between February and October, 1917.”<sup>31</sup>

Against the speculative thesis that conceives the concrete and the singular of a situation, as the phenomena in which an aprioristic necessity expressed itself, the political thought manages to consider the contradictory unity of an actual conjuncture. Far from idealist theo-

29 « ...il n'y a pas de politique hégélienne possible, et, de fait, on n'a jamais connu d'homme politique hégélien. » Althusser, 1996, p.278

30 “ de 'probleme' du 'role de l'individu dans l'histoire' qui posé sous sa forme celebre est un probleme faux parce bancal, theoriquement 'adulterin' puisqu'on y confronte la theorie d'un objetc à l'existence empirique d'un autre” Idem, pp.300-301

31 1969, p.179

ries this singular kind of knowing is a *knowing of the singular*. A knowing of revolutionary practice, placed within the liminal space of theoretical field, and performed while thinking *the limits*: "...about the practice of the class struggle, in other words, about what makes it possible to act on History from within the sole history present, about what is specific in the contradiction and in the dialectic, about the specific difference of the contradiction which quite simply allows us, not to demonstrate or explain the 'inevitable' revolutions *post festum*, but to 'make' them in our unique present, or, as Marx profoundly formulated it, to make the dialectic into a revolutionary method, rather than the theory of the *fait accompli*." <sup>32</sup>

### III. A few words to jump out of the train

The simultaneous battle against both the empiricist and idealist forms of continuous and contemporary time is, at last, a conflict within the religious images of *genesis*: the idealistic unity between logical order and historical order which reminds us the Edenic nostalgia of immediacy of life. Althusser led us to understand that it will be only by questioning these ideologies of Time interwoven into Epistemology, that it will be possible a *political thought*; and thus, to consider political practice as a *real practice*.

Between the green and the gray, "fate" of the materialistic dialectics is played. It is only after having settled this confusion, that the distance to think politics as a practice of *this world* can be opened, and rooted out of the domains of "the small god of the world" image of the great God.

"Althusserian theoreticism" can be considered, hence, as an immense theoretical effort to pursue the implications of the *aporia* called *theoretical practice*, to its limits; that is, towards that impossible place of the current instant. There lays the great challenge of the materialist position: the radical adventure of *thinking politics*.

*Reading Althusser* is not about elucidating his psychological intentions, and has nothing to do with exegetical pleasure. It responds to the *political urgency* of (re)commencing a thought that has obligated itself to elude the dichotomies with which, finally, the 20th century has been entangled.

.....  
32 Althusser, 1969, p.180

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# On Althusser on Science, Ideology, and the New, or Why We Should Continue to Read *Reading Capital*

Geoff Pfeifer

## Abstract:

It is no secret that much of the criticism of Althusser's work during the period within which *Reading Capital* was written centers on his alleged 'theoreticism', or the view that revolutionary practice needs theory (or theoretical practice) if it is to be truly revolutionary and thus theory is primary and autonomous whereas other forms of practice are secondary and must be tied to theory insofar as it is only theory that can liberate practice from its entrapment in ideology (this is of course, in a very general sense, the foundation of the science/ideology split in Althusser's work from this period). As Jacques Rancière has put this criticism in his assessment of *Reading Capital*, "this reading of Marx via Althusser and Lacan does little more than give a new sheen to the thesis Kautsky had already defended: science belongs to the intellectuals and it is up to them to bring it to producers necessarily cut off from knowledge"<sup>1</sup> Criticisms such as Rancière's are what, in part, led Althusser himself to work to clarify his position during what we know as his 'critical period' wherein he argues that theory itself is a form a political intervention. This essay returns to these debates in order to point to the relevance of the central thesis of *Reading Capital* for our time arguing that ultimately, Althusser's project is not one in which theory trumps other forms of practice, but rather one in which Marxist theory (or science in the parlance of *Reading Capital*) is what can help us make sense of those moments in other forms of revolutionary practice that are distinct from the ideological field in which we find ourselves, and hence can aid us in marking the border between ideology and the new, the non-ideological, and the revolutionary.

## Keywords:

Althusser, Sartre, Ideology, Science, Historical Materialism, Dialectical Materialism,

It is no secret that much of the criticism of Althusser's work during the period within which *Reading Capital* was written (along with the essays that appear in *For Marx*) centers on his alleged 'theoreticism.' This is the view that revolutionary practice needs theory (or theoretical practice) if it is to be truly revolutionary and thus, theory is primary and autonomous whereas other forms of practice are secondary and must be tied to

<sup>1</sup> Jacques Rancière, *Althusser's Lesson*, translated by Emiliano Battista (London and New York, Continuum, 2011) p. 47.

theory insofar as it is only theory that can liberate practice from its entrapment in ideology (this is of course, in a very general sense, the foundation of the science/ideology split in Althusser's work from this period). As Jacques Rancière has put his version of this criticism in an assessments of Althusser's work in *Reading Capital*, "this reading of Marx via Althusser and Lacan does little more than give a new sheen to the thesis Kautsky had already defended: science belongs to the intellectuals and it is up to them to bring it to producers necessarily cut off from knowledge"<sup>2</sup> Criticisms such as Rancière's are what, in part, led Althusser himself to work to revise and clarify his position during what we now know as his 'critical period' wherein he moves away from the earlier views about the nature, status, and role of historical materialism as the science invented by Marx and dialectical materialism as the philosophy of that science, and toward a renovated thesis that theory itself is a form a political intervention.<sup>3</sup>

What I want to do in this essay is to return to these early debates—and to the original Althusserian conception of Marxist science—in order to point to the relevance of the central thesis of *Reading Capital* for our time. What I hope to show is that ultimately, Althusser's project is not, as the charge of theoreticism claims, one in which theory necessarily trumps other forms of practice, nor must we believe that it necessarily leads to the view that it is only the intellectual who can bring the revolution to the people, but rather the project is one in which Marxist theory (or science in the parlance of *Reading Capital*) and the theoretician who practices Marxist science can help us make sense of those moments in other forms of revolutionary practice that are distinct from the ideological field in which we find ourselves. So, ultimately, such theory can act so as to aid us in marking the border between ideology and the new, the non-ideological, and the revolutionary.

Before beginning, it might be useful to acknowledge that I am purposefully ignoring the context in which Rancière's criticism is uttered. That is, it is certainly the case that Althusser's reaction to the student movement of 68 and also Althusser's arguing in favor of the view that the French Communist Party should give special consideration to party intellectuals because of the importance of their theoretical enterprise sets the stage for Rancière's concerns. This I will not dispute. Nor will I dispute the fault he finds in Althusser's choices here, rather, what I am only

2 Rancière, 2011 p. 47.

3 See, Althusser, 1976.

interested in, is defending the view that theory holds a special place in Marxist practice but I don't think, as noted above, that one need endorse Althusser's political choices at this particular moment in history in order to endorse his philosophical position. I will return to all of this below but for now, let's back up and briefly recall the main points elaborated by Althusser in *Reading Capital* and *For Marx*.

## I.

As is well known Althusser begins by arguing that Marx, in his mature work, after the break with both his Hegelianism and his Feuerbachianism, founds the science of history known as historical materialism and at the same time the philosophy of this science, Dialectical Materialism. The former (historical materialism) is, as is also well known, the Marxist science of history and the history of social formations while the latter (dialectical materialism, the substance of which is what really interests Althusser) is, as Althusser himself puts it, "the theory of the differential nature of theoretical formations and their history" or in other words, as I have said elsewhere, where historical materialism is the science of history, dialectical materialism is the philosophy within which it becomes possible to understand the science of historical materialism.<sup>4</sup>

Althusser goes on to argue that these two important foundations are related but irreducible to one another. This is significant for both theoretical and political reasons. In making this claim Althusser is marking one of the many differences between his reading of Marx and the readings of Marx given by others in this period. As Alain Badiou shows us in his early review of Althusser's work in *For Marx* and *Reading Capital*, Althusser argues that other forms of Marxism either reduce Marx's philosophy (dialectical materialism) to the science of history (historical materialism) wherein Marx's work becomes, as Badiou puts it, little more than a "dialectical anthropology in which historicity becomes a founding category, rather than a constructed concept," or they "force historical materialism into dialectical materialism" and treat "contradiction as an abstract law applicable to anything."<sup>5</sup>

Among Althusser's examples of the former type of Marxism—that

4 Pfeifer 2015 p. 54.

5 Badiou 2012, pp. 140-141.

of the reduction of dialectical materialism to historical materialism and the turning of Marxism into a dialectical anthropology—is Sartre’s. Sartre argues in the *Critique of Dialectical Reason* that, “matter” and human action—or ‘human undertakings’ as he terms it—are such that, “Each term modifies the other: the passive unity of the object determines material circumstances which the individual or group transcend by their *projects*, that is, *by a real active totalization* aimed at changing the world.”<sup>6</sup>

In order to further understand this, we can begin by pointing out that the material world in which we find ourselves (and its structures, objects, and institutions) is, according to Sartre, one that we have made ourselves insofar as humans are, through their production and projects, intertwined with and involved in the constructing and reconstructing of that world. In this fashioning of the world, we too are fashioned in particular ways via the active appropriation of this material world through our ‘projects’ both individual and collective as well as through the ways in which such fashioning, both past—as in those ways of fashioning which are inherited from past generations—and present—those ways of fashioning that are underway in a given time and place—impinge on our own productive activities, understandings of our world, and possibilities for the types of projects that are available at a given time. We can think here of the types of roles that are available in given times and places- who one is, what one can do, is always structured by one’s historical moment, and this moment, and its material possibilities and impossibilities, is the result of the collective and historical production of the world by humans up to this point. In other words, there is, according to Sartre, a dialectical relation between human and matter such that each acts upon, and implies the existence of the other. This then is the meaning of Sartre’s claim in the quote above that ‘matter’ and ‘human undertakings’ modify each other.

To be sure, as alluded to above, though the ‘matter’ that exists at a given time and place is the result of this dialectic between it and human undertakings, such matter certainly does not always appear to us in this form (as the result of human action or labor). Rather, the material world often appears in the form of an inert, solidified objectivity that seems to act as a limit to our own projects in the form of the given—and limited—set of possible and impossible ways of being or projects that exist at a particular time and place.

The reasons for this are two-fold. First, materiality is not simply

.....  
6 Sartre 2004, p.182.

the result of the individualized work of one’s own undertakings and projects. It is rather the collective product of a human community both in meaning and in form- so ‘matter’ does not belong to any one person, but rather to a community (and the dialectical effect on, and production of, individuals in the relation that exists between a given material and the human, is also felt by the community as a whole). Second, as noted above, Sartre argues that such material is historical- it is always at least partially the product of the endeavors of individuals and communities that come before. It is then, for these two reasons that matter confronts one, at least initially, as alien, separate, and as a ‘negation’ or limit to one’s power as a human. Think here for example, of the materiality of law: it is a human creation, but it is the result of a long (and ongoing) historical process that is far removed from the lives of many individuals. As such, law often confronts individuals as an inert, solidified object whose structures form a limit to action, and in relation to which such individuals appear mostly powerless.

As Sartre also notes, however, humanity’s power quickly returns insofar as individuals and communities are able to, through their own projects in their own times, act to negate the negation of their actions caused by the material world that confronts them. Here is Sartre echoing much of what we said above and also turning to a discussion of the power inherent in humanity in its relation to matter:

In this sense, the materiality of things and institutions is the radical negation of invention or creation; but this negation comes to Being through the project’s negation of previous negations. Within the ‘matter-undertaking’ couple, man causes himself to be negated by matter. By putting his meanings (that is to say the pure totalizing transcendence of previous Being) into matter, man allows himself to lend his negative power, which impregnates materiality and transforms itself into a destructive power.<sup>7</sup>

The central motor of this process of creation and negation then, on Sartre’s account of it, is human action. In humanity’s relation to (both as cause and as effect), and revision of, material objects, structures, and institutions (both in the past and in the present) that exist in the world, we find the driving force of materialist history and a materialist conception of historical change. For Sartre, Marxism really is a dialectical anthropology that looks to history (or historicity) in order to make sense of this process. So here, we can see the way that historical materialism swal-

.....  
7 Ibid., p. 183.

lows dialectical materialism for Sartre insofar as, the dialectical process simply becomes the historical process itself within which humans are confronted by, appropriate, and recreate their material worlds (and themselves in this process).

In critiquing this reductionist view—recall here that this view is reductionist in the sense that it reduces Marx’s thought to such a historical method—, Althusser points out that, “...A second underhanded reduction can be introduced, by treating the relations of production as mere human relations.”<sup>8</sup> We can see this operative in what we have described above insofar as Sartre argues that ultimately the dialectical relations between matter and the human are founded on and by the actions of humans in their ongoing, collective modes of production, reproduction, and transformation of the material world, and also in his portrayal of the influence this process has on humanity itself. Althusser continues:

This second reduction depends on something ‘obvious’: is not history a human phenomenon through and through, and did not Marx, quoting Vico, declare that men can know it since they have ‘made’ all of it? But this ‘obviousness’ depends on a remarkable presupposition: that the ‘actors’ of history are the authors of its text, the subjects of its production.<sup>9</sup>

It is, of course, Althusser’s reading of Marx that is opposed to this kind of view, but before we say more about why, we should see what further conclusions he draws out of this kind of reading of Marx.

By putting the human back at the center of both the production and reproduction of the matter/human dialectic, theoretical views like those that Sartre offers also, as we have begun to see, make Marxism about reading the history of humanity and its influence on itself via the dialectical relation between constructed matter as determining human subjectivity in its historical foundations and human subjectivity’s overcoming of that determination via its laboring to change that matter through its projects in the present. Thus, Marxism becomes a philosophy that seeks understanding of the history of humanity’s construction and reconstruction of its own nature. Or, in other words, Marxism becomes nothing more than the history of humanity’s role in the construction of human nature itself. Here again, is Althusser:

History then, becomes the transformation of a human nature, which remains the real subject of the history which transforms it. As a

8 Althusser and Balibar 2009, p. 155.

9 Ibid.

result, history has been introduced into human nature, making men the contemporaries of the historical effects whose subjects they are, but—and this is absolutely decisive—the relations of production, political and ideological social relations, have been reduced to historicized ‘human relations’ i.e.- to inter-human, intersubjective relations.<sup>10</sup>

I will say more below about the distinction Althusser draws here between ‘actors’ and ‘authors, but for now we can say that the project of *Reading Capital* is, in part, an attempt to show that such a reduction misses the complexity that is involved in the relation between the relations of production and the means of production. Though Althusser agrees in part with the claim that the relations of production are social relations between humans, it is not the case that he thinks this is the exhaustive definition of Marx’s understanding of the relations of production.

According to Althusser, what this reading of Marx misses (or at least de-emphasizes) is the role played by the existing means of production and their necessary limit on, and determination of, the role and ability of humanity at a given time and place. For Althusser (and for Althusser’s Marx), the means of production have a kind of autonomy and determinative power over the relations of production that readings like those offered by Sartre miss insofar as they are too focused on, and overemphasize, the role humans play in the dialectical processes at work in the relation between the material and the human projects. So for Althusser, the kind of separation between the relations of production and the means of production at work in the Sartrean reading is simply impossible:

The social relations of production are on no account reducible to mere relations between men, to relations which only involve men, and therefore to variations in a universal matrix, to intersubjectivity (recognition, prestige, struggle, master-slave relationship, etc.). For Marx, the social relations of production do not bring men alone onto the stage, but the *agents* of the production process and the *material conditions* of the production process, in specific combinations...relations of production necessarily imply the relation between men and things, such that relations between men and men are defined by the precise relations between men and the material elements of the production process.<sup>11</sup>

Ultimately then, on Althusser’s reading of Marx, because one cannot separate the relations between the relations of production and the

10 Ibid

11 Ibid, 192

means of production as the means of production are themselves part and parcel of the relations of production (and as such, have their own causal efficacy in determining the ways in which human to human relations exist at a given time), we always need a proper conception of a given conjuncture and its specific combination of material conditions within which humans exist and produce if we are to gain the kind of understanding of that conjuncture's conditions Sartre wants. But this requires more than Sartre thinks it does- it requires a close and careful analysis of the determinative power of 'things' in a given moment.

Further, when Althusser drives a wedge, as we have seen him do in a couple of places quoted above, between 'actors' and 'authors', and 'agents' and 'men', what he is alluding to is precisely this: objects, things, and material conditions (practices, institutions, etc) have all—and in many cases, more— of the determining power of 'authors' and 'agents' in the same way that humans themselves can come to have such power. Though we won't go into it here, it is useful to mention at this point that this view, of course foreshadows the conception of the determining power of ideological apparatuses that Althusser will give us in his 1969 essay exploring such institutions.<sup>12</sup> Further, we can, I think, now see the importance of holding apart what Althusser sees as Marx's method (historical materialism) and his philosophy (dialectical Materialism), subjugating the latter to the former causes one to miss the complex nature of the kinds of relations between the various parts of Marx's system that we have been discussing and in doing that, one can misunderstand Marx's project as a whole.

## II.

Returning now to the earlier discussion of the two mistaken types of reductionist Marxism that Althusser is opposed to, an example of the latter type of Marxism that Althusser's view rejects—the type which seeks to reduce historical materialism to dialectical materialism—we can think of the Stalinist Marxism that infected the French Communist Party (PCF) beginning in the late 1940s wherein every portion of the social structure was subjected to the analysis afforded by a universalized contraction between classes. As is well known, around this time the PCF adopted a version of Andrei Zhdanov's 'socialist realism' which argued

<sup>12</sup> See Althusser 1971.

that in the realm of cultural production (art, literature, etc.) there were two fundamental kinds of such works, bourgeois and proletarian and, in addition to this, PCF also had come down in favor of the Lysenkoist view of scientific production as having the same fundamental division.<sup>13</sup> So here you have a Marxism which applies the concept of the contradiction between classes, in advance, to many parts of a given society in order to sort and explain them. The problem with this from the perspective of the Althusserian reading of Marx, is that, as Badiou puts it in the same review cited above, "under these conditions, the procedures for the constitution of the specific object of historical materialism end up being suppressed and Marx's "results" incorporated into a global synthesis that could never transgress the rule."<sup>14</sup>

This is the inverse (but related) problem to that described in relation to Sartre. In universalizing the concept of the contradiction between the bourgeois and the proletariat, this strategy is, like Sartre, unable to think the specificity of given historical situations and social formations. But here, this inability is the result of an inability to come down from the universality that conditions this version of Marxism's social structure: the structure is applied, as noted above, in the analysis *prior to* the analysis itself but is so without the recognition of this imposition and with a rigidity and inflexibility that dis-allows for any real critical thought about the nature of the conjuncture that is being analyzed. That is, this version of reductionist Marxism is only able to use the lens of the one universalized contradiction (bourgeois vs. proletariat) and cannot look to the specific elements that might be determinative of a given historical situation but exist outside of this one universal contradiction (or this universal conception of contradiction itself). Althusser argues that this one contradiction is itself often overdetermined by other contradictions that exist in a given place and time, and in order to fully comprehend a given conjuncture, one needs to understand the role that contradictions other than this one play. Furthermore and most importantly, this requires that one *not* begin by an *a priori* application of such a universalized concept in one's investigation.

So, as we have seen so far, Althusser's view attempts not to reduce historical materialism to dialectical materialism (or vice versa), but rather seeks to hold them apart, and to show the importance of both as being related, but also as forming distinct modes of investigation, which

<sup>13</sup> For more on this see, Pfeifer 2015, Lewis 2005, Elliott, 2006, Adereth, 1984.

<sup>14</sup> Badiou 2012, p. 141

in their relation, inform one another. Again, I think Badiou is helpful here. He refers to Althusser's conception as that of an "analogical Marxism" which "establishes between historical materialism and dialectical materialism a relation of correspondence juxtaposing the two terms, with the Marxist philosophy at every moment being the structural double of a given state of social formation."<sup>15</sup> This is to say that, again, as Althusser sees it, Historical Materialism and Dialectical Materialism are co-constitutive: in the founding of the theory of historical materialism, Marx also founds the philosophy of dialectical materialism which allows for, as noted above, the recognition and understanding of the theory of history as such.

### III.

This history and this understanding are of a very particular nature for Althusser: they are both epistemological- that is, as we will see below, they both have to do with the production of knowledge out of social and material relations and those sets of relations' particular historical arrangement in particular times and particular places in history. This knowledge is also and importantly, itself a result of the particular arrangement of social *practices* that exist at a given time.

This of course is the theory of the primacy of practice that Althusser elaborates and that was alluded to above. We should pause here for a moment and say a bit more about Althusser's conception of practice. A practice as Althusser understands it is:

...Any process of transformation of a determinate given raw material into a determinate product, a transformation effected by a determinate human labor using a determinate means (of production). In any practice thus conceived, the determinant moment (or element) is neither raw material, nor the product but the practice in the narrow sense: the moment of the labor of transformation itself, which sets to work, in a specific structure, men, means, and a technical method of utilizing the means.<sup>16</sup>

Practices are, in this way, a part of the means of production. Recall our discussion above of the role that such means play at the intersection between humans and matter wherein such means (or material conditions inside of which production takes place) are determinative of both matter

15 Ibid., p. 142.

16 Althusser 2005, p. 166

and human relations as such. The practice then, is a 'work' in the sense that it is the 'actor' or the 'agent' of transformation itself, that exists between the raw material, the human, and the product. In other words, though practices engage humans and human capacities/activities, they are material insofar as they exist outside of individual humans and make up the foundation of the ways humans come to understand themselves.

This general definition of practice, furthermore, allows for the identification of, as Althusser argues, "different levels of human practice (economic practice, political practice, ideological practice, scientific practice) in their characteristic articulations, based on the specific articulations of the unity of human society."<sup>17</sup> We should be careful here to point out that though it is the case that we are given a general definition of practice by Althusser, this general definition, in its particular expression, is different for each of the different types of practices in general. As Norman Geras has pointed out:

Economic practice involves putting to work labor power and means of material production to transform natural or already worked up materials into socially useful products, theoretical or scientific practice brings together "thought power" and means of theoretical labor (the concepts of a theory and its method) to produce from concepts, representations, intuitions, a specific product: knowledges. Political practice works on its own type of raw materials, given social relations, to produce its own type of product, new social relations. Ideological practice transforms the forms of representation and perception in which agents of a social formation 'live' their relations with their world.<sup>18</sup>

Though I think that Geras' definition of the different modes of transformation via the work of practice is helpful, I want to make one small correction. Where Geras speaks of scientific practice as a form of theoretical practice he does not apply the term theoretical practice to ideological practice but rather seems to reserve it for scientific practice only. Althusser does not do this: he takes it to be the case that both scientific practice and ideological practice are in fact forms of theoretical practice.<sup>19</sup> This is a crucial point and I now want to turn our attention to the split between scientific practice and ideological practice as it is this that is most important for our purposes in the remainder of this paper.

17 Ibid., 229

18 Geras 1972, p. 62.

19 See for instance Althusser 2009, p. 49.

#### IV.

Recall again the claim just made about the 'work' of theoretical practice: it brings together 'thought power' and the other means of theoretical labor (concepts and a method). The raw material that is worked on in theoretical practice and transformed into the object of knowledge, is precisely not the real object itself (the object that exists outside of and prior to thought). Rather, it is the object as already appropriated by thought (or the concepts and methods through which one understands her or his world). So here we see the distinction between thought and reality as such, or as Althusser puts it, here we come upon the fact that:

The real is one thing, along with its different aspects: the real-concrete, the process of the real, the real totality, etc. thought about the real is another, along with its different aspects: the thought process, the thought-totality, the thought concrete, etc.<sup>20</sup>

Althusser continues, outlining the materialism inherent in this:

This principle distinction implies two essential theses: 1. The materialist thesis of the primacy of the real over thought about the real presupposes the existence of the real independence of that thought (the real survives in its independence, after, as before, outside the head –grun- drisse 22) 2. The materialist thesis of the specificity of thought and the thought process, with respect to the real and the real process.<sup>21</sup>

So here, theoretical practice is not the practice of transforming the real object into the object of knowledge but rather a working of thought on the object of knowledge itself as that which is also given in thought. Though this is the case, namely that in theoretical practice, we remain within the confines of thought/concepts/theoretical methods and never reach the real that is outside of thought, Althusser claims that there is a very important relation between the object of knowledge that is worked on in theoretical practice and the real object. Here he points out that theoretical practice remains tied to the real object insofar as the object of knowledge is always an object which attempts to approximate the real object, that is, it is only through our conceptual 'work' that we approach the real object (in theoretical practice anyway).

We should pause for a moment here and talk briefly about the Althusserian concept of a 'problematic' as this will further help make

.....  
20 Ibid., 87

21 Althusser and Balibar. 2005, p. 87.

sense of this complex point. A problematic as Althusser understands it is a given historical set or framework of concepts which exist together as a means through which thought grasps its world. These complexes or frameworks of concepts shift and change over time as new modes of theoretical practice arise and old modes drop off (through the theoretical work of transformation). The problematic then, has a kind of independent existence in the same way that practices do and also in the same way that the materiality of the means of production do (as we discussed above): thought pre-exists any given individual's use of its framework in relating to the world and is rather that into which individuals are inserted as it is the given problematic that is handed down to individuals as the mode through which one comes to comprehend one's world. In other words, thought (as material), in its historical specificity and given historical conceptual arraignment, is determinative of one's understand of oneself and one's world. This gets us back to the distinction between ideological and scientific practice.

Returning once more to Badiou with what I have said so far in mind, in characterizing this distinction in Althusser, he writes (and this will act as a frame for what I have to say for the rest of this essay) that if for Althusser, "science is a process of transformation, ideology—insofar as the unconscious comes to constitute itself therein—is a process of repetition"<sup>22</sup> In other words, in ideological theoretical practice, there is, ultimately no work of transformation. The concepts and methods that one uses are those that are 'found' to be in existence. This is to say that in ideology, one never leaves the realm of the existing problematic through which one first comprehends one's world. In ideological practice, one simply and endlessly repeats the use of the concepts one finds in existence in one's relating to the world. There is no 'work' going on here, no transformation, no deepening of the relation between the object of knowledge and the real object. Alternatively, in scientific practice, one interrogates the object of knowledge and (and thereby also the problematic itself) as it has been handed down to one and attempts, through theoretical labor, to transform that object of knowledge (with the goal of deepening the relation between that object and the real object). It is in this act of theoretical transformation that the new becomes possible- in the work of theoretical transformation of the problematic, a new object of knowledge is forged and the old is left behind. It is then, in this way that historical materialism and dialectical materialism are bound together:

.....  
22 Badiou 2012 p. 147.

where historical materialism, in its analysis of the history of social formations, gives us the tools to understand a given problematic (along with the given set of other types of practice), dialectical materialism gives us the tools for marking the distinction between ideological and scientific practice (repetition and transformation) insofar as it allows a window into the specificity of a given conjuncture. In other words, in the founding of the possibility of science as science—or, dialectical materialism—we also have the founding of ideology as ideology. The two are inextricably linked. Here once more is Badiou:

From the definition of DM [Dialectical Materialism] (discipline in which the scientificity of HM [Historical Materialism] is pronounced) we immediately derive that the determining concept of its field is that of science. DM would not be able to exhibit the identity of science in an undecomposable 'seeing': Thus, what comes first is the differential *couple* science-ideology. The object proper to dialectical materialism is the system of pertinent differences that both and at the same time disjoins and joins science and ideology.<sup>23</sup>

Understood this way, what Marxist science as Althusser describes it does is first and foremost, mark the difference between the scientific and the ideological, thereby identifying the ideological as such (and at the same time, the scientific as the scientific), which then in turn, constructs what is determined as ideological to be so for that particular science. Bruno Bosteels, in commenting on this, puts the point this way, "not only is every science dependent on the ideology that serves merely to designate its possible existence, but there is also no discourse known as ideological except through the retroaction of science."<sup>24</sup>

What now of the concerns raised at the beginning of this essay? What can we now say about the worry about the elevation of the role of the intellectual and the claim made by Ranciere that all that Althusser's theory does is privilege the role of theoretical practice at the expense of other forms of practice? Well, in one sense he is correct. It is truly the case (if we are to buy Althusser's conception anyway) that it is theory that can mark the difference between the ideological and the new, but this is by no means leads to the claim that only theory can do this- it can offer a guide, or means through which to examine other forms of practice in order to root out the ways in which those forms are simply bound to

23 Badiou, 2012. p.146.

24 Bosteels, 2011, p. 54.

the problematic in which they arise (and hence ideological). It can also, however, serve to mark those elements of other practices that are not ideological in this way and that instead push toward the work of transformation, both theoretically and practically. It is certainly in this, that theory is as relevant as ever for those who wish to find and/or produce moments wherein social and theoretical transformation is possible.

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# Is There Less Bullshit in *For Marx* than in *Reading Capital*?

## William Lewis

### Abstract:

This paper explores G. A. Cohen's claim that Althusser's Marxist philosophy is bullshit. This exploration is important because, if we are persuaded by Cohen's assertion that there are only three types of Marxism: analytic, pre-analytic, and bullshit and, further, that only analytic Marxism is concerned with truth and therefore "uniquely legitimate" then, as political philosophers interested in Marxism's potential philosophical resources, we may wish to privilege its analytic form. However, if Cohen's attribution is misplaced, then we may wish to explore why Cohen was so insistent in this ascription and what this insistence reveals about his own political philosophy. The first half of this paper explains what Cohen means by bullshit and it examines the distinction between bullshit and non-bullshit Marxism. The second half explores what the insistent misattribution of the epithet "bullshit Marxism" to Althusser's Marxism reveals about Cohen's own Marxist political philosophy.

### Keywords:

Althusser, G. A. Cohen, bullshit, Marxism, analytic, political, philosophy

This paper explores G. A. Cohen's 1978 claim in the introduction to *Karl Marx's Theory of History [KMTH]* that there is more bullshit in Althusser's contribution to *Reading Capital [RC]* than there is in the essays comprising *For Marx [FM]*.<sup>1</sup> This exploration is important because, if we are persuaded by Cohen's claim that there are only three types of Marxism: analytic, pre-analytic, and bullshit and, further, that only analytic Marxism is concerned with truth and therefore "uniquely legitimate" then, as Marxist philosophers interested in Althusser's classic work between 1960-1965, we may wish to privilege *FM* over *RC*.<sup>2</sup> This is the case as the former may already be analytic or amenable to analytic correction to an extent that the latter, due to its bullshit quotient, is not.

In order to pursue this investigation and to better understand why Cohen identified at least some portion of Althusser's work as bullshit, we will first examine the scattered references to Althusser and "Althusserians" that appear throughout Cohen's writings.<sup>3</sup> Second, we will give

1 Cohen, 2000b, p. x. Cohen calls *Lire le capital* "critically vague," a description that marks the work as bullshit according to at least one of the criteria that Cohen develops.

2 Cohen, 2000a, pp. xxv-xvi, 2013a, p. 123,

3 Though there are considerable theoretical difference between Althusser and those who

an account of what Cohen means when he labels a philosophical argument “bullshit.” Third, we will apply Cohen’s criteria for bullshit to *FM* and Althusser’s contributions to *RC* to see whether his assertion that *FM* has more bullshit than *RC* is true. This done, we should then be in a position to decide whether to privilege *FM* over *RC* because of its closer potential or actual connection to the truth.

### Cohen on Althusser

Like the British historian Tony Judt, Cohen found many opportunities throughout his career to criticize the work of Louis Althusser and of “Althusserians.”<sup>4</sup> It is also clear that, for both the intellectual historian and the political philosopher, there was something in Althusser’s philosophy (and perhaps the attention paid to it) that was unsupportable and which both scholars thought must repeatedly be exposed and decried. While Judt was content to repeatedly invoke the caricature of Althusser and Althusserianism first sketched in his book *Marxism and the French Left*, for Cohen, this founding took the dual form of an autobiographical and a philosophical break.<sup>5</sup>

In the autobiographical version of this break, Cohen tells a tale of attraction to Althusserian ideas and recounts his reading of *Pour Marx* and *Lire le Capital* in their original French editions in 1968.<sup>6</sup> Like the revolutions of that spring, however, this “intoxication” with Althusserian ideas was not to last. The first event that Cohen gives as explanation for this falling out was his realization that the “reiterated affirmation of the value of conceptual rigour was not matched by conceptual rigour in [Althusserian] intellectual practice.”<sup>7</sup> The second experience was an encounter with a “tough American philosopher” who challenged Cohen to explain exactly what he meant when he said that, “in Marx’s view, the rich capitalist’s mistress does not love *him* because of his money: instead she loves the money *itself*.” This philosopher wanted Cohen to explain exactly what

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call themselves Althusserians, we will stick with the rough grained category suggested by Cohen’s usage where the category “Althusserian” includes the theoretical writings of Althusser and anyone whose Marxism Althusser’s reading of Marx has profoundly influenced.

4 Montag, 2013, p. 11.

5 Judt, 1986, pp. 221–233; Riley, 2011.

6 Cohen, 2000b, p. xxi.

7 Cohen, 2000a, p. xxi.

he intended to convey with this phrase and “how one was supposed to go about telling whether or not it was true.”<sup>8</sup> The demand was followed by an admonition to always cover the “ground rules” in a philosophical argument, a reproach that Cohen testifies “hit me hard and sunk in deep.” The internalization of this admonition had the effect of discouraging Cohen thenceforth from “writing...in the fashion of a poet who puts down what sounds good to him and who needn’t defend his lines.” From then on, Cohen shares that he challenged himself to ask of each sentence “precisely what *this* sentence contributes to the developing exposition or argument” and he reasoned that it is only “when you practice that sort of...self-criticism” that you become analytical.”<sup>9</sup>

Like many an autobiographical account, this narrative of enchantment, disenchantment, and growth is a bit too tidy.<sup>10</sup> And, though it tells us something about Cohen’s psychological motivation for contrasting his Marxism to that of Althusser, it is a bit vague on specific criticisms of Althusser’s work. Unfortunately, such criticisms were never made. What we do have, however, are Cohen’s broad characterizations of Althusser’s ideas and methodology as well as concise judgments about the value of some of these ideas and about some of his specific works. In the following paragraphs, we will make use of these remarks to detail the reasons given for the philosophical break with Althusserianism.

Famously, Cohen wrote in the foreword to *KMTH* that he was inspired by Althusser’s *Pour Marx*, which “persuaded [him] that the abidingly important Marx is to be found in *Capital* and the writings preparatory to it.”<sup>11</sup> We also have approbatory remarks from Cohen in the 2002’s “Complete Bullshit” essay about the “Althusserian school” championing the idea of a “conceptually rigorous” Marxism.<sup>12</sup> This is the extent of explicitly positive remarks by Cohen on Althusser and Althusserianism. From the generous remark about *FM* convincing him of *Capital*’s primacy in the foreword to *KMTH*, Cohen proceeds to a disparaging assessment of Althusser’s *RC* as “critically vague” and as an example of “how

8 Cohen, 2000a, p. xxii.

9 Cohen, 2000a, p. xxii.

10 Cohen, 2000a, p. xxii) The encounter with the “tough American philosopher” happened prior to the 1968 publication of (Cohen, 1968) and also prior to Cohen’s reading of *FM* and *RC*.

11 Cohen, 2000b, p. x.

12 Cohen, 2013a, p. 112.

elegantly-and evasively-the French language could be used.”<sup>13</sup> Cohen also makes a first attempt at a sociology of the profession in this introductory section when he attributes this vagueness to the fact that “logical positivism, with its insistence on precision of intellectual commitment, never caught on in Paris.”<sup>14</sup>

From general comments about the lack of lucidity of *RC* and speculations about the reasons for this obscurity, Cohen passes on in *KMTH*'s foreword to a brief discussion of the “doctrinal differences” between Althusserian Marxism and his own. Though brief, the statement reveals something about how Cohen saw the Althusserian project and why he rejected it. The discussion is also useful because, from this point on in his career, Cohen writes little about how his Marxism varies from Althusser's and mostly attacks “Althusserians” for their lack of methodological rigor and clarity. Quantitatively, Cohen judges that the difference between his Marxism and that of the Althusserians is “considerable.” Rather than list all the differences, he chooses to state what his Marxism emphasizes: this is “an old-fashioned historical materialism, a traditional conception, in which history is, fundamentally, the growth of human productive power, and forms of society rise and fall according as they enable or impede that growth.” Cohen adds one more hint of what differentiates him from Althusser when he relates that his Marxism does not emphasize “class conflict, ideology, and the state.”<sup>15</sup>

Between the 1978 foreword to *KMTH* and the new introduction to the 2000 re-edition of the volume, Cohen's references to Althusser are scattered. They also lack details as well as supporting arguments and references. For instance, in a footnote from Chapter VII of *KMTH*, Cohen paraphrases an Althusserian argument, signals his assent to its premises and then declares that the premises do not support the conclusion.<sup>16</sup> Later, in the same volume, he references Althusser's concept of “structural causality” as a failed attempt at finding an alternative to functional explanations for socio-economic change. The footnote to this reference then charges Althusser with hypocrisy for employing functional explanation in his account of ideology.<sup>17</sup> Surprisingly, in a set of lecture notes on

13 Cohen, 2000b, p. x.

14 Cohen, 2000b, p. x.

15 Cohen, 2000b, p. x.

16 Cohen, 2000b, pp. 176–77fn.

17 Cohen, 2000b, pp. 279–80.

Hobbes from 1988-89, Cohen makes explicit and apparently favorable references to Althusser's theories of reading and of scientific development when he remarks that “there is game theory in Hobbes, but in a practical untheorized, not made explicit state.”<sup>18</sup>

This reference from the late 1980s is the only positive mention of Althusser in Cohen's oeuvre after 1978 and, along with the negative assessment of structural causality, it is one of the few that explicitly mentions one of Althusser's methods or concepts. It is also the last gesture to Althusser or Althusserians until the series of autobiographical, methodological, and metaphilosophical reflections which began with the new introduction to *KMTH* in 2000, continued with the 2002 essay on “Complete Bullshit,” and that concluded with Cohen's 2008 valedictory address. In each of these writings, Cohen charges Althusser or Althusserians with producing bullshit Marxist philosophy.<sup>19</sup> Though some detail for this charge is given, it is perhaps worthwhile to take a detour into Cohen's analysis of bullshit before looking at the reasons why he charges Althusser with its production. After we understand what Cohen means by bullshit and why he charges Althusserians with its manufacture, we can then examine *FM* and *RC* to see whether they contain bullshit and, if so, assay the relative amount that each contains.

### Cohen on Bullshit Philosophy

Cohen first employed the descriptor “bullshit” in order to differentiate his and his associates' methodological approach to Marxian philosophy from that of other Marxist philosophers in the late 1970s.<sup>20</sup> However, it was only in 2000, in a new introduction to *KMTH* titled “Reflections on Analytical Marxism,” that Cohen clarified what he meant by the term. In 2002, and apparently now cognizant of Harry Frankfurt's 1986 analysis of the phenomenon, Cohen further refined what he intended by the term and distinguished the variety of bullshit (philosophical) that he was interested in from Frankfurt's generic analysis.<sup>21</sup> Though the 2000 and 2002 essays are not consistent (one looks at the verbal form from the standpoint of its

18 Cohen, 2014a.

19 Cohen, 2000a, 2013a, 2013b.

20 Cohen, 2013a, p. 113.

21 Cohen, 2000a; Frankfurt, 1986.

producer, the other at the nominal form), they are complimentary; we will make use of both in our account of what Cohen means when he labels a philosophical text, argument, claim, or statement “bullshit.” This done, we can mark the distinctions relevant to the rest of this paper’s argument among bullshit Marxist philosophy, pre-analytic Marxist philosophy, and analytic Marxist philosophy.

In “Reflections on Analytical Marxism,” Cohen first takes up the rigorous conceptual analysis of the form of bullshit in which he is interested. He does so by focusing on the dialogical comportment of its producer, the bullshitter. This comportment, Cohen maintains, is “a product of an intellectually dishonest posture, one, more particularly, that includes an unwillingness to respond in an honest way to criticism.”<sup>22</sup> Unlike the dogmatist who “maintains his belief in the face of all criticism” and who may be honest about his unwillingness or inability to consider counter-arguments to his position, Cohen specifies that a bullshitter is one “who may be ready to change his position under critical assault.” However, when he does so, “he does not take precise measure of the force of that assault in order to alter his position in a controlled and scientifically indicated way. He simply shifts to another unthought-through and/or obscure position.”<sup>23</sup> Therefore, a bullshitter is one who engages in a philosophical conversation and who provides reasons for her positions. However, when she is presented with possibly valid counter-arguments, she does not consider them according to agreed upon norms of philosophical reasoning and she does not take into account the scientific knowledge relevant to understanding the issue at hand.<sup>24</sup> Instead, the bullshitter shifts the line of argumentation “in order to remain undefeated.”<sup>25</sup> In short, the failings which Cohen accuses the bullshitter of are ethical and epistemic: she is interested not in generating truth through philosophical exchange but in winning the conversation. Further, she is willing to achieve this rhetorical victory by dishonest means.

In the 2002 essay “Complete Bullshit,” Cohen further refines his conception of bullshit and separates the phenomenon from the inten-

22 Cohen, 2000a, p. xxvi.

23 Cohen, 2000a, p. xxvi.

24 Based on what Cohen says about science in the 2000 Introduction and in *KMTH* as a whole, this is the most charitable reading we can give to this sentence, which seems to conflate scientific knowledge and philosophical virtues.

25 Cohen, 2000a, p. xxvi.

tional state of its producer. In so doing, he offers an analysis of bullshit which does not depend on a speaker or author’s awareness that she or he is unconcerned with truth and flouting philosophical virtues of clarity and rigor by “aiming at obscurity.”<sup>26</sup> Cohen is motivated to offer this refinement in order to better capture the variety of bullshit that he is interested in: philosophical. He also does so in order to contradistinguish this phenomenon from Harry Frankfurt’s more generic variety of bullshit where the speaker’s conscious indifference to truth is a necessary element to its production.<sup>27</sup> For Cohen, this indifference is neither a sufficient nor a necessary criterion for bullshit. Instead, he locates the “insufficient concern with truth” which is an essential feature of bullshit “with respect to features of the text itself.”<sup>28</sup>

In order to be bullshit, Cohen further specifies, a statement must meet at least one of the following sufficient criteria: it must be (a) unclarifiably unclear, (b) rubbish, or (c) irretrievably speculative. Cohen focuses on the elaboration of the first criterion because he believes it to be a feature of 20<sup>th</sup> Century French philosophical writing in general and of Althusserian philosophy in particular.<sup>29</sup> In order to apply these evaluative tools to the statements constituting *FM* and *RC*, it is therefore important to cover what he means by this term, the types of unclarifiability Cohen enumerates, as well as the test for unclarity he specifies. Because of the ascription of clarity concerns to Althusserian philosophy, we will analyze this criterion in some depth before proceeding to the two other sufficient indicators of bullshit.

To begin with the clarity benchmark, Cohen maintains that one thing which will allow us to recognize a statement as bullshit is if it manifests an “unclarifiable unclarity.” Such nonsensical utterances “cannot be rendered unobscure” and any charitable attempt at reconstructing them such that that they are sensical will leave a statement that “isn’t recognizable as a version of what was said.”<sup>30</sup> Cohen further enumerates three types of unclarifiability and suggests that there may be others. The first type of unclarifiability is at the level of an individual sentence. The second has to do with the relation of a perhaps perfectly clear individual

26 Cohen, 2013a, p. 126.

27 Cohen, 2013a, p. 115.

28 Cohen, 2013a, p. 123.

29 Cohen, 2013a, pp. 112, 126–27.

30 Cohen, 2013a, p. 122.

sentence to the other statements written or “uttered in a given context.” It is important to note that, in this case, the actual interpretive judgment of a statement is, to Cohen, irrelevant.<sup>31</sup> It may be a fact that an audience judges a statement to relate clearly to other parts of the speakers discourse when they hear it. However, these people may be incorrect and what matters is whether the statement in context is “graspable” when subjected to the test that Cohen proposes. The third type of unclarifiability has to do with the relation between two statements where one is “taken to lend credence to another” but where the way in which this is accomplished is unclear and cannot be clarified.<sup>32</sup> We will label instances of this first type of unclarifiable unclarity “sentential” while those of the second type we will label “contextual.” Those of the third type we will label “credential.” Though Cohen does not note this fact, it appears that a credential liaison is merely a specific variety of contextual unclarifiable unclarity (which always has to do with the relation between two sentences) and properly does not constitute its own type.

If the unclarifiable unclarity of a statement is not immediately evident, one test for obscurity that Cohen gives is that when one adds or subtracts “a negation sign from a text [it] makes no difference to its level of plausibility.” This is also a test for “graspability” because it cannot be said that a statement has been grasped “if its putative grasper would react no differently to its negation from how he reacts to the original statement.”<sup>33</sup> In addition to the “sufficient condition of clarity” test, another explicit lucidity criterion Cohen mentions is that a text or statement must be univocal in its possible interpretations rather than generative of multiple meanings. Though a text or statement may, by these assessments, be proven unclarifiable, Cohen does not mean to imply that a text with obscure elements or unclear relationships between statements must also be without value. Indeed, such unclarity may be productive of a “suggestiveness” which “can stimulate thought” and that “tolerates a multiplicity of interpretations.”<sup>34</sup> Labeling this type of writing “good poetry,” Cohen exempts it from the category of bullshit philosophy.<sup>35</sup>

In addition to unclarifiable unclarity, the two other sufficient

31 Cohen, 2013a, p. 123.

32 Cohen, 2013a, pp. 122–23.

33 Cohen, 2013a, p. 123.

34 Cohen, 2013a, pp. 123–24.

35 Cohen, 2013a, p. 124.

conditions of bullshit are that a statement or text be rubbish or that it be “irretrievably speculative.” Unlike the sufficient condition of clarity, which has to do with whether a statement is univocal, graspable, or makes sense in relation to the other statements it informs or draws upon, an argument or statement is rubbish if it is “grossly deficient either in logic or in sensitivity to empirical evidence.” Presumably, the statements of Oklahoma senators about snowballs and global warning fit this category, as do arguments and statements that violate the principle of identity such as Rimbaud’s famous line: “Je est un autre.” Cohen uses an example from David Miller to illustrate a comment that is neither unclear nor illogical but that is irretrievably speculative (and therefore bullshit): “Of course, everyone spends much more time thinking about sex now than people did a hundred years ago”<sup>36</sup> We can also slightly modify Cohen’s rhetorical question from his 2008 valedictory address so that it provides another example of an irretrievably speculative statement: “If I had gone to Paris, I would have sunk into a sea of bullshit and become a bullshitter myself.”<sup>37</sup> What both the Miller and the modified Cohen remark provide are examples of statements which, though clear and logically correct, are ones for which we could never acquire the empirical evidence to justify.

### **Bullshit Philosophy, Pre-analytic Marxist Philosophy, and Analytic Marxist Philosophy**

Now that we have defined “bullshit philosophy” and now that we have tests which will allow this type of philosophy to be identified when applied to *FM* and *RC*, we can move onto defining and to marking the distinctions among bullshit Marxist philosophy, pre-analytic Marxist philosophy, and analytic Marxist philosophy. Though Cohen does not give an explicit definition of what makes a philosophy Marxist, he does mention Althusser, Goldmann, Lukács, Lenin, Marx, Engels, Luxemburg, Plekhanov, and E.P. Thompson as Marxist philosophers. Despite being a diverse list, the feature that all of these philosophers and their philosophies have in common is that each identifies as a Marxist thinker and each makes use of philosophical ideas originated by Karl Marx and Frederick Engels. Therefore, following Cohen’s practice and in the spirit of his indication

36 Cohen, 2013a, p. 123.

37 Cohen, 2013b, p. 198. The unmodified quote is: “If I had gone to Paris, would I have sunk into a sea of bullshit, and become a bullshitter myself? We shall probably never know.”

from the introduction to *KMTH* that what he has to say about Marxism can be found in section 6 of the book where he talks about Marxists, we will call “Marxist” any philosophy which labels itself Marxist and that originates or develops recognizably Marxian philosophical ideas.<sup>38</sup> Like Cohen, and despite Marx’s (possibly apocryphal) protest, we will include Marx’s own work in the category of Marxian philosophy.<sup>39</sup>

If Marxist philosophy is defined as any philosophy which labels itself Marxist and that originates or develops recognizably Marxian philosophical ideas, then how does one go about separating this great body of philosophical work into bullshit, pre-analytic, and analytic varieties? The qualitative assessments detailed above may be sufficient to allow us to distinguish bullshit from non-bullshit Marxist philosophy, but what allows us to separate pre-analytic from analytic philosophy? As with his definition of bullshit, Cohen becomes increasingly clear over time about the difference between the two types of philosophy, eventually offering both methodological and temporal considerations useful to making this distinction. Rather than give a genealogical account of this development, we will begin with the mature definition formulated by Cohen in the “Reflections on Analytical Marxism” from 2000.<sup>40</sup>

In this essay, Cohen claims broadly that a commitment to analytic Marxist philosophy “...reflects nothing less than a commitment to reason itself. It is a refusal to relax the demand for clear statement and rigorous argument.”<sup>41</sup> This commitment, he further explains, demands the adoption of methodological individualism, or the belief that social phenomena must be understood as causally produced by the actions of individuals.<sup>42</sup> As Cohen writes, “insofar as analytical Marxists are analytical in this...sense, they reject the point of view in which social formations and classes are depicted as entities obeying laws of behavior that are *not a function* of the behaviours of their constituent individuals.” The reason that Cohen gives for rejecting this perspective is that it is “scientifically undeveloped.” Elaborating on this point, Cohen compares Marxist explanation that employs a holistic methodology to thermal dynamics before the application of statistical mechanics. Just it is scientifically preferable

38 Cohen, 2000b, pp. xvii, 150–70.

39 Frederick Engels, 1882.

40 Wolff, 2014, p. 343.

41 Cohen, 2000a, p. xvii.

42 Cohen, 2000a, p. xxviii.

in thermodynamics to explain large arrangements of matter and energy by the movements of individual atoms so to, he states, is it better to explain the necessary breakdown of capitalist arrangements by the actions of its individual participants.<sup>43</sup> Thermal dynamics has moved on to the explanation of heat and temperature as causally produced by the actions of atomic individuals. Therefore, in order to be scientific, Marxism must too. If it does not, it is not scientific and it is not analytic.

To be analytic also demands the use of certain techniques and the exclusion of others.<sup>44</sup> There are three sets of techniques Cohen mentions that “require and facilitate precision of statement on the one hand and rigour of argument on the other.”<sup>45</sup> The first are the “techniques of logical and linguistic analysis developed within twentieth-century positivist and post-positivist philosophy, initially in the German-speaking but then... dominantly in the English-speaking world.” In short, one way Cohen identifies analytic philosophy is by its attempt to clarify the meanings of and relation between statements of positive fact and by its logical formalization of ordinary language statements.<sup>46</sup> The second set of techniques he references is that of classical economic theory, especially as these procedures have been mathematically formalized in the twentieth century. Finally, analytic Marxist philosophy can be identified by its use of rational choice and game theoretical techniques.<sup>47</sup>

Reading through the list of techniques employed by AMP and noting the methodological perspective that it employs, we may note a tension between analytical Marxism’s basic methodological assumption and that of many Marxists, who have historically employed holistic methods to explain social phenomena.<sup>48</sup> We might also note that the background assumptions of logical empiricism, of classical economics, and of rational choice theory contradict many of the suppositions often thought basic to Marxist analysis.<sup>49</sup> These include assumptions about the inability of formal logic to describe social phenomena, about how masses rather than

43 Cohen, 2000a, pp. xviii–xxiv.

44 Cohen, 2000a, p. xxiii.

45 Cohen, 2000a, p. xviii.

46 Beaney, 2015.

47 Cohen, 2000a, p. xviii.

48 Shiell, 1987, p. 235.

49 Roberts, 1996, p. 14.

individuals make history, about the ideological status of current scientific knowledge, and about how profit is realized.<sup>50</sup> In short, analytic Marxism demands that Marxists give up most of the critical, dialectical, and phenomenological tools and explanations historically thought to be constitutive of its theory.

With this necessary detour into the definitions of and distinctions among analytic Marxism, pre-analytic Marxism, and bullshit Marxism, we are now in a position to examine Cohen's references to Althusser and to Althusserians in order to better understand why he identified some portion of Althusser's work as bullshit. We are also in a position to compare the bullshit quotient of *FM* and *RC* and to discover whether some parts of each book are pre-analytic or perhaps even analytic.

I am not going to do it though.

Why am I not going to do it?

First, I will not do so because I think that it is a fool's errand; I am simply not interested in analyzing every statement and the relations between each statement in *FM* & *RC*. I suspect that some individual claims will be unclarifiably unclear and that the relations among statements will not be as tight as Cohen's tests' demand. I also know that Althusser in the early 1960s was wont to make speculative statements about the privilege of Marxist theory in the Marxist movement and about that movement's future.<sup>51</sup> This is so even if Althusser's rubbish quotient between 1960 and 1965 was fairly low. His philosophical writings from this time exhibit few logical howlers and they demonstrate sensitivity to empirical evidence, especially when compared to contemporaneous work in Marxist philosophy. In short, though they may not contain a lot of rubbish, one can probably identify portions of both *RC* and *FM* as bullshit according to Cohen's criteria inasmuch as both exhibit speculative content and unclarifiable unclarity.<sup>52</sup>

Second, I will not compare the bullshit quotient of *FM* and *RC* because I do not think that Althusser's occasional lack of clarity or speculative flight is a fatal flaw that renders his philosophy bullshit. To demand

50 Mamo, 1981; Mulkay, 1992, pp. 5–26; Murray, 2000; Novack, 1969, p. 42.

51 Althusser, 1990; Düttmann, 2007

52 I also suspect that, rigorously applied, one could do the same thing with Cohens work on Marxist philosophy.

this of *RC* is itself a philosophical error: it demonstrates a failure to read the book well. As Althusser makes clear, *RC* was never meant to be taken as the painstaking analysis of the truth-value of a claim or claim in Marx's philosophy (as was the intent of *KMTH*). Instead, *RC* was presented as a preliminary attempt at using Marx's theory of symptomatic reading to read *Capital* itself and in order to develop the latent philosophy within it.<sup>53</sup> Though philosophical structures and scientific concepts were brought forth and developed in the book, *RC* is primarily a synthetic and investigative work, not an analysis of each concept enumerated therein for its truth-value.

Further, the methods and the concepts Althusser and his co-authors developed in the course of the seminar (and whose contents became the collective volume *RC*) were presented as sketchy and hastily rendered; they were explicitly not meant to be taken as "contents in the systematic framework of a single discourse." As Althusser wrote on page one of the book, its essays "bear the mark of these circumstances: not only in their construction, their rhythm, their didactic or oral style, but also and above all in their discrepancies, the repetitions, hesitations and uncertain steps in their investigations."<sup>54</sup> Given this statement of intent and the recognition of the work's preliminary, lacunary and, indeed, oral character, it seems a bit much for Cohen to require of *RC* that it meet the standard of a "refusal to relax the demand for clear statement and rigorous argument," which he sometimes set for his own work.

Third, I will not comb through *FM* and *RC* to see which has more bullshit because I do not believe that, fundamentally, the concepts and methods that Althusser developed in these texts are unclarifiably unclear. Though offering a thorough defense of this claim is not one of the purposes of this paper, the history of these ideas' reception should at least be sufficient to suggest that they are not bullshit. For fifty years, Althusser's readers and critics have been critiquing, revising, and working with the concepts and methods he developed in *FM* and *RC*. Though their first formulation may have been hasty and less than explicit, today we have very lucid explanations of such concepts as structural causality, ideological interpellation, and of Althusser's hermeneutic method.<sup>55</sup> This explication has been done so well that even some of Cohen's anti-Althusserian

53 Solomon, 2012.

54 Althusser & Balibar, 1970, p. 13.

55 Boer, 2007; Montag, 2003; Resch, 1992, pp. 50–51.

allies are able to succinctly describe these concepts and their relations.<sup>56</sup> Further, theorists and activists in fields as diverse as political science, economics, and literature have judged these theories to have theoretical value and have put them to use in order to better understand and to explain the social, economic, psychological, and historical phenomena in which they are interested.

Finally, I am not going to examine every statement and the relations between each statement in *FM* and *RC* for their unclarifiable unclarity because what really interests me is *why* Cohen strenuously maintained for 30 years that Althusser's Marxism is bullshit. One way of approaching this question is to ask: "If many Marxist activists and thinkers find Althusser's interpretation of Marxist philosophy meaningful, useful, and manifestly concerned with philosophical truth, then why does Cohen never engage with Althusser's actual philosophy and instead label it BS?"<sup>57</sup> Two explanatory strategies that could be used to answer this question are the intellectual-historical and the biographical. No doubt, an account which looked at the unique circumstances of British Marxism of the '60s and '70s, at the low status of Marxist philosophy (and of political philosophy in general) at the time, and at the relative prestige held by Anglo-American analytic philosophical techniques at Oxford (as well as at the corresponding disdain for francophone methods) would go some way to explaining why Cohen's might label Althusser's Marxist philosophy bullshit. It might also explain why he could get away with such pejorative attributions and still be respected as a scholar.<sup>58</sup> Similarly, a biographical account emphasizing what it must have been like for a Jewish, red diaper baby, Montrealer to fit in at Oxford among "tough" bourgeois analytic philosophers could go a long way to explaining Cohen's hostility towards French philosophy and towards Althusserians.<sup>59</sup> However, neither the intellectual-historical nor the biographical approach gives sufficient reason for explaining the vehemence and longevity of Cohen's thirty-year negative comportment towards Althusser and Althusserians. Instead, I'd like to suggest another explanation, one that gives sufficient motivation for Cohen's sustained rejection of Althusser and Althusserians. This explanation is a philosophical one.

56 Rosen, n.d., p. 7.

57 Closest he comes is Balibar quote but he bungles its analysis

58 Lock, 1988, pp. 500–04.

59 Cohen, 2013b, pp. 193–97.

## Why Cohen labeled Althusser's Marxism Bullshit for Thirty Years

The philosophical reasons that Cohen had for his prolonged rejection of Althusser can be divided into two categories. The first is the pronounced similarity of their two projects and the consequent need for Cohen to deny these similarities in order to make his project seem more original, more tough, and less "French." The second and more profound reason is that the results of Althusser's projects from the early 1960s contradicted and undermined some of the fundamental assumptions of the theory of history that Cohen developed in the late 1970s.

The initial similarity between the projects of Cohen and Althusser has already been remarked upon in this paper. Cohen himself identified this connection and cited Althusser as its inspiration: it is the denial of the importance of Hegel's influence on Marx's mature philosophy.<sup>60</sup> Though Cohen does not develop this point in the thoroughgoing way that Althusser does in *FM*, this denial of Hegel's influence leads both to a rejection of dialectical materialism (or Marx's philosophy) as it had theretofore been historically conceived. This conviction would have consequences for each thinker's conception of nature, of history, and of individual and social experience. In terms of a philosophy of nature, for instance, both philosophers challenged the idea accepted widely among Marxists that nature develops according to dialectical laws and that its processes can only be described according to dialectical logic.<sup>61</sup> Cohen and Althusser also dismissed the idea propagated during the first years of the Cold War that dialectical materialism can serve as a guide to scientific discovery.<sup>62</sup> In addition, both argued against the prevalent understanding which had it that dialectical materialism includes a robust philosophy of history or philosophical anthropology. Correspondingly, neither Cohen nor Althusser believed that dialectical materialist philosophy includes a formula for revolution or an explanation for all and every historical change. Further, inasmuch as dialectical materialism was often thought to include or to begin from a phenomenological description of the way in which individual subjects must experience the world, both thinkers rejected this supposition. Finally, and to summarize, neither Althusser nor Cohen believed that

60 Cohen, 2000a, p. x, 2014b, p. 318; Wolff, 2014, p. 346.

61 Friedrich Engels, Dutt, & Haldane, 1940; Politzer, 1976; Stalin, 1949.

62 Althusser & Balibar, 1970, pp. 50–51; Cohen, 2014b, p. 318.

there is a specific Marxist methodology, a specific way of understanding the world and its historical and natural processes, which flows from the Hegelian dialectic even if this dialectic be specified as materialist.<sup>63</sup>

The second commonality between Althusser's and Cohen's Marxist philosophy is that both emphasized and wished to philosophically defend the scientificity of historical materialism. This defense began with the shared belief that historical materialism was underdeveloped as a science and that this underdevelopment prevented it from producing knowledge about how our socio-economic system works.<sup>64</sup> Consistent with the shared stances mentioned in the preceding paragraph, both Cohen and Althusser argued that one of the principal reasons for this underdevelopment was historical materialism's reliance for its fundamental conceptions and for its methodology on the Hegelian inspired philosophy of dialectics. Instead of relying on these widely-held assumptions, both Cohen and Althusser argued that the "basic concepts in any theoretical structure must be systematically questioned and clarified."<sup>65</sup> For Cohen, this interrogation was best done using "rigorous argument" and "precision of statement" while, for Althusser in *FM* and *RC*, it was best done by a process of reading Marx that ferreted out and then developed the scientific concepts and philosophical structure latent in his mature philosophy.<sup>66</sup>

In addition to interrogating historical materialism's basic concepts using philosophical tools and to rejecting or, in Althusser's case, to severely modifying the inherited Marxist philosophy of dialectical materialism, both Marxist thinkers wished to bring the best social scientific methods and discoveries of their day to help develop historical materialism as a science. For Cohen, as we have seen, this meant an endorsement of individualistic accounts for all social phenomena, the specification of covering laws as the gold standard for scientific explanation, and the embrace of neo-classical economic and game theory.<sup>67</sup> For Althusser, it meant employing the psychoanalytic methods of Jacques Lacan, the sociological insights of Claude Levi-Strauss, the historical methods of Georges Canguilhem and Michel Foucault, and the historical materialist concepts developed in the course of Marxist practice in order to iden-

63 Althusser, 1969a; Tarrit, n.d., pp. 5, 11–12.

64 Althusser, 1969b, p. 14; Cohen, 2000a, p. xxvii.

65 Tarrit, n.d., p. 7.

66 Althusser, 1969b, p. 9; Montag, 1998, p. 71.

67 Cohen, 2000b, pp. 259–61)

tify and develop the latent philosophy hidden within *Capital* and other of Marx's mature works.<sup>68</sup>

However, and this is the central and most significant difference between the two philosophers, the one that explains why Cohen avoided engaging with Althusser's work and instead chose to label it "bullshit." It is that Althusser does not take it for granted that the dominant social science of his day (as well as assumptions about atomic level description in general) must fully and totally inform the contents, concepts, and methods of historical materialism. Rather, Althusser attempts to demonstrate that the insights from the social scientists listed above and from Marxist practice about the nature of social, psychological, and historical relations are helpful in developing the latent concepts and methods in Marx's writing. Once such concepts as overdetermination, structural causality, ideology, productive practices are identified and subsequently clarified using philosophical tools, Althusser's belief is that they can be employed as the fundamental concepts of historical materialism. This accomplished, Marxist social science can then refine these concepts in the course of its empirical investigations. If the concepts identified are the correct ones and if they are well-employed, then historical materialism will be able to advance its knowledge of history and of socio-economic relations.<sup>69</sup>

In the words of David Macey, Althusser thinks with "borrowed concepts."<sup>70</sup> However, instead of borrowing these concepts wholesale from the social scientific assumptions dominant in his theoretical "habitus" and assuming that they are true or productive of truth, Althusser borrows analytic tools from Lacan, Lévi-Strauss, Canguilhem, Spinoza and others in order to discover, name, and analyze the philosophical structures and scientific concepts which allow Marx to pursue his analyses in his mature work. The structures and scientific concepts that Althusser describes and clarifies in *FM* and *RC* are discovered in Marx's own writing and are therefore proper to his philosophy. To summarize, by a process of analysis, Althusser in *RC* and *FM* does explicitly *foundational* philosophical work on historical materialism, exploring what philosophical structures and scientific concepts constitute its theory.

Though Cohen equally borrows his concepts, he does not do so to clarify Marx's philosophy. Instead, *KMTH* is a work of *applied* philosophy.

68 Althusser & Balibar, 1970, p. 16, ; Peden, 2014, pp. 167–69.

69 Althusser & Balibar, 1970, pp. 183–87.

70 Macey, 1994.

The philosophies that Cohen borrows and applies to Marxism are neopositivism and methodological individualism. In *KMTH*, Cohen begins with a “scientific” claim from Marx’s 1859 “Preface” to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* and examines it using the methodological criteria already developed within these two philosophies. To do so, he must treat Marx as the author of a fully-formed, explicitly scientific hypothesis about how and why socio-economic systems transform themselves over time.<sup>71</sup> That the claim Cohen begins with is an abbreviated claim, one which leaves out Marx’s statements about the power of ideology and about the necessity to begin an analysis of history by looking at social relations (rather than at individual agents), does not bother Cohen. This is because he (a) believes that these parts of Marx’s explanation of historical change are obscure or; (b) because they contradict the concepts and methods that Cohen knows he must use if he wants to do analytic philosophy.<sup>72</sup> To be scientific according to the philosophies of science and social science to which he subscribes, Cohen knows that he must proceed via unambiguously clear statements and arguments to the individualistic explanations of social phenomena that are the necessary condition of all genuine scientific knowing. If this way of reasoning suffices to explain how and why socio-economic systems must perish and be transformed, then Marx is vindicated in his scientific predictions. If they do not, then Marx’s scientific claim is false and his thesis about history must be rejected.<sup>73</sup>

If Althusser had ever been sufficiently motivated to respond to Cohen and to critically examine *KMTH*, he might have noted how *KMTH*’s central thesis relies on an idea of science in which a subject comes to know what its object (in this case, history) really and truly is by means of a process of abstraction and observation. He therefore would have charged *KMTH* with “empiricism” and probably even with its most historically pernicious variant: “economism,” where the true object of knowl-

71 The claim is that “in the social production of their life, men enter into definite relations that are indispensable and independent of their will, relations of production which correspond to a definite stage of development of their material productive forces. The sum total of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society, the real foundation, on which rises a legal and political superstructure and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness.” Cohen, 2000b, p. 28.

72 Cohen, 2000b, pp. xviii, 44–47, 147–50.

73 When he was unable to prove the theory of history that he attributed to Marx according to the standards of evidence and argumentation that he endorsed, it is to Cohen’s great credit that he dropped the theory and sought another justification for his Marxism. (Cohen, 2000a, p. xxiv; Wolff, 2014, p. 348.

edge is understood to be the economy: the reality that underlies, causes, and can explain all historic structures and historical transformations.<sup>74</sup> Probably, Althusser would also wonder why Cohen insists on making individual agents rather than social classes the subject of history when there are so many passages in Marx, including the one from which Cohen abstracts his historiographical hypothesis, that indicate the contrary.<sup>75</sup>

Lastly, Althusser would probably charge Cohen with not really doing philosophy and with not really taking Marx seriously as a philosopher. He would point out that, instead of trying to understand Marx’s argument, Cohen picks and chooses among Marx’s theses, looking for one that is testable according to the concepts and ideas that analytic philosophy, individualistic sociology, and neo-classical economics judge to be true. Despite their similar claims about Marx’s originality and about the importance of Marxist social science, Althusser might also point out that Cohen never takes seriously the originality of Marx’s claims about history, society, social explanation, and the possibility of social transformation. In short, and again despite his avowed claims about the importance of historical materialism, Althusser would surely indicate that Cohen fails to explore the idea that Marx founded a *new* science. With these omissions and with the substitutions of tools from what Cohen labels “analytic philosophy,” Althusser would probably come to the conclusion that what Cohen is left with in *KMTH* is a telic theory of history, one which relies fundamentally for its explanatory power on the decisions of individual agents and that is of the sort which Marx wished to avoid or, at the very least, to complicate.

If Cohen, for his part, were to respond to the diagnosis of his own theory that Althusser never made but that is implicit in *FM* and *RC*, he would have had to examine the methodological and textual assumptions of his own project. Evidently, it was easier for him to keep calling the competing and much more popular Gallic research agenda “bullshit” for thirty years and to irretrievably speculate on “Why Bullshit Flourishes in France” than to ever do this work.<sup>76</sup>

74 Althusser & Balibar, 1970, pp. 111, 138–39.

75 Resch, 1992, pp. 69–70.

76 Cohen, 2013a, pp. 126–32.

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# Althusserianism and Value-form Theory: Rancière, Althusser and the Question of Fetishism Panagiotis Sotiris

## Abstract:

Louis Althusser's writings in the 1970s are very critical of certain aspects of Karl Marx's theory of the value form and in particular the notion of fetishism. However, at the moment of High Althusserianism, in the 1965 collective volume *Reading Capital*, we find a text by Jacques Rancière that is an important contribution to value-form theory and offers a novel approach to the notion of fetishism, treating it as a highly original theory of the emergence of ideological miscognition rather than an idealist anthropological critique of alienation. However, Rancière later renounced his 1965 reading at the same period that Althusser rejected the notion of fetishism. In this text I attempt to re-read Rancière's interventions and Althusser's writings on the notion of fetishism. I also attempt to show that Rancière's 1965 intervention opens up the way for a new reading of the fetishism of value and of the relation between the emergence of ideological representations and their reproduction.

## Keywords:

Marx, Althusser, Rancière, ideology, fetishism, Marxism, Value-Form.

## Introduction

One of the most interesting aspects of *Reading Capital* is the very fact that it is also a contribution to the value theory debate, a contribution that in a certain sense pre-dates the opening of the debate through texts as Hans-Georg Backhaus 'Dialectic of the Value Form'<sup>1</sup> or Roman Rosdolsky's *The Making of Marx's Capital*,<sup>2</sup> or the re-discovery of the work of I.I. Rubin,<sup>3</sup> or the later contribution to value theory.<sup>4</sup> Yet, *Reading Capital* is such an intervention. This is obvious in Althusser's own intervention as a confrontation with the very status of Marx's *Capital* as a theoretical text,<sup>5</sup> and its textual dynamics. It is also obvious in Rancière text from *Reading Capital*.<sup>6</sup>

1 Backhaus 1980.

2 Rosdolsky 1977.

3 Rubin 1973.

4 See for example Elson (ed.) 1979; Williams (ed.) 1988; Arthur 2004.

5 In Althusser and Balibar 1970.

6 Waiting for the new full English edition of *Reading Capital* that has been announced by

## 1. Rancière's theory of the value-form

Rancière's text begins with a reading of the 1844 *Manuscripts*, which for him represent the 'the most systematic form of the anthropological critique carried out by Marx'.<sup>7</sup> This critique takes the form of an opposition between critical discourse and speculative discourse regarding abstraction. Abstraction is viewed in this anthropological critique as both a logical and a real process. The real process refers, in line with Feuerbach's archetypical anthropological critique, to the process through which the essence of real objects is posited outside of them. The crucial theoretical step made by young Marx was to transfer the Feuerbachian notion of the objectification of the essence to the terrain of work and production: 'Thus the object produced by the worker, appears as a Feuerbachian object, as the objectification of man's own essence'.<sup>8</sup> This opens up the way for a theorization of capitalist social relations as relations of alienation. This, according to Rancière, is helped by a pre-critical conception of production in general as a relation between man and nature and between man and man, which enables a conception of production as alienation, as an estrangement between man and his essence. However, this is not based upon a conception of social relations of production. Rancière insists that although Marx seems to present a classical Feuerbachian critique of the alienation as a form of objectification of an essence that separates it from its subject, at the same time there is also a Hegelian conception of humanity as the 'real subject of history' that 'makes use of illusory subjective states in order to impose its laws'.<sup>9</sup> Rancière's conclusion is that inside this problematic it is impossible to pose the question of a scientific theory of the value and the capitalist mode of production: 'we can see how the pair: theory of the abstraction / theory of the subject, prevent the problem being posed of the setting up of the field of political economy as a *field of objectivity*'.<sup>10</sup>

Regarding the mature work of Marx, Rancière begins with rejecting

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Verso, we use the translation of Rancière's text that appeared in three issues of *Theoretical Practice* and one issue of *Economy of Society*.

7 Rancière 1971a, p. 36.

8 Rancière 1971a, p. 43.

9 Rancière 1971a, p. 50. In this sense Rancière's reading is in sharp contrast to other readings of the 1844 *Manuscripts* that insisting on the element of continuity in Marx's work. See for example Arthur 1986.

10 Rancière 1971a, p. 51.

the solution suggested by the Della Volpe School.<sup>11</sup> According to the position suggested by Della Volpe Marx's critique in *Capital* is based on the critical approach that he had already used in the *Critique of the Hegelian Philosophy of Right*,<sup>12</sup> where Marx had insisted on the centrality critique of the subject - predicate inversion, as an inversion of the actual relations between real objects and theoretical abstractions. In contrast, Rancière insists that the absence of the notion of the subject, or of something that could play the role of the subject in Marx's mature work makes it evident that Marx opts for a different critical approach.

For Rancière the important question that Marx poses is exactly the question of form: Why does value takes this form, why does it take this form in exchange, although it is not constituted as such in exchange? For Rancière to answer this question we need a different form of causality that can refer to social relations of production as an 'absent cause'.<sup>13</sup> It is exactly this that can explain the complex relation between appearing and concealing that characterizes the capitalist economy in its appearance as mainly an endless series of commodities exchanges. We are no longer dealing with a question of subjectivity or of subjective appropriation (and distortion) of reality.

Thus the formal operations which characterize the space in which economic objects are related together manifest social processes while concealing them. We are no longer dealing with an anthropological causality referred to the act of a subjectivity, but with quite a new causality, borrowing this concept from Jacques-Alain Miller, who formulated it to the exposition he devoted to the critique of Georges Politzer. Here we can state it as follows: what determines the relation between the effects (the relations between the commodities) is the cause (the social relations of production) insofar as it is absent. This absent cause is not labour as a subject, it is the identity of abstract labour and concrete labour inasmuch as this generalization expresses the structure of a certain mode of production, the capitalist mode of production.

In other words, the equation  $x \text{ commodities A} = y \text{ commodities B}$  is, as we have seen, an impossible equation. What Marx

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11 Della Volpe 1997. On Della Volpe see Fraser 1977.

12 In MECW, Vol. 3.

13 Rancière 1971b, p. 36.

does, and what distinguishes him radically from classical economics. Without this theory, classical economics could not conceive the system in which capitalist production is articulated. By not recognizing this absent cause, it failed to recognize the commodity form as 'the *simplest and most general* form' of a determinate mode of production: the capitalist mode of production. Even if it did recognize the substance labour in the analysis of the commodity, it condemned itself to incomprehension of the more developed forms of the capitalist production process.<sup>14</sup>

It is obvious that we are dealing here with a very important contribution to the debate on the value-form. The value-form is indeed the manifestation of a mode of production, and not simply of a social or subjective calculus that abstracts from real objects. Instead, social relations of production in their complex articulation with the level of exchange determine this form or appearance of an equation between the products of different private labours and the emergence of the value-form as exactly this appearance and contradiction at the same time. Moreover, it is here that indeed we can find a 'dialectic' between the visible and the invisible - a topic that also runs through Althusser's own contribution to *Reading Capital*.<sup>15</sup> The very form of appearing is at the same time a form of concealing not in the sense of a alienated subjectivity that loses sight of the fact that wealth in the form of commodities is the product of its own exploited labour, but in the sense of an objective process where the very result of the causal mechanisms is at the same time the condition of their invisibility. It is a social structure and no longer some distorted and alienated form of subjectivity.

We can no longer have a subject-object couple like that of the *Manuscripts*. In the *Manuscripts* the term *Gegenstand* was given a sensualist meaning, whereas here it is no more than a phantom, the manifestation of then structure. What takes the form

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14 Rancière 1971b, p. 36.

15 'Even if Smith and Ricardo did 'produce', in the 'fact' of rent and profit, the 'fact' of surplus-value, they remained in the dark, not realizing what they had 'produced', since they could not think it in its concept, nor draw from it its theoretical consequences. They were a hundred miles away from being able to *think* it, since neither they nor the culture of their time had ever imagined that a 'fact' might be the existence of a *relation* of 'combination', a relation of complexity, consubstantial with the entire mode of production, dominating its present, its crisis, its future, determining as the law of its structure the entire economic reality, down to the visible detail of the empirical phenomena -- while remaining *invisible* even in their blinding obviousness.' (Althusser and Balibar 1970, p. 181).

of a thing is not labour as the activity of a subject, but the *social character of labour*. And the *human labour* in question here is not the labour of any constitutive subjectivity. It bears the mark of a determinate social structure.<sup>16</sup>

Consequently, what is needed is a more complex approach than the simple opposition between philosophical speculation and actual reality that characterized Althusser's earlier anthropological critique, an approach that will attempt to critically deconstruct the real relations that have as a result the obfuscation of social reality. And this goes beyond searching for an underlying reality, a deeper 'truer' reality under the text. What is crucial is the very fact that social reality is like a hieroglyph, at the same time suggesting and concealing real relations.

We are no longer concerned with a *text* calling for a reading which will give us its underlying meaning, but with a *hieroglyph* which has to be deciphered. This deciphering is the work of science. The structure which excludes the possibility of a critical reading is the structure which opens the dimension of science. This science, unlike Ricardo, will not be content to pose labour as the substance of labour while deriding the commodity fetishism of the Mercantilists who conceived value to be attached to the body of a particular commodity. It will explain fetishism by theorizing the structure which founds the thing-form adopted by the social characteristics of labour.<sup>17</sup>

Moreover, Rancière insists that Marx's scientific approach is in sharp contrast to the traditional philosophical conception of the object as appearance and as the result of a subjective process. Appearance is a result of objective processes.

[T]he constitution of objects does not appertain to a subjectivity. What does appertain to a subjectivity is perception. Appearance (*Schein*) is determined by the gap between the conditions of the constitution of the objects and the conditions of their

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16 Rancière 1971b, p. 37.

17 Rancière 1971b, p. 39.

perception.<sup>18</sup>

The same reference to the absent social relations of production also is necessary if we want to explain the contradictions traversing the very conception of selling labour power as a commodity. The simple substitution of labour (which is creator of value) with labour power (whose reproduction can have a value) cannot explain the wage relation, without reference to capitalist relations of production.

We are confronted with the following contradiction: labour appears as a commodity whereas it cannot ever be a commodity. That is, we are dealing with a structure which is *impossible*. This possibility of impossibility refers us to the absent cause, to the relations of production. The immediate producers, separated from their means of production as a result of Primitive Accumulation, are constrained to sell their labour-power as a commodity. Their labour becomes wage labour and the appearance is produced that what is paid for by the capitalist is their labour itself, and not their labour power.<sup>19</sup>

This is the process that leads to the imaginary expression 'value of labour', and it requires a theory of *forms* in order to be explained. Rancière then turns his attention from the notion of *concealment* to the notion of *inversion* between phenomenal form and real process. 'The inversion of the inner structural determinations, which bear witness to the constitutive character of the relations of the production, in their forms of manifestation, thus appears as a fundamental characteristic of the process. It is this law that determines the development of its forms'.<sup>20</sup>

For Rancière this thematic of the inversion is in fact a theory of the production of subjectivity in the capitalist mode of production, a 'theory of capitalist subjectivity',<sup>21</sup> a process through which the basic tendencies and dynamics are internalized by the bearers of social relations and practices as motives for action. It is here that Rancière makes a very

18 Rancière 1971b, p. 40.

19 Rancière 1971b, p. 44

20 Rancière 1972, p. 32.

21 Rancière 1972, p. 32.

important choice of theoretical tactics. Instead of going first to Volume One of Marx's *Capital* and the theory of fetishism presented there, he prefers to start by Volume Three and the formation of the average rate of profit and the apparent inversion caused by competition in relation to the real processes and determinations. This has nothing to do with the anthropological relation between essence and phenomena. Instead, the 'conceptual work grasps the articulation of forms insofar as it grasps what determines their articulation, i.e., the social relations, concealed by the a-conceptual connection of the rate of profit'.<sup>22</sup> It is here that the notion of the subject as the support (träger) of social relations enters the stage. It is by this mechanism that individual capitalists misperceive profit and cannot perceive the real mechanism by which it is determined. However, this misperception is in fact instrumental for capital accumulation and the reproduction of its conditions. This is determined by the place of the agents of social relations in production.

The place of the agents of production in the process thus determines the necessary representations of their practice as mere expressions of the apparent motion of capital and therefore as totally inverted with respect to its motion.<sup>23</sup>

Rancière turns his attention to the relation between value and price of production. He insists that this does not represent an advance in historical stage, but to another level in the process of production, thus opposing Engels' claim in Volume 3 of *Capital* that the law of value was valid for simple commodity production.<sup>24</sup>

For Rancière it is exactly this theoretical problematization of social forms that is the only way to actually theorize both the structural determinations and the forms of appearance of capitalist social relations and practices.

From here on, it is possible to understand the development of forms of capitalist production. Marx indicates this in a footnote to

22 Rancière 1972, p. 37.

23 Rancière c, p. 41.

24 See Engel's preface to Marx's *Capital*/Volume Three 'This makes clear, of course, why in the beginning of his first book Marx proceeds from the simple production of commodities as the historical premise, ultimately to arrive from this basis to capital' (MECW, Vol. 37, p. 16). For a critique see Heinrich 1996-7.

Chapter One: the value form of the product of labour is the abstract form of the capitalist mode of production. Its analysis enables us to understand the later development of its forms (the money form, the capital form, etc.). On the contrary, if this analysis is lacking, if the critical question of the form is not posed, then the problem of the relation between the essential form and the concrete forms cannot be posed either. One is reduced to *comparison* between the existing categories and the categories which express the inner determination. One is left with a false abstraction which is not developable.<sup>25</sup>

Consequently, that what is important in Marx's theoretical intervention was exactly the fact that he presented a theoretical system and not just a historicization of the concepts of the classical political economy. In a line similar to Althusser's anti-empiricist and anti-historicist emphasis on the centrality of the *problematic*, Rancière stresses the systematicity of Marx's theoretical approach.

Marx's revolution does not therefore consist of historicizing the categories of political economy. It consists of making a system of them, and we know that a critique is made of a system by its scientific exposition, i.e., that this system reveals a structure which can only be understood in the theory of the development of social formations.<sup>26</sup>

The last part of Rancière's text turns to the question of fetishism in order to present a reading of the notion of fetishism that distinguishes it from the anthropological reading that can lead up to a variation of an anthropological theory. Instead for Rancière it is important to go back to a theory of social forms in order to explain the fetishistic structure that emerges at the surface of the process of production.

The fetishistic discourse is the elaboration of this connection of concrete forms presented on the surface of the capitalist process and reflected in the consciousness of the agents of production.<sup>27</sup>

25 Rancière 1972, pp. 46-47.

26 Rancière 1972, p. 48.

27 Rancière 1976, p. 352.

Once again Rancière chooses to begin not with Volume One but with Volume Three of *Capital* in order to study the question of what Marx defines as the externalization [*Verausserlichung*] of capitalist relations, and Marx's references to 'define interest-bearing capital as the most concrete, the most mediated, the most fetishized and the most alienated (*entfremdetste*) form'.<sup>28</sup>

For Rancière the process that leads to fetishism in Marx begins with the externalization of the relations of capital in the form of interest bearing capital and in particular Marx's reference to it being an a-conceptual [*begrifflose*] form, since it is a form in which 'the form that makes it possible disappears'.<sup>29</sup> What seems in itself as an impossible relation (the movement from M to M' in the case of interest bearing capital) 'can only be sustained by what governs the whole circuit: capital as a relation of production, with its complement, wage-labour'.<sup>30</sup> In this sense, the circuit of money-capital with its principle of the self-expansion of value that can only be explained by what disappears in the process, namely capitalist social relations, is a condensation of the logic of capitalist social relations.

Thus the circuit of money-capital is the one which best expresses the capitalist process. In fact it is a peculiarity of this process that it has as its principle the self-expansion of value, as the circuit from M to M' clearly expresses. But this determinate form of the process of reproduction of capital, the process of self-expansion of value made possible by the relations of production of capital and wage-labour, tends to disappear in its result.<sup>31</sup>

Consequently, the disappearance of the process in the result is a crucial aspect of the process itself and leads to its misrecognition. This disappearance takes place exactly in interest bearing capital: 'The financial capitalist who advances the sum of money M remains outside the whole process of production and reproduction. All he does is to advance a sum M and withdraw a sum M'. What happens between these two acts

28 Rancière 1976, p. 353.

29 Rancière 1976a, p. 354.

30 Rancière 1976a, p. 356.

31 Ibid.

does not concern him.<sup>32</sup> It is exactly this disappearance of the crucial aspect that makes possible capitalist interest, namely capitalist social relations, that sustains both the *Begrifflosigkeit* of interest bearing capital and the process of externalization of the relations of capital.

Thus the whole capitalist process has disappeared in the form M'-M'. The *Begrifflosigkeit* expresses the disappearance of all the intermediary terms whose connection makes the relation of M to M' possible. It thereby expresses the disappearance of what underlies this connection and makes it possible, the capitalist relations of production. This disappearance of the relations of production in the *Begrifflosigkeit* of the form is the basis for the externalization (*Verausserlichung*) of what Marx calls the relations of capital.<sup>33</sup>

The result is double motion that includes at the same time the materialization of capitalist social relations and determinations of production and what can be described as a subjectification of the material bases of this process.

We are therefore dealing with a double motion: the materialization of the social determinations of production and the subjectification of its material bases, of the things in which these social determinations are represented and concealed. Marx explains that this double motion was already perceptible in the simplest determination of the capitalist mode of production: the commodity-form of the labour product.<sup>34</sup>

The question that arises is whether these notions of materialization and subjectification lead us back to an anthropological critique of alienation and of reversal of the subject-predicate relations, as it was the case in the 1844 Manuscripts. According to Rancière in Marx's *Capital* in materialization 'it is not a subject which is separated from itself, whose predicates pass into an alien entity. It is a form which becomes alien to the relation that it supports and, in becoming alien to it, becomes a thing

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32 Rancière 1976a, p. 357.

33 Ibid.

34 Rancière 1976a, p. 360.

and leads to the materialization of the relation.<sup>35</sup> Moreover, what 'Marx designates as the subjectification of the thing is the acquisition by the thing of the function of motor of the process'.<sup>36</sup> More generally, Rancière stresses the fact that in *Capital* Marx describes how the relation of production 'determines on the one hand a subject function and on the other an object function'.<sup>37</sup> It is this process that 'designates the function of the subject as a support for the relation of production'.<sup>38</sup> Consequently, we are not dealing with an anthropological critique, but with an attempt towards a scientific theory of social relations and how they induce forms of both objectification and subjectification. The persistence of anthropological references even in Marx's mature work is an evidence of the fact that he never fully thought the difference between the two different problematics, even if, in practice, he affirmed their difference.

In classical political economy what we have is a displacement of the origin of wages, profit and rent, namely 'total social labour time realised in the value whose break-down they represent', a process which goes along with the 'transformation of the social relations of production into things defined by material properties' and is also a disappearance of its limit, the 'total quantity of exploited labour'.<sup>39</sup> It is this disappearance of both origin and limit that leads to a fetishistic perception of capital as an endlessly self-expanding form, an *automaton*. In such an approach to fetishism, it ceases to be the result of a deforming speculation, it represents 'the very forms in which the capitalist process exists for the agents of production'.<sup>40</sup> It becomes a constitutive aspect of the very structure of the capitalist mode of production and a necessary aspect of its reproduction.

Fetishism thus represents not an anthropological process but the specific dislocation according to which the structure of the capitalist mode of production presents itself in the field of *Wirklichkeit*, of *Alltagsleben* (everyday life), and offers itself to the consciousness and action of the agents of production, the supports

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35 Rancière 1976a, p. 361.

36 Rancière 1976a, p. 362.

37 Rancière 1976a, p. 363.

38 Ibid.

39 Rancière 1976a, p. 366.

40 Rancière 1976a, p. 367.

of capitalist relations of production.<sup>41</sup>

For Rancière such an approach is very crucial in the sense that it enables us to understand the limits and shortcomings of classical political economy, even though he admits that Marx's own attempt to formulate this had its own limits and historicist overtones (mainly in the sense of a reference to a lack of development of theoretical understanding). At the same time, it makes necessary a new and critical approach to history.

However, it is not the more general relation of Rancière's intervention to the project of 'High Althusserianism' that concerns us here. It is the importance of this text as a contribution to the theory of the value form. Regarding the question of fetishism Rancière makes crucial theoretical choices. The first is that he treats the fetishism of value, the fetishism of self-expanding value as the most crucial aspect and not commodity fetishism. It is interesting to note that this is also relevant to the very evolution of the notion of fetishism. Marx first elaborated the notion of fetishism in the 1861-1863 Manuscript as a fetishism of value and capital and then introduced the notion of commodity fetishism in Volume One. The second is that Rancière incorporates the notion of fetishism to a broader thinking about social forms, presenting in his text a theory of the emergence of the commodity form and the value form as representation - in a complex articulation between materialization and subjectification - of capitalist social relations. This in turn produces a highly original theory of social appearances that moves from the subjective terrain to that of social relations and practices. It is at the level of social structures and in this case of social relations of capitalist exploitation that the condition for the emergence of these forms, as at the same time presence and concealment, emerges. This creates a new relation between the visible and the invisible at the level of social practices and relations. The visibility of social forms is a result of the social relations underlying them, but we are dealing with a different kind of causality, a form of structural causality, or of absent cause, where a structure exists only in its results.

However, if we remain only at this level, we are at the danger of a classical conception of the relation between deeper or latent structures and surface forms, a problematic conception, reminiscent of the classical essence - appearance relation, with which we know that Althusser himself also flirted in *Reading Capital* before abandoning any reference to

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41 Rancière 1976a, p. 368.

the latent structures.<sup>42</sup> It is here the theory of fetishism enters the stage as a crucial strategic notion. For Rancière, as we have seen, fetishism is not simply a concept that refers to the ability of social reality to obfuscate itself, to conceal its structural determination. Rather, it is a concept that refers to a socially necessary form of miscognition. The very fact that the agents of capitalist social relations do not have an accurate knowledge of the mechanism of value creation and of surplus value as the origin of profit, is indispensable for their fetishistic conception of profit and, consequently for their conception of the average profit as a mechanism for the distribution of capital between sectors and enterprises, for their perception of interest bearing capital and for their perception of the self-expansion of value. All these 'deformed' perceptions of reality are at the same time socially necessary for the expanded reproduction of capitalist social relations. Thus in a certain sense fetishism becomes, by itself, a crucial social relation, a form of socially necessary social representation, bridging the ontological gap between structural determinations and surface appearances avoiding any reproduction of the essence - appearance distinction and any relations between 'depth' and 'surface'. The capitalist mode of production thus becomes the complex and overdetermined articulation between capitalist social relations of exploitation, exemplified in the power relations around the wage relation and inside the workplace, the generalization of the commodity form, and the fetishistic perception of value creation and expansion.

## 2. Rancière's later rejection of the notion of fetishism

Therefore, it is interesting that Rancière disavowed this text in a text written for the appearance of the final part of his text in *Economy and Society*, considering it part of a collective work with 'reactionary political foundations'.<sup>43</sup> Rancière accuses his (and Althusser's) strategy of being unable to take consideration of the conflicting discourses underlying Marx's own texts and in particular of the discourses of the proletariat itself which are echoed in the texts of bourgeois economists, parliamentary enquiries, etc, as echoes of 'voices in the workshop, rumours in the streets, market-places and labour exchanges, to the leading ideas of

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42 On this see Montag 2013.

43 Rancière 1976b, p. 377.

working-class insurrection, by way of the educated forms of working-class literature or the popular forms of street songs'.<sup>44</sup> Instead for Rancière the Althusserian endeavour is marked by a conception of the relation of discourse to its object that leaves no room for a positive role to what is exterior to the problematic and which always appears 'in the form of a deficiency'.<sup>45</sup> And he insists that this is particularly true regarding his reading of the notion of fetishism.

Rancière's rejection of his 1965 reading on fetishism is based not only upon his insistence that there are instances when even in Marx's work workers act with greater apprehension of social reality than the theory of ideological illusion suggests. It is also based upon a different reading of the theory of fetishism. It is a rejection of the 'principle which posits that the *constitution of an object and the constitution of its illusion* are one and the same process'.<sup>46</sup> Moreover, for Rancière there is an evolution in Marx's thinking of the very concept of ideological illusion. In the texts of 1845-47 we can see the contrast between the 'the clarity of the classes directly engaged in struggle on the one hand, with the illusions of the petty-bourgeoisie on the other',<sup>47</sup> whereas after the defeat of the revolutions of 1848 Marx becomes more interested on the autonomy of science

This political rupture, which ploughed up the space of reality, imposed a different mode of reading the text of bourgeois economic science. In this new reading, the latter is no longer a darkened mirror to be made clear by a critical operation which makes it declare all there is to say, but a rewriting (in the space of a specific rationality) of the fantastic writing of the commodity-whose principle is produced elsewhere. Commodity fetishism does not reproduce man's alienation, nor does it produce its critique: it is the class struggle which separates science and revelation.<sup>48</sup>

Rancière's rejection of the theory of commodity fetishism is not limited to this critique of the epistemological aspects of the Althusserian endeavour. It actually reverses the very notion of fetishism from ideologi-

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44 Rancière 1976b, p. 378.

45 Ibid.

46 Rancière 1976b, p. 379.

47 Rancière 1976b, p. 380.

48 Rancière 1976b, p. 381.

cal distortion and concealment to a projection of the proletarian envisioning of emancipation. In the opposition between mystical veil and the clarity of social relations Rancière sees the 'the theoretical representative of a leading idea in which are concentrated the dreams of fighting proletarians: the association of free producers'. Consequently, '[f]etishism represents *in theory*, i.e. in terms of the *conditions of understanding* (and of misunderstanding), that other world borne by the proletarian struggle, which makes its object thinkable'.<sup>49</sup> For Rancière a tension is running through the concept of fetishism in Marx's texts, as a result of what he defines as the double genealogy of fetishism, from both science and proletarian struggles and aspirations.

This was an appeal from the visible of perception to the invisible of science and from that invisible to the representation of *visibility* which its extension gives to it. In this double return is marked the double genealogy of the concept (from the side of bourgeois philosophy and that of the class struggle) in which is reflected also the double political relationship of Marx with the workers in their struggle: impatience at those Parisian workers, self-educated and moralising, infatuated with forming associations, popular banks and co-operative kitchens-and admiration for those same workers, climbing to assault the skies and to seize the state machine.<sup>50</sup>

For Rancière the result of this tension is that the concept of fetishism 'may be twisted either towards the sentimentality of alienation or towards the pedantry of science'.<sup>51</sup> In this sense, Rancière's self-criticism is that he tended to treat the 'spontaneous' ideological representations of an always struggling proletariat as a 'result of machination from outside', namely from capitalist production relations in the ability to self-conceal their class exploitative character, meaning that the 'agents of production are necessarily within the illusion'.<sup>52</sup> The end of the text links his 1965 reading of fetishism with the position of the French Communist Party against the spontaneous worker's resistance that a great part of the post-

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49 Rancière 1976b, p. 382.

50 Rancière 1976b, p. 383

51 Ibid.

52 Ibid.

May 1968 revolutionary Left referred to:

'Spontaneity does not exist,' proclaims the CGT in a comment on the assassination of Pierre Overney. This is where the discourse of science meets 'proletarian' power and the bosses' militias.<sup>53</sup>

### 3. Althusser and Balibar's critique of fetishism

In contrast to Rancière's confrontation with the notion of fetishism, in Althusser we have many instances of a rejection of the very notion of fetishism. In his 'reader's guide' to Volume One of Marx's *Capital* Althusser declares fetishism to be the 'last trace of Hegelian influence' in Marx.<sup>54</sup> In a note in *Elements of Self-criticism* Althusser insists on the need 'to clear up the problem of the theory which serves as a philosophical *alibi* for all this "reification" literature: the theory of commodity fetishism in Book I, Part I of *Capital*'.<sup>55</sup>

It is in Balibar's extended 1973 'self-criticism' regarding *Reading Capital*, that first appeared in *Theoretical Practice* that we find the first outright rejection of the very notion of fetishism coming from 'Althusserian orthodoxy'. In particular, Balibar makes this self-criticism in relation to his references in *Reading Capital* in which in a line similar to that of Rancière intervention he refers to fetishism as exactly the kind of ideological mystification arising out social practices themselves.

By a double necessity, the capitalist mode of production is both the mode of production in which the economy is most easily recognized as the 'motor' of history, and the mode of production in which the essence of this 'economy' is unrecognized in principle (in what Marx calls 'fetishism'). That is why the first explanations of the problem of the 'determination in the last instance by the economy' that we find in Marx are directly linked to the problem of fetishism. They occur in the texts in *Capital* on the 'fetishism of commodities' (T.I, pp. 88-90; Vol. I, pp. 76-8), on the 'genesis

53 Ibid.

54 Althusser 1971, p. 95.

55 Althusser 1976, p. 118.

of capitalist ground rent' (Vol. III, pp. 763-93) and on the 'trinity formula' (Vol. III, pp. 794-811), where Marx replaces the false conception of this 'economy' as a relation between things by its true definition as a system of social relations. At the same time, he presents the idea that the capitalist mode of production is the only one in which exploitation (the extortion of surplus-value), i.e., the specific form of the social relation that binds classes together in production, is 'mystified', 'fetishized' into the form of a relation between the things themselves. This thesis follows directly from his proof where the *commodity* is concerned: the social relation which constitutes its reality, knowledge of which enables us to assess its fetishism, is precisely the commodity relation as a relation of production, i.e., the commodity relation as generalized by the capitalist mode of production. A social ('human') relation cannot therefore be found behind 'things' in general, but only behind the thing of this capitalist relation.<sup>56</sup>

In 1973 Balibar is ready to reject this position. He insists that the theory of fetishism in Marx is 'totally *idealist*', since on this 'particular but decisive point the *rupture* with idealism *has not taken place*'.<sup>57</sup> This criticism of the very notion of fetishism as an idealist theoretical conception is based a very specific conception of ideology that echoes aspects of Althusser's theory of ideology in his text on 'Ideology and Ideological Apparatuses of the State'.<sup>58</sup> In such a conception, ideological social relations, are 'specific social relations really distinct from the relations of production although they are determined by the latter "in the last instance" [...] materialized in specific practices, depending on specific ideological apparatuses'.<sup>59</sup> It is obvious here that the main point made by Balibar is that a theory of ideology cannot be a theory of ideological representations arising in a spontaneous way in social relations themselves, but mainly a theory of ideological practices materialized in and reproduced by Ideological Apparatuses of the State. It is interesting that Balibar maintained this distinction between a theory of ideology and a theory of fetishism in

56 Althusser and Balibar 1970, pp. 216-7.

57 Balibar 1973, p. 57.

58 In Althusser 2014.

59 Balibar 1973, p. 57.

later texts such as *The Philosophy of Marx*<sup>60</sup>. In that text, Marx's theory of fetishism is presented as an attempt to theorize the emergence of ideal-ity, the idealization and mystification of capitalist social relations and the emergence of subjectivity, a theory of *subjection*, as opposed to the theory of ideology as a theory of power relations, leading to two different lines in subsequent Marxist research, one oriented towards the state and power relations, the other towards processes of reification. Thus Balibar's conclusion in the 1990s is not a rejection of the problematic of fetishism but rather an insistence on a certain incompatibility between the two approaches:

The theory of ideology is fundamentally a *theory of the State* (by which we mean the theory of domination inherent in the State), whereas that of fetishism is fundamentally a *theory of the market* (the mode of subjection or constitution of the 'world' of subjects and objects inherent in the organization of society as a market and its domination by market forces).<sup>61</sup>

Returning now to the Balibar's 1973 self-criticism, there the rejection of the theory of fetishism is based upon two premises. The first has to do with the very notion of ideological mystification as "'structural effect'" (or "formal effect") of the circulation of commodities'.<sup>62</sup> The second has to do with the fact that the commodity is presented as the '*source or subject of its own misrecognition*'.<sup>63</sup> To this, Balibar also adds a political dimension (in a certain analogy but not similarity with the position of Rancière): the theory of fetishism leaves no space to revolutionary political practice as a means to transform ideological relations, leading instead to self-enlightenment as the only option.

For what then remains unintelligible (and fundamentally useless) is a *social practice* of the material transformation of ideological relations (as a specific revolutionary practice), and hence the distinct reality of these relations. If the effect of illusion is *the effect for the individual of the place* in the 'whole' that constitutes

60 Balibar 1995.

61 Balibar 1995, pp. 77-78.

62 Balibar 1973, p. 57.

63 Balibar 1973, pp. 57-58.

him as a *subject*, then the lifting of the illusion is still no more than a subjective, individual matter, however it is socially conditioned by the structure of the whole, and however much it is repeated 'millions of times over' for millions of individuals occupying similar places: it is only the effect of a different place or of coming to consciousness in one place.<sup>64</sup>

Althusser returns to the theory of fetishism in the 1978 manuscript *Marx in his Limits*, which provides the the basic theoretical background to his interventions on the crisis of Marxism and the crisis of the communist movement. For Althusser the problem with the theory of fetishism is that it remains prisoner of an opposition between persons and things that in fact remains 'trapped in the categories of the law or in the notions of juridical ideology.'<sup>65</sup> For Althusser the problem is that in the theory of fetishism social relations between men are substituted by illusory relations between things, whereas the problem with juridical ideology is that social (exploitative) relations between men are substituted by juridical relations. 'The paradox is that Marx opposes relations between men to relations between things, whereas the reality of the law itself describes these relations in their unity.'<sup>66</sup> Moreover, Althusser accuses Marx of confusing the ideological illusions of the economists and fetishism as ideological illusion inherent in the world of commodities. In such an approach there is the danger of bracketing the reality beyond commodity exchange, namely the reality of exploitation, of workplace struggle etc. Moreover, Althusser insists that in such a conception of generalized commodity exchange within the capitalist mode of production we tend to underestimate the role of the state, we cannot understand how commodity relations 'could function without money minted by the state, transactions registered by state agencies, and courts capable of settling possible disputes'.<sup>67</sup> We can say that it is here Althusser links his critique of the theory of fetishism to his attempt to insist on the importance of state theory for Marxism.

Moreover, in this capitalist class society, the state and law [droit] adamantly continue to exist - not just private, mercantile

64 Balibar 1973, pp. 58-59.

65 Althusser 2006, p. 129.

66 Althusser 2006, p. 128

67 Althusser 2006, p. 132.

law, but also public, political law, which is, despite the term 'common law', of an altogether different sort; and there are also the ideologies, which the ideology of the dominant class strives to unify in the dominant ideology.<sup>68</sup>

Moreover, it remains within the contours of a conception of labour as substance as opposed to its phenomenal appearances. For Althusser, this is also the result of Marx's own order of exposition that began from the simplest 'abstraction'.

Here he pays the price, for the first but not the last time, for having set off on an analysis of the capitalist mode of production (*Capital*) with a certain idea of the order of exposition that compelled him to 'begin' with the prescribed beginning: the simplest abstraction, value.<sup>69</sup>

For Althusser the problem with any theory of fetishism is that it underestimates the concrete reality of the ideological role of the state, what he designates as the 'state's political-economical-ideological function as a machine for transforming the force that emanates from class struggle into power'.<sup>70</sup>

It is obvious that we are dealing here with one of the most interesting and contradictory at the same time aspects of the entire Althusserian endeavour. It begins with Rancière's texts which in a certain way is one of the most acute readings of crucial aspects of value theory, in a certain sense preceding later theoretical intervention. It is important that Rancière insists that the crucial question is that of the emergence of value-form and that the 'absent cause' refers exactly social relations of production. It is interesting that Rancière's text in a certain way reminds us of Rubin's position that the emergence of the value-form and of commodity fetishism can only be explained by reference to capitalist social relations of production (even though in Rubin in many instances social relations of production refer mainly to market relations and a market based on independent commodity produces, not the relations *inside* capitalist

68 Althusser 2006, p. 133

69 Ibid.

70 Althusser 2006, p. 135.

production).<sup>71</sup> It is also important to note that it precedes Hans-Georg Backhaus' 1969 text on the importance of value-form theory. The following passage from Backhaus' texts makes evident the analogies.

The value-form analysis is significant for Marx's social theory in a threefold respect: it is the point of confluence of sociology and economic theory; it inaugurates Marx's critique of ideology and a specific theory of money which founds the primacy of the sphere of production vis-a vis the sphere of circulation and thus of the relations of production vis-a-vis the 'superstructure'.<sup>72</sup>

Rancière's text is also important for the fact that regarding the question of fetishism it focuses on Volume Three of *Capital* and the notion of the fetishism of capital. As both Enrique Dussel and John Milios and Dimitri Dimoulis have shown, is there and in the 1861-63 Manuscripts that we can see this particular conception of the fetishism of capital and not just the commodity fetishism.<sup>73</sup>

#### 4. The complex theorization of fetishism in Marx's work

If we look at the evolutions of Marx's own conceptualization of fetishism, we will that we can find the first references in the *Grundrisse* in passages that suggest something close to a theory of objectification and mystification of social relations.

The economists regard people's social relations of production, and the determinations acquired by things subsumed under these relations, as natural properties of the things. This crude materialism is an equally crude idealism, indeed a fetishism which ascribes to things social relations as determinations immanent to them, and thus mystifies them.<sup>74</sup>

71 See Rubin 1973. It is interesting to note that the time that Rancière wrote his text there were not translations or editions available of Rubin's book.

72 Backhaus 1980, p. 112.

73 Dussel 2001; Dimoulis and Milios 2004.

74 MECW 29, p. 77

In a similar fashion in the 1859 *Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, fetishism appears in a footnote referring to the 'the fetishism of German "thinkers"'<sup>75</sup> and to a reference to the 'wealth as a fetish' in a section on money.<sup>76</sup> It is obvious that we are dealing not simply with commodity fetishism but with a more general reference to processes of objectification/mystification of social relations, with an emphasis more on money than simply commodities, something that brings us closer to the fetishism of value and capital rather than simple commodity fetishism.

A social relation of production appears as something existing apart from individual human beings, and the distinctive relations into which they enter in the course of production in society appear as the specific properties of a thing—it is this perverted appearance, this prosaically real, and by no means imaginary, mystification that is characteristic of all social forms of labour positing exchange value. This perverted appearance manifests itself merely in a more striking manner in money than it does in commodities.<sup>77</sup>

It is in the 1861-63 Manuscript that Marx links fetishism to value and not commodity and in particular interest capital, exactly the point in Volume Three of *Capital* that Rancière turns his attention to. The following passage referring to the division of surplus value into industrial profit and interest is rather revealing in this sense:

Thus the nature of surplus value, the essence of capital and the character of capitalist production are not only completely obliterated in these two forms of surplus value, they are turned into their opposites. But even in so far as the character and form of capital are complete [it is] nonsensical [if] presented without any intermediate links and expressed as the subjectification of objects, the objectification of subjects, as the reversal of cause and effect, the religious *quid pro quo*, the pure form of capital expressed in the formula  $M—M'$ . The ossification of relations, their presentation as the relation of men to things having a definite social character is here likewise brought out in quite a different manner from that of

75 MECW 29, p. 277.

76 MECW 29, p. 387.

77 MECW 29, p. 289.

the simple mystification of commodities and the more complicated mystification of money. The transubstantiation, the fetishism, is complete.<sup>78</sup>

In this sense fetishism emerges as a more general aspect of the capitalist mode of production, a particular mode of ideological inversion and mystification inscribed in not simply in the generalization of commodity exchange, but in capitalist social relations of production and in particular in the wage relation as a social relation and in the process of real subsumption of labour to capital, a part of the actual 'biopolitics' of capital.

Since living labour is incorporated into capital—through the exchange between capital and the worker—since it appears as an activity belonging to capital, as soon as the labour process starts, all the productive powers of social labour present themselves as productive powers of capital, just as the general social form of labour appears in money as the quality of a thing. Thus the productive power of social labour, and the specific forms of it, now present themselves as productive powers and forms of capital, of *objectified* labour, of the objective conditions of labour, which—as such an independent entity—are personified in the capitalist and confront living labour. Here once again we have the inversion of the relation, the expression of which we have already characterised as *fetishism* in considering the nature of money.<sup>79</sup>

It is obvious from the above references that when Marx started working on *Capital* Volume One he has already moved towards a more comprehensive account of fetishism as a specifically capitalist mode of socially necessary miscognition, exemplified on the fact that a fetishistic conception of the profit and interest is necessary for the extended reproduction of the capitalist mode of production.

78 MECW 32, p. 494.

79 MECW 34, p. 122.

## 5. Conclusion: The contradictory relation of Althusserianism to value-form theory

Now the question arises why both Rancière and Althusser discarded in the end the notion of fetishism as anthropological, idealistic, and -especially in the case of Rancière - a mystification of the collective envisioning of the struggling proletariat. One of the reasons has to do with their increased apprehension of the effectivity of social antagonism. In Althusser this takes the form of an insistence on the primacy of relations of production over productive forces and on the importance of autonomous popular struggles.<sup>80</sup> In Rancière this takes the form of a turn towards the modalities of proletarian subjectivity.

This emphasis on antagonistic relations of production, on struggles and movements, could easily lead to an underestimation of the importance of social forms and in particular of the social and ideological effectivity of the value-form. The reproduction of the capitalist mode of production does not depend only on the balance of force in production, but also the reproduction of a series of practices at the level of circulation. Capitalism is not simply extraction of surplus value; it is also the generalized expansion of the market, including money and capital markets.

At the same time, Althusser's post-1968 emphasis on the role of the state and a more political approach (in an analogy with Marx Althusser's own '1848' moment as the realization of the effectivity of both ideology and the state) can also lead to a certain misunderstanding of these forms of miscognition, arising out of the realm of economic practices. Two important points have to be made here. One is that the theory of the Ideological Apparatuses of the State is not a theory of the *origin* of ideological representations but of their *reproductions*. Ideological representations arise out of all aspects of social life, out of all social practices, economic, political, or discursive. ISA's are instrumental in order to turn them into more coherent ideological discourses and strategies and in order to reproduce them. The other is that the processes of the emergence of fetishistic representations are not outside the State or the practices of the State. The State is always already present both in the market and in the capitalist production process. The legal guarantee of the wage contract, and of money, the importance of State power to safeguard credit and the banking system, the role of bourgeois law in all aspects of the economy, all these attest that the social practices from which fetishistic

.....  
80 Althusser 2014.

representations emerge, are always also conditioned by state apparatuses, their material interventions and discursive tropes, the class strategies inscribed in state apparatuses, and the ideological practice being reproduced in the ISAs.

Now 50 years after *Reading Capital*, in a conjuncture where we can see both the return of mass politics and the political effectivity of social and political antagonism, but also the pervasive effects of the expansion of money and capital markets, exemplified in the fetishistic neoliberal fantasies of auto-regulated markets, we can return to these debates and re-read texts that have lost nothing of their theoretical force.

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# Althusser and the Problem of Historical Individuality

## Ted Stolze

### Abstract:

Louis Althusser once raised an important theoretical problem for Marxists of how to understand “the historical forms of the existence of individuality,” but he failed to provide an adequate solution to this problem. By contrast, fellow French communist philosopher Lucien Sève has criticized Althusser’s approach and provided a full-fledged and compelling theory of historical individuality, which helps to shore up a major weakness in Althusser’s famous formulation that “ideology interpellates individuals as subjects.” By trying to understand what an individual is, Marxists can better reclaim the concrete individuals who are subject to, and subjected by, the process of interpellation, and thereby more successfully disrupt this process. I test this claim by investigating the case of the first-century historical individual Simeon bar Yonah (better known as Simon Peter).

### Keywords:

Louis Althusser, Lucien Sève, ideology, interpellation, Marxist theories of individuality

“We are discussing living water which has not yet flowed away.”<sup>1</sup>  
– Louis Althusser

Louis Althusser’s well-known formulation that “ideology interpellates individuals as subjects”<sup>2</sup> has long concealed a key problem that Althusser himself once posed but quickly dropped and never resolved: What is an individual? An answer to this simple – but exceedingly difficult – question would go a long way to explain not only the limits of the interpellation of subjects as *individuals* but also how resistance to oppressive social structures and institutions is possible. As a point of departure for our investigation, let us first consider two brief references by Althusser to this problem in texts from 1965-1966.

### 1. The historical forms of the existence of individuality

In *Reading Capital* Althusser addresses the question of individual-

1 Althusser and Balibar 2009, p. 33. Althusser doubtless alludes here to a passage in the Gospel of John, in which Jesus cries out in the Jerusalem temple courtyard, “Let anyone who believes in me drink. As the scripture has said, ‘Out of the believer’s heart shall flow rivers of living water!’” (Jn 7.37-8).

2 Althusser 2014, pp. 188-94, 261-6.

ity in the context of his outline of a Marxist “concept of historical time,” which he opposes to a “Hegelian concept of history” that has two “essential characteristics”: “homogeneous continuity” and “contemporaneity.”<sup>3</sup> For Althusser this Hegelian approach allows for an ‘essential section’ (*coupe d’essence*), i.e. an intellectual operation in which a *vertical break* is made at any moment in historical time, a break in the present such that all the elements of the whole revealed by this section are in an immediate relationship with one another, a relationship that immediately expresses their internal essence.<sup>4</sup>

According to this “ideological” and “empiricist” approach to historical time, we may envisage history as a linear sequence of homogeneous stages or “moments,” any one of which could easily be segmented from the rest (as indicated below):

... / PAST / ... / PRESENT / ... / FUTURE / ...

Althusser argues that this conception is inadequate to the task of accounting for the complex unity of different rates and rhythms by which the historical process unfolds. It also gives rise to a number of “conceptual confusions and false problems,” of which Althusser discusses three: “the classical oppositions: essence/phenomena, necessity/contingency, and the ‘problem’ of the action of the individual in history.”<sup>5</sup> Allow me to bypass the first two problems in order to focus on the third.

Althusser notes that the so-called “problem” of the “role of the individual in history”<sup>6</sup> is a tragic argument which consists of a comparison between the theoretical part or knowledge of a determinate object (e.g., the economy) which represents the essence of which the other objects (the political, the ideological, etc.) are regarded as the phenomena – and that fiendishly important (politically!) empirical reality, individual action.

For Althusser, this is more than a “tragic problem”; it is a *false* problem, because it is “unbalanced, theoretically ‘hybrid,’ since it compares the theory of one object with the empirical existence of another.” In other words, the problem of the “role of the individual in history” commits a serious category mistake by confusing two distinct theoretical levels of analysis. Yet Althusser readily admits that this false problem of the ‘role

3 Althusser and Balibar 2009, p. 104.

4 Althusser and Balibar 2009, p. 105.

5 Althusser and Balibar 2009, p. 123.

6 Althusser is referring here to the title of a famous essay published in 1898 by the Russian Marxist Georgi Plekhanov; see Plekhanov 1969, pp. 139-77.

of the individual in history’ is nevertheless an index to a true problem, one which arises by right in the theory of history: the problem of the concept of the *historical forms of existence of individuality*.

What is more, it is precisely *Capital* that allows this problem to be properly posed. This is because Marx’s text defines for the capitalist mode of production the different forms of individuality required and produced by that mode according to functions, of which the individuals are “supports” (*Träger*), in the division of labour, in the different “levels” of the structure.

Yet caution is in order, for we should be careful not to align or match individuals as they are theoretically construed with individuals as they are empirically encountered and described. This is because the mode of historical existence of individuality in a given mode of production is not legible to the naked eye in “history”; its concept, too, must therefore be *constructed*, and like every concept it contains a number of surprises, the most striking of which is the fact that it is nothing like the false obviousnesses of the “given” – which is merely the mask of the current ideology.

Althusser concludes with a scathing joke:

So long as the real theoretical problem has not been posed (the problem of the forms of historical existence of individuality), we shall be beating about in the dark – like Plekhanov, who ransacked Louis XV’s bed to prove that the secrets of the fall of the *Ancien Régime* were not hidden there. As a general rule, concepts are not hidden in beds.

Althusser’s jest about Plekhanov’s theoretical naiveté arguably overlooks what is really at stake in the latter’s essay, namely, the usefulness of counterfactual statements and arguments in historical explanation.<sup>7</sup> But I set this matter aside.<sup>8</sup>

\* \* \* \*

Althusser returns to the question of “forms of historical existence of individuality” in a lecture he delivered at the École normale supérieure in the early summer of 1966, which serves as an occasion for him to reflect on the “philosophical conjuncture.”<sup>9</sup> After addressing such mat-

7 By a “counterfactual” argument, I mean wondering whether or not, by imaginatively altering the actual historical conditions, an event (e.g., the American, French, or Russian Revolutions) would have turned out the way it did, or at all. An example of a counterfactual statement is: “If Lenin had not been allowed to travel from Zurich through Germany to Russia on a sealed train in the spring of 1917, then the October Revolution would not have occurred.”

8 For a fine introduction to the problem of “historical counterfactuals,” see Evans 2013 (on pp. 40, 43 there is even a brief discussion of Plekhanov).

9 “The Philosophical Conjuncture and Marxist Theoretical Research,” in Althusser 2003, pp.

ters as how a *philosophical* differs from a *political* conjuncture and distinguishing the internally uneven and combined elements of the former, Althusser launches into an analysis of the three “sedimented historical layers or elements” – what Althusser (and Pierre Macherey) would later call philosophical “tendencies”<sup>10</sup> – in the history of French philosophy: the “religious-spiritualist,” the “rationalist-idealist,” and the “rationalist-empiricist.” Althusser further proposes that the intervention of Marxists into contemporary French philosophy should operate on “two fronts”: first, against the spiritualism of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Paul Ricoeur, and phenomenology; second, against the critical, rationalist idealism of Jean-Paul Sartre, Martial Guérout, Claude Lévi-Strauss, and structuralism.

The first task of Marxists in philosophy is to define Marxist theory itself and to distinguish the theoretical status of historical materialism as a science from dialectical materialism as a philosophy. Then arises a series of key “strategic questions” in both dialectical and historical materialism. My concern is with the last three (out of seven) strategic questions that, according to Althusser, have to be addressed in the field of dialectical materialism, namely, to develop theories of the following: ideology, the subject or “subjectivity-effect,” and the “historical forms of individuality (including the social formation).” As is well known, Althusser’s famous essay “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses,” which was published in 1970 as an extract from a much longer 1969 manuscript “On the Reproduction of Capitalism,” brings together the first two strategic questions and formulates both a Marxist ideology of ideology and of subjectivity.<sup>11</sup> However, as I have already suggested, in those texts, and subsequently, Althusser never fully worked out his theory of individuality.

## 2. Sève’s critique

However, in the late 1960s Lucien Sève (a fellow philosopher and member of the French Communist Party) also proposed that a non-reductive version of historical materialism would require a theory of historical forms of individuality. The fruit of Sève’s theoretical activity during that period was published as *Marxisme et théorie de la personnalité*.<sup>12</sup> Recently,

1-18.

10 See Stolze 2015 (forthcoming).

11 Both the manuscript and the excerpt are available in Althusser 2014.

12 Sève 1981, available in translation as Sève 1978.

he has summarized his lifelong research into this problem:

Historical materialism is not ..., as a mutilated Marxism has dramatically believed, the key to understanding human *societies* alone but is also inseparably the key to understanding *individualities*. After having created its own foundations, every social formation includes a related “individual formation”; this is indeed why communism could not be the emancipation of the human species without ensuring the free development of all individuals. Marxist anthropology thus gives the lie to a double illusion: substantialist (“humans” *have a nature*) and existentialist (“humans” *have no essence*). In so far as they are socially evolved beings, human individuals have neither a nature nor a metaphysical essence, but indeed always concrete *historical presuppositions* from which we can make abstraction only in the imagination.<sup>13</sup>

Sève continues to agree with Althusser’s “theoretical anti-humanism” to the extent that “humanism” is rooted in a commitment to some conception of “the human.” However, Sève stresses that theoretical anti-humanism is merely the “critical preamble for a *materialist anthropology* that for ‘the human’ would substitute the dialectic of the human individual and human species that has at long last been untangled.”<sup>14</sup> To reject entirely such an anthropological dimension to historical materialism would be to lose sight of Marx’s ultimate aim of social emancipation, namely, to expand and enrich human capabilities by surpassing capitalism and by realizing a less oppressive, exploitative, and alienated society.<sup>15</sup>

Although this is not the place to develop at length a much-needed appreciation of Sève’s work and its critical relationship to Althusser, it is worth noting that Sève himself has acknowledged the influence of Althusser’s passing remarks in *Reading Capital* on ‘the historical forms of existence of individuality.’<sup>16</sup> However, Sève has offered a compelling criticism of Althusser’s non-dialectical approach to individuality. In Sève’s view, Althusser has in mind the *general figures of individuality* that underpin a social formation of a given type and of which singular individuals become *supports* – for example, the capitalist and wage laborer in the capitalist mode of production.<sup>17</sup>

13 Sève 2015, pp. 72-3.

14 Sève 2015, p. 72.

15 See Sève 2012.

16 Sève 2008, pp. 118-21.

17 Sève 2008, p. 119.

As a result, Althusser fails to capture the “immense variety of the *constitutive relations of individuality in detail*, in historical forms of *individuation* in all their diversity.”<sup>18</sup> Speaking in general terms of the Capitalist and the Worker as representative figures of modern individuality falls far short of the fine-grained, concrete analysis that is required in order to show how a given mode of production appropriates human mental and physical capabilities, for instance, by constraining free time or stunting personal development.<sup>19</sup>

Sève has found his inspiration for his conception of historical forms of individuality especially in two sources:<sup>20</sup> Marx’s Sixth Thesis on Feuerbach (on which there also exist brief commentaries by Althusser)<sup>21</sup> and a letter written by Marx in 1846 to his Russian acquaintance Pavel Vasilyevich Annenkov. In the first text, Marx observes that the German materialist philosopher Ludwig Feuerbach had rightly resolved “the religious essence into the human essence.” However, as Marx insisted, “the human essence is no abstraction inherent in each single individual. In its effective reality (*Wirklichkeit*) it is the ensemble (*das Ensemble*) of the social relations.”<sup>22</sup> In the second text, Marx argues that the social history of men is never anything but the history of their individual development, whether they are conscious of it or not. Their material relations are the basis of all their relations. These material relations are only the necessary forms in which their material and individual activity is realized.<sup>23</sup>

In each of these texts, Marx is at pains to emphasize the dialectical interaction of individuals and external social relations. As Sève has argued – employing Spinozist terminology<sup>24</sup> – we should distinguish

18 Sève 2008, p. 120.

19 Sève 2008, p. 120.

20 See Sève 1981, pp. 97-106n.1 (Sève 1978, pp. 161-7n. 27); 2008, pp. 63-68; 2015, pp. 70-73.

21 See especially Althusser 2003, pp. 253-6; Althusser 2005, pp. 242-3.

22 Marx 2000, p. 172. Translation slightly modified.

23 Marx 2000, pp. 209-10.

24 Spinoza famously used “naturing nature” (*natura naturans*) and “natured nature” (*natura naturata*) to express the distinction between God (or substance) in its absolutely infinite *internal* productivity and the *external* infinity of finite modes that follow from that productivity; see the *Ethics*, part 1, note to proposition 29 (Spinoza 1996, pp. 20-21). However, Sève has carried out a materialist reversal of the distinction, since for Marx the ensemble of *external* material and social relations has always already existed prior to, and independent of, human beings, whose individuality only subsequently becomes effectively realized *internally*. With Gilles Deleuze, we could even speak of this external ensemble of relations becoming *folded* to form individuals; see Deleuze 1993, especially pp. 3-13.

between:

The *forming form* of individuality (or “matrix”) that occurs outside of human beings as the “ensemble” of material and social relations; and

The *formed form* of individuality (or “figure”) that is the historical product of this complex process in its “effective reality.”<sup>25</sup>

Consequently, Sève argues, by regarding individuals merely as social “supports” (*Träger*), Althusser fails to address the “historical substance”<sup>26</sup> of how individuation *actually* unfolds and so implies that such support is merely passive.<sup>27</sup> Yet such a perspective turns out to be non-dialectical, for individuals are both “*supports*” for structural relations that dominate them and *actors* of social dynamics that make them move.<sup>28</sup> One might add to Sève’s objection that individuation results from more than an internalized ensemble of – or “support” for an external ensemble of relations; it requires an *active* unification of experience that is a precondition for understanding, acting in, and transforming the world.

### 3. Individuals and subjects

There is much to commend in Sève’s nuanced theory of the historical forms of individuality and his criticisms of Althusser. However, what I would like now to suggest is that his approach lends additional support for Althusser’s materialist position in *Reading Capital* that a real object exists prior to, and independent of, thought about it. For Althusser,

while the production process of a given real object, a given real-concrete totality (e.g., a given historical nation) takes place entirely in the real and is carried out according to the real order of *real* genesis (the order of succession of the moments of *historical* genesis), the production process of the object of knowledge takes place entirely in knowledge and is carried out according to a *different order*, in which the thought categories which ‘reproduce’ the real categories do *not* occupy *the same* place as they do in the order of real historical genesis, but quite different places assigned them by their function in the production process of the object

25 Sève 2008, pp. 112-3.

26 Sève 2008, p. 120.

27 Sève 2008, pp. 120-1.

28 Sève 2008, p. 121.

of knowledge.<sup>29</sup>

Let me propose, then, that there exists a counterpart to Althusser's distinction between the *real object* and the *object in thought*, namely, a distinction between the *concrete individual* and the *subjected individual*. Indeed, each has its own "genesis." Although Althusser himself does not indicate as much (nor, for that matter, does Sève), we should equally insist on the materialist position that every concrete individual is prior to, and independent of, the same individual who has undergone interpellation as a subject. It may well be true, as Althusser insists, that even a newborn always already undergoes interpellation through the expectations of others regarding the infant's name, gender, future social position, and so forth.<sup>30</sup> Nevertheless, every individual-in-process is born at a precise conjuncture of world history, enjoying specific opportunities and confronted by specific material and ideological obstacles. As human beings in our individual composition, each of us strives to persist in our being and to increase our capacities to flourish. As a result, each of us in our own singularity always threatens to act as what could be called a "counter friction" to disrupt the smooth operation of the interpellative machine.<sup>31</sup> Again using Spinozist language, Sève envisions constructing a "science of the singular" that would help one to identify and open up an emancipatory path along which all of humanity may journey together.<sup>32</sup>

#### 4. An example from Christian religious ideology: Simon Peter

In order to appreciate how tension can arise between historical forms of individuality and the process of subjective interpellation, consider the following historical-theological case. In his chapter on ideology in *The Reproduction of Capitalism*, Althusser proposes that

.....  
29 Althusser p. 44.

30 Althusser 2014, pp. 192-3. As we shall see below, there is a serious problem regarding personal names. Althusser is rightly concerned with the ideological implications of assuming one's "father's name." However, personal names also denote reference to *this*, as opposed to some other, individual who has been, or is about to be, born. The dual nature of personal names registers a deeper division between historical forms of individuality and interpellation of such individuals as subjects.

31 See Thoreau 1996, p. 9.

32 Sève 1987, pp. 244-6. For Spinoza's famous distinction among three kinds of knowledge – (1) from "random experience," hearsay, opinion, or imagination (2) by reasoning based on "common notions," and (3) by "intuition" of a singular thing in itself – see the *Ethics*, part 2, note 2 to proposition 40 (Spinoza 1996, p. 57).

Christian religious ideology ... says: I address myself to you, a human individual called Peter (every individual is *called* by his name, in the passive sense, it is never the individual who gives *himself* his own name), in order to tell you that God exists and that you are answerable to Him. It adds: it is God who is addressing you through my voice (since Scripture has collected the Word of God, tradition has transmitted it, and papal infallibility has fixed it for ever on "ticklish" points, such as Mary's virginity or ... papal infallibility itself). It says: This is who you are; you are Peter! This is your origin: you were created by God from all eternity, although you were born in 1928 Anno Domini! This is your place in the world! This is what you must do! In exchange, if you observe the "law of love," you will be saved, you, Peter, and will become part of the Glorious Body of Christ! And so on . . .<sup>33</sup>

As Judith Butler has cautioned, religious ideology may not be the most useful illustration of the everyday operation of interpellation.<sup>34</sup> Nonetheless, it remains, as I hope to demonstrate, an interesting example in its own right. In addition, although Althusser is clearly not discussing "the historical Simon Peter," for purpose of illustration, it is worth considering the latter's concrete existence as an *individual* prior to, and independent of, becoming a subject.

According to the Gospel according to Mark, shortly after the arrest of John the Baptizer by order of Herod Antipas (the Roman-appointed "tetrarch" of Galilee and Perea), Jesus announces his own mission based on "good news" to the poor, journeys to the fishing village of Capernaum, and at some later point "hails" two fisherman, Simon (Hebrew: Simeon), and his brother Andrew, to leave behind the tools of their trade and become disciples in order to "fish for people."<sup>35</sup> Simon is soon given the nickname "Peter" (Greek: *Petros*) and becomes Jesus's leading disciple.<sup>36</sup> However, in keeping with the narrative's recurrent reversals

.....  
33 Althusser 2014, p. 194. This passage also appeared in Althusser's extracted essay "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses" (p. 266).

34 Butler 1997, pp. 109-12.

35 Mk 1.16. Luke's retelling of this episode (5.1-10) adds a parabolic flourish: Peter and his companions, upon Jesus's directive, are able to catch so many fish that their nets cannot contain them!

36 Mk 3.16. Simon's nickname in Aramaic is Kēphā, which means "the Rock." Jesus also gives nicknames to – in effect, *interpellates* – two other fishermen who along with Simon became leading disciples: John and James, the sons of Zebedee, were called in Aramaic *Boanerges*, which has been badly transliterated into Greek and is then translated by Mark as "Sons of Thunder" (Aramaic: *benē re'em* -> Greek: *huioi brontēs*); see Mk 3.17. For a discussion of the complexities involved in understanding the meaning of such Aramaic nicknames, see Casey 2010, pp. 186-92.

of expectations,<sup>37</sup> Simon Peter's persistent failure to understand – and act in accordance with – Jesus's messianic mission of sacrifice for the well-being of others appears to be all the more tragic. Indeed, at a pivotal moment in the trajectory of Mark's story, Jesus rebukes Simon Peter for his misunderstanding: "Get behind me, Satan!"<sup>38</sup> A dramatic interpellative reversal has occurred: Simon Peter's previous hailing of Jesus – "You are the "Messiah"<sup>39</sup> – has turned out to be a *misrecognition*, for it incorrectly presumed a conventional hierarchical model of power. Simon Peter, according to Jesus, has wrongly set "his mind not on divine things but on human things."<sup>40</sup> As a result, by means of a corrective *counter-interpellation*, Jesus rejects this model – and presumably so should listeners/readers of the gospel.<sup>41</sup>

Yet apart from this orally transmitted and then narratively embedded remembrance, Simon Peter was a complex embodied individual who lived in a specific region of the world during a precise conjuncture: at the height of Roman Imperial power,<sup>42</sup> he was probably an illiterate (or marginally literate)<sup>43</sup> peasant fisherman, the son of Yonah,<sup>44</sup> grew up in Bethsaida<sup>45</sup> and later moved to Capernaum on the eastern periphery of the Empire,<sup>46</sup> eked out a living from the Sea of Galilee, and spoke a local dialect.<sup>47</sup> Simon Peter encountered Jesus and decided to follow him not simply as a result of Jesus's charismatic presence but was probably

37 Here I follow especially Myers 2002; 2008.

38 Mk 8.33.

39 Mk 8.30.

40 Mk 8.33.

41 In the Gospel according to Mark, the only genuine interpellations of Jesus as a messiah who will be killed for his egalitarian vision of the "reign of God" turn out to be Bartimaeus ("son of Timaeus"), a blind beggar, who calls out to Jesus from the roadside during the latter's march to Jerusalem (10.46-52), and an unnamed woman in Bethany, who anoints Jesus with oil to affirm his messianic status – but as a prelude to his death and burial (Mk 14.3-9).

42 For an introduction to the dynamics of first-century Roman imperial power, see Carter 2006.

43 In Acts 4.13 Simon Peter is described as "illiterate" (*agrammatos*) and "unsophisticated" (*idiōtēs*).

44 See Mt 16.17.

45 Only John's gospel provides this biographical information (see Jn 1.44).

46 An inference based on Mk 1.21, 29.

47 Presumably, this is how, after Jesus's arrest, bystanders in the courtyard of the high priest are able to identify Simon Peter's accent when he denies that he is a follower of Jesus (Mk 14.71; Lk 22.59).

inspired by the latter's message of "theological-economic" hope of debt forgiveness in a restored nation of Israel.<sup>48</sup> He evidently betrayed Jesus after the latter's arrest,<sup>49</sup> returned – or fled – to Galilee for a time.<sup>50</sup> Eventually he returned to Jerusalem and served as one of the three main leaders or "pillars" (*styloi*) in the assembly of Jesus followers located there.<sup>51</sup>

One of the most moving episodes in the New Testament is a post-resurrection dialogue between Jesus and Peter that occurs in the Gospel according to John. Peter and several other disciples have gone fishing in the Sea of Tiberias in Galilee (another name for the Sea of Galilee), but they have returned to shore with an empty net. Just after daybreak Jesus appears on the beach as a stranger and directs them to cast their net to the right side of the boat – with miraculous success. Subsequently, they all sit down to cook and eat a breakfast of fish and bread.

When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?" He said to him, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you." Jesus said to him, "Feed my lambs." A second time he said to him, "Simon son of John, do you love me?" He said to him, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you." Jesus said to him, "Tend my sheep." He said to him the third time, "Simon son of John, do you love me?" Peter felt hurt because he said to him the third time, "Do you love me?" And he said to him, "Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you." Jesus said to him, "Feed my sheep. Very truly, I tell you, when you were younger, you used to fasten your own belt and to go wherever you wished. But when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will fasten a belt around you and take you where you do not wish to go." (He said this to indicate the kind of death by which he would glorify God.) After this he said to him, "Follow me."<sup>52</sup>

What exactly is going on in this mutually interpellative question-and-response between Master and student, between absent/present

48 On Jesus's central economic teaching debt-forgiveness (and tax-resistance), see Oakman 2014.

49 Mk 14:66-72; Mt 26.69-75; Lk 22.54-62; Jn 18.25-27.

50 Peter's return to Galilee is assumed by the two earliest Gospels, Mark and Matthew (Mk 14.28-29, 16.7; Mt 26.32-33, 28.10, 16). The Galilean setting for post-Resurrection appearances is not shared by Luke-Acts, for which Jerusalem provides the hub of activity of an (improbably) unbroken and continuous Jesus movement. John 21 also provides a post-crucifixion Galilean context for Simon Peter, who has evidently returned to his previous life as a fisherman.

51 At any rate, this is indicated in the opening sections of the Book of the Acts of the Apostles and is confirmed by Paul's letters.

52 John 21:15-19.

Shepherd and caretaker shepherd?<sup>53</sup>

At first glance, Simon Peter seems to have redeemed himself. After having previously denied Jesus three times in the aftermath of his arrest, and returned to his ordinary life as a Galilean fisherman, in this exchange Simon Peter three times expresses his trust in, and devotion to, Jesus and his cause. This trust and devotion will, Jesus forewarns, result in Simon Peter's own arrest and death; for genuine love for Jesus requires action, namely, to "feed his lambs" and "tend his sheep." Yet such action is fraught with risk – *to be taken where you do not wish to go*. Has Simon Peter understood, and committed himself to, the demands of radical discipleship? Listeners/readers of John's narrative would doubtless have already known about Simon Peter's ultimate fate, which is not explicitly mentioned anywhere else in the New Testament but to which the narrator parenthetically refers here: he was probably executed (along with Paul and other Jesus followers) in Rome as a victim of the persecution initiated by the Emperor Nero following the fire that broke out in Rome in 64.<sup>54</sup> Simon Peter appears, then, to become a model disciple who will comply with Jesus's request to "follow me," no matter the risk.

Yet several ambiguities destabilize the dialogue. First of all, when Jesus asks, "Do you love me more than these?" it is unclear where in the sentence the emphasis (in English or Greek) lies. Two readings are possible:

"Do *you* [Simon Peter] love me more than these [other disciples do]?"

Do you love me more than [you love] *these* [other disciples]?

Simon Peter's reply is not to the first question (for how could he know the answer?) but to the second question. Thus, Simon Peter assures Jesus that, yes, he loves *him* more than he loves the other disciples. Yet the listener/reader cannot simply evade the first question, which hauntingly concerns the depth of one's commitment to Jesus and his cause.

Thus, another ambiguity arises: the first two times that Jesus asks Simon Peter "Do you love me?" he uses the Greek verb *agapao*, which connotes unconditional "fidelity." However, when Simon Peter responds each time "You know that I love you," he uses the weaker Greek verb *phileo*, which connotes conditional "fondness or friendship." On the third questioning, Jesus deliberately switches to *phileo*, as if to meet Simon

53 My reading is indebted to Howard-Brook 2003, pp. 475-9.

54 See Dunn 2009, pp. 1071-74.

Peter on his own terms. Again, the listener/reader is invited to reflect on whether or not his or her loyalty to Jesus and his cause is conditional or unconditional.

As a final ambiguity, note that, according to Jesus, Simon Peter will be taken *where he does not wish to go*; in other words, *unwillingly*. Yet early in John's narrative, Jesus has already announced that he is the "good shepherd ... who lays down his life for the sheep" (10:11). In other word, the model life of an Authentic Shepherd requires that one sacrifice, and even be willing to die *willingly* out of unconditional love for others. By contrast, Simon Peter's death will indeed "glorify God," but he will prove to be a reluctant martyr and a less-than-authentic shepherd.

Over generations, from conjuncture to conjuncture, of course, the degree of such loyalty fluctuated. It is worth noting that there are two letters in the New Testament attributed to Simon Peter - 1 and 2 Peter - that indicate waning commitment by Jesus followers to Jesus's egalitarian vision. Both letters express a second-century perspective of Jesus followers who looked back to Simon Peter's life as exemplary and formed a kind of "Petrine circle."<sup>55</sup>

In particular, the earlier 1 Peter retains a powerful ethos of solidarity to include and care for those who had been rendered homeless and marginalized by Roman imperial rule; and such an ethical commitment can be traced back to the historical figures of Jesus and Simon Peter. Yet 1 Peter contains passages that are sharply at odds with the practice of Jesus and the earliest Jesus followers. Indeed, these passages indicate a new conjuncture of increasing accommodation to Roman imperial norms ("Honor the emperor."),<sup>56</sup> to slavery ("Slaves, accept the authority of your masters ..."),<sup>57</sup> and to unequal gender roles ("Wives, in the same way, accept the authority of your husbands ...").<sup>58</sup> Simon Peter's authority as a disciple is being used to encourage conformity to the status quo instead of supporting critical inquiry into the continuing demands of radical discipleship.

55 Elliott 2005. For a commentary on both of these so-called "Catholic Epistles," see Nienhuis and Wall 2013, pp. 95-156.

56 1 Peter 2.17.

57 1 Peter 2.18.

58 1 Peter 3.1.

## 5. From naming-using practices to social emancipation

What should we conclude from this thumbnail sketch of Simon Peter's historical individuality – of his biographical life? First of all, we should insist on the extent to which richness of his ordinary Galilean life exceeds our contemporary ability fully to reconstruct through even the best textual, anthropological, folkloric, sociological, and archeological evidence.<sup>59</sup> Let us, for the sake of argument, though, suggest that the name *Simeon bar Yonah* rigidly designates this concrete individual.<sup>60</sup> By contrast, let us reserve *Petros* (or *Kēphā*) for the subsequent linguistic, cultural, theological, indeed, the *interpellative*, shifts in how this individual was remembered and venerated over the decades following his death and the subsequent stages of a movement to whose founding he had vitally contributed.<sup>61</sup>

In this respect, I disagree with Markus Brockmuehl, who has contended that history's Simon Peter, like history's Jesus of Nazareth, is from the start always already embedded in communal memory and interpretation of one kind or another. This apostle, in other words, is always *somebody's* Peter, whether friend or opponent – rather than a neutrally or objectively recoverable figure.<sup>62</sup>

The chief problem with Brockmuehl's historical methodology is that while seeking to reconstruct the transmission of collective memories of an individual – Simon Peter in this case<sup>63</sup> – he fails to distinguish between a memory and the individual of whom there is a more-or-less reliable recollection. A memory is always a memory *of* something or

59 For overviews of the "historical Galilee," see Horsley 1995 and Freyne 2014, pp. 13-51.

60 Saul Kripke has famously defined something as a rigid designator "if in every possible world it designates the same object" (Kripke 1980, p. 48). In other words, a rigid designator picks out the singularity of an individual as compared with others. Moreover, according to Kripke, a (personal) name can best be understood to function as a rigid designator and not as a more-or-less comprehensive collection of definite descriptions of an individual.

61 Although Slavoj Žižek has used Kripke's theory of names to understand the nature of ideology (Žižek 2008, pp. 95-144), he too sharply distinguishes between *descriptivist* (e.g. Russell and Searle) and *antidescriptivist* theories of names (e.g., Kripke), and so fails to appreciate the need for what amounts, in Gregory McCulloch's words, to adopting a "mixed strategy" (McCulloch 1989, p. 308) that incorporates both *descriptivist* and *antidescriptivist* elements, much as I am suggesting that an adequate theory of ideology grounded in "the interpellation of individuals as subjects" has to emphasize the irreducible tension between subjects and (named) individuals.

62 Brockmuehl 2012, p. xv.

63 Strictly speaking, "Simon Peter" is what we ought to call a *hybrid* personal name that combines features designating (a) the historical individual "Simeon bar Yonah" and (b) that individual as interpellated by Jesus and the tradition subsequently associated with him, namely, *Kēphā* -> *Petros* -> "The Rock."

someone; no memory is an entirely autonomous and purely idiosyncratic fiction. In this respect, memories operate, for better or worse, as *intentional* acts of transmission.

Furthermore, we must take care to distinguish between the *production* of a personal name and subsequent name-using practices associated with the *consumption* of that name.<sup>64</sup> *Producers* of personal names are those who have had dealings with an individual *x* and are in a position to recognize *that* individual as having been assigned a name, whether through formal "baptism"<sup>65</sup> or some informal means, and to correction inaccurate information about him or her. By contrast, *consumers* of personal names are not acquainted with the individual – indeed he or she may now be long dead – but have been introduced into a relevant name-using practice by means of which meaningfully to refer to that individual.<sup>66</sup>

We can make a further distinction between *active* and *passive* consumers.<sup>67</sup> Passive consumers of personal names act as mere "mouth-pieces" of the name-using practice; they simply "parrot sentences" and pass along the information to which they have been exposed about how to use the name in question.<sup>68</sup> Active consumers, by contrast, take a genuine interest in acquiring new knowledge and so strive to keep "the light burning" in the name-using practice.<sup>69</sup> For instance, to the extent that they operate as active consumers, biblical scholars may acquire new facts and draw insightful conclusions about Simon Peter that are lacking to ordinary consumers of the name "Simon Peter." In this respect, their knowledge of the historical individual may rival that of the producers of that personal name – those individuals such as his family, Jesus, the other disciples, and other "eyewitnesses" to the events narrated in the gospels.<sup>70</sup>

64 In this paragraph I follow Gareth Evans's discussion of proper names in Evans 1982, pp. 373-404.

65 On "baptism" as the means by which name-using practices are customarily initiated, Kripke writes: "Someone, let's say a baby, is born; his parents call him by a certain name. They talk about him to their friends. Other people meet him. Through various sorts of talk the name is spread from link to link as if by a chain" (Kripke 1980, p. 91).

66 This process is already at work during Paul's missionary activity in Corinth, where he confronts a variety of factions in the assembly of Jesus followers who identify as "belonging" to Paul, Apollos (about whose life and teachings relatively little is known), Christ, or Cephas. See 1 Cor 1.10-17.

67 McCulloch 1989, pp. 281-4.

68 McCulloch, pp. 268-72, 283.

69 McCulloch, p. 282

70 Richard Bauckham has argued persuasively that the four gospels are ancient "biogra-

Once all name-producers have become unavailable or have died, of course, only name-consumers remain. At this point, in the “last phase” of a name-using practice, it could turn out that everything associated with that personal name is false, because there are no longer name-producers able to correct the inaccuracies.<sup>71</sup> However, such widespread misinformation does not affect the personal name’s referent, which continues to be the original individual *x*.<sup>72</sup> At any rate, the accumulation of falsehoods in the transmission of a personal name can eventually be identified, challenged, and corrected by active consumers of that name.

Let me reiterate, then: theological reassessment of the historical individual Simeon bar Yonah doubtless occurred during the first generations of the Jesus movement, but this does not mean that there never existed an individual *by that name* who underwent subsequent processes of interpellation by those who in various ways modified the name-using practice. Nor does it imply that there is no good reason today to try to reconstruct the life of that individual within his historical conjuncture in as objective and thorough a manner as possible.

Secondly, although individuals are always already interpellated as subjects (even before they are born, as Althusser suggests), it is equally true that naming and reclaiming a concrete individual – Simeon bar Yonah, for instance – can serve to disrupt an interpellated subject – *Petros/Kēphā*) for instance – as much any counter-interpellation has or could. In this sense, although some names are “unnameable,” they must nonetheless be said.<sup>73</sup>

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phies” that can be presumed to rely on eyewitness testimony to the life and times of Jesus. Obviously, there is also creative license involved in the oral transmission and writing of those gospels. But there is equally a more-or-less reliable historical core of information about Jesus and the first-century movement he led that rivals information about any other ancient figure, for example, Socrates or Julius Caesar. Interestingly, much of Bauckham’s argument hinges on the use of personal names, especially for minor characters, in the gospels as rigid designators (not his term) for historical referents, who themselves likely provided eyewitness testimony to help establish either the oral tradition or written narratives. See Bauckham 2006 (on names in the gospel traditions, see pp. 39-66. For dissenting views, see Patterson 2008; Weeden 2008; for Bauckham’s reply, see Bauckham 2008.

71 Evans 1982, pp. 393-6. In New Testament studies, this would constitute the extreme skepticism of what is commonly called the “mythicist” position. For strong criticisms of such skepticism as unwarranted, see Ehrmann 2012 and Casey 2014.

72 Evans 1982, p. 395. The presence of an Aramaic nickname *Kēphā* as preserved in Mark’s gospel and Paul’s letters helps to provide a basis for reasonable confidence not only in the historical Jesus but also in the historical Simon Peter. At the very least, it would suggest a pre-Greek Aramaic background to the traditions associated with the early Jesus movement.

73 On “unnameable names,” see Lazarus 2015, pp. 115-66. Like Althusser, though, Lazarus has pitched his analysis at the general level of collective names like “worker,” whereas there exists a grave political need to name specific individuals in order to address specific injustices. Consider the case of Sandra Bland, an African-American woman who was en route from Naperville, Illinois to

Continuing struggle over how the historical Simon Peter has been remembered and venerated has profound theological and practical impact on the lives of contemporary Catholics in specific (the doctrine of papal infallibility, for instance) and all Christians in general (the egalitarian practice of the Jesus movement<sup>74</sup>). But it equally provides a basis for Christians and non-Christians to agree on the vital role that this individual played in history and may continue to play through solidarity grounded in positive identification and emulation.

If Althusser is right that “concepts are not hidden in beds,” it is equally true that they are not hidden in Galilean fishermen’s boats. And yet there is a world of difference between “ransacking Louis XV’s bed” and carefully reconstructing a vessel used by Galilean peasants as an artifact in order to provide insight into an ancient subsistence fishing economy<sup>75</sup> – this between the decadent reality of social domination from above and the hardscrabble prospect of social emancipation from below.

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a new job at Prairie View A&M University in Texas. Bland was beaten and arrested in Prairie View for a minor traffic infraction on July 10, 2015. She then died under suspicious circumstances in a Waller County, Texas jail on July 13. A key slogan of the Black Lives Matter solidarity movement that has arisen and drawn attention to police misconduct in her – and numerous other cases – is precisely “Say her name!” The slogan contains a double emphasis: not only “Say her *name!*” but also “Say *her* name!” Institutional racism remains unnameable within the confines of the dominant racial ideology – and yet it must be named by anti-racist activists each and every time it occurs. On Sandra Bland’s death in police custody, see [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Death\\_of\\_Sandra\\_Bland](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Death_of_Sandra_Bland).

74 On the egalitarianism of the Jesus movement, see Horsley 2013.

75 See Wachsmann 2009.

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# Humanity, That Sickness: Louis Althusser and The Helpless- ness of Psychoa- nalysis

## Adrian Johnston

### Abstract:

The fiftieth anniversary of the publications of *For Marx* and *Reading Capital* indeed calls for celebrations of Althusser's accomplishments, a Marxist legacy endowed by the opening years of the twenty-first century with renewed timeliness and urgency. However, celebrating Althusser on this occasion should involve not only returning to the (in)famous anti-humanist author of these 1965 works centered on claims regarding Marx's alleged "epistemological break" of 1845—it also should involve revisiting lesser-known moments in Althusser's extended *oeuvre* and, in so doing, recovering other Althusserians than the best-known one of *For Marx* and *Reading Capital*. Herein, I engage in the latter mode of honoring Althusser. Specifically, I scrutinize his shifting, ambivalent relations with Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis. Doing so enables me to (re)construct an Althusserian (or quasi-Althusserian) version of dialectical and historical materialisms in which philosophical anthropology *à la* Hegel and Marx, analysis *à la* Freud and Lacan, and various branches of biology, all on equal footing with each other, cooperate so as to yield a compatibilism both uncompromisingly materialist and, at the same time, thoroughly anti-reductionist.

### Keywords:

Hegel, Marx, Freud, Lacan, Althusser, materialism, psychoanalysis

Already in 1947, a young Louis Althusser draws attention to specific peculiar features of G.W.F. Hegel's philosophical anthropology. In "Man, That Night," a review of the published version of Alexandre Kojève's legendary 1930s lectures on Hegel then just released in print, Althusser, following Kojève himself,<sup>1</sup> highlights a now-familiar moment in the 1805-1806 *Jenaer Realphilosophie*, namely, the one when Hegel speaks of the "human being" as "this night, this empty nothing," "a night that becomes awful (*furchtbar*)."<sup>2</sup> Introducing this particular Hegelian passage, Althusser opens his review thusly:

The profoundest themes of the Romantic nocturne haunt Hegel's thinking. Yet Night is not, in Hegel, the blind peace of the darkness

1 Kojève 1947, pp. 574-575

2 Hegel 1987, p. 172

through which discrete entities make their solitary way, separated from one another for all eternity. It is, by the grace of man, the birth of Light. Before Nietzsche—and with what rigour—Hegel saw in man a sick animal who neither dies nor recovers (*cet animal malade qui ne meurt ni ne guérit*), but stubbornly insists on living on in a nature terrified of him (*mais s'entête à vivre dans une nature effarée*). The animal kingdom reabsorbs its monsters, the economy its crises: man alone is a triumphant error who makes his aberration the law of the world. At the level of nature, man is an absurdity, a gap in being (*un trou dans l'être*), an 'empty nothing,' a 'Night.'<sup>3</sup>

Twenty years later, in 1967's "The Humanist Controversy," a better-known, older Althusser similarly states, "a definition of the essence of Man in Hegel... makes man a 'sick animal,' not a labouring animal."<sup>4</sup> Of course, this post-1965 remark is of a piece with Althusser's efforts to defend and reinforce his (in)famous thesis apropos Karl Marx's alleged 1845 "epistemological break" with Feuerbach and, behind the latter, with Hegel too. As I later will argue here, for Hegel, Marx, and Althusser (as well as Jacques Lacan), there are implicit and explicit links between both this "sickness" and this "laboring" as equally distinctive, perhaps even co-constitutive, of human beings.

Contemporaneously with "The Humanist Controversy," in "Notes sur la philosophie" (1967-1968), Althusser hesitantly floats the interpretive hypothesis that "a certain anthropological Hegelianism" perhaps continues to haunt the mature Marx of *Capital*.<sup>5</sup> This somewhat tempers the contrast between Hegelian and Marxian anthropologies underscored in "The Humanist Controversy." Moreover, it might not be straightforwardly critical of this Marx; as I have shown elsewhere, Althusser throughout his career is far from categorically hostile to Hegel, finding much in Hegel's philosophy of value for historical, dialectical, and aleatory materialisms.<sup>6</sup>

As is common knowledge, Lacan, in terms of both his construal of Hegelian philosophy as well as many other features of his own teaching, is profoundly marked by his youthful encounter with Kojève (Lacan having attended those 1930s seminars being reviewed in book form by Althusser

3 Althusser 1994a, p. 239; Althusser 1997, p. 170

4 Althusser 2003, p. 250

5 Althusser 1995, p. 321

6 Johnston 2015a [forthcoming]; Johnston 2016a [forthcoming]

in 1947). For better or worse, Lacan's Hegel, whenever the French psychoanalyst mentions the German philosopher by name, usually is Kojève's, namely, the author of the 1807 *Phenomenology of Spirit* propounding a proto-existentialist and proto-Marxist philosophical anthropology centered on tensions between positions of mastery and slavery. However, not only does Lacan, sometimes intentionally/explicitly and sometimes unintentionally/implicitly, manage to do more interpretive justice to Hegel's thinking than Kojève—he dramatically develops and extends the implications of the intuitions of the Jena-period, pre-*Phenomenology* Hegel quoted by both Kojève and Althusser. Having detailed these Lacanian developments and extensions at length on other occasions,<sup>7</sup> I herein both will be somewhat selective in my references to Lacan as well as will rely upon the evidence and arguments put forward by me on these just-mentioned separate occasions. In what ensues, my focus will be more on Althusser and Althusser's engagements (not unrelated to each other) with Hegelian philosophy and Freudian-Lacanian psychoanalysis.

Returning to this intervention's starting point with Althusser's equation of the nocturnal with the sick in Hegel's early *Realphilosophie*, another fragment from the latter's pre-1807 Jena phase is especially striking. In the incomplete manuscripts of his 1803/1804 *Das System der spekulativen Philosophie*, Hegel identifies organic illness as the pivotal mediator facilitating the transition from animal *Natur* to human *Geist*—"With sickness, the animal exceeds the limit of its nature; but, the sickness of the animal is the becoming of the spirit" (*Mit der Krankheit überschreitet das Tier die Grenze seiner Natur; aber die Krankheit des Tiers ist das Werden des Geistes*).<sup>8</sup> A few scholars of German idealism, including Althusser's and Lacan's friend Jean Hyppolite, mention this thesis of the young Hegel.<sup>9</sup> But, it is not directly referenced by Kojève or Althusser. However, in the 1955 *écrit* "Variations on the Standard Treatment," Lacan perhaps obliquely gestures at this when he speaks of "the dehiscence from natural harmony (*cette déhiscence de l'harmonie naturelle*), required by Hegel to serve as the fruitful illness, life's happy fault, in which man, distinguishing himself from his essence, discovers his existence (*la*

7 Johnston 2008, pp. 269-287; Johnston 2011, pp. 159-179; Johnston 2012, pp. 23-52; Johnston 2016b [forthcoming]

8 Hegel 1986, p. 179

9 Hyppolite 1969, pp. 160-161; Breidbach 1982, p. 326; Harris 1983, pp. 101, 113, 450, 460, 467, 506; Harris 1997, pp. 500, 521, 524

*maladie féconde, la faute heureuse de la vie, où l'homme, à se distinguer de son essence, découvre son existence*)<sup>10</sup> (I am not sure whether Lacan actually had first-hand familiarity with the fragments constituting Hegel's 1803/1804 *Das System der spekulativen Philosophie*, although he may have been made aware of this material thanks to Hyppolite). As will subsequently prove to be significant for my line of thought here, Lacan associates this Hegelian "fruitful illness" specifically with the Freud-emphasized biological fact of human beings' developmental-ontogenetic *Hilflosigkeit*, their species-distinctive prolonged prematurational helplessness (a condition Lacan fleshes out under the heading of his concept of the "body-in-pieces" [*corps morcelé*]).<sup>11</sup> I will come back to all of this in the final third of this piece.

For Hegel himself, in line with certain notions shared amongst his contemporaries (such as F.W.J. Schelling), organic illness essentially involves the rebellion of part against whole. That is to say, disease occurs when an organ malfunctions and runs amok such as to disrupt the functional unity of the organism to which it belongs. Hegelian sickness is the consequence of an organ becoming "anorganic," namely, coming to assert its independence, so to speak, from the larger organic whole.

Yet, as the mature Hegel's philosophical "Anthropology" (i.e., the stretch of his *Realphilosophie* immediately succeeding, within the *Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences*, the culmination of *Naturphilosophie* in "Organics") makes clear (for instance, in its well-known discussion of "habit"), intra-organic imbalancing, the becoming-uneven of the organism's parts in relation to each other and the whole, comes to fashion and characterize the distinctively human as denaturalized and more-than-animalistic.<sup>12</sup> Therefore, insofar as "sickness" involves certain of an organism's organs lop-sidedly enjoying excessive priority/prominence, the Hegelian philosophical-anthropological doctrine of the peculiarly human soul (*Seele*) indeed depicts humanity as, at its zero-level, sick animality. The human being is, at its roots, the animal that has fallen ill *qua* lost the organic unity of its natural body—hence the justness of Lacan's above-mentioned linking of Hegelian humanizing-*qua*-deanimalizing *Krankheit* with Freudian *Hilflosigkeit* and the body-in-pieces.

But, apart from Althusser's already-cited 1947 and 1967 references

10 Lacan 1966, p. 345; Lacan 2006, p. 286

11 Johnston 2012, pp. 23-52

12 Hegel 1971, §378 [p. 3], §381 [pp. 8, 13-15], §388 [p. 29], §391 [pp. 35-36], §392 [p. 38], §409-410 [pp. 139-147], §412 [pp. 151-152]

to Hegel's human being as a sick animal, what more, if anything, does Althusserian Marxism have to do with Hegel, Freud, Lacan, and the cluster of interrelated topics I have introduced here thus far (such as nature-and-culture, animal-and-human, humanization as denaturalization/deanimalization, helplessness, and laboring)? As will be seen below shortly, the Althusser who refers to animality-fallen-ill furnishes the beginnings of an ensemble of intertwined red threads allowing for a guided re-traversal of his intellectual itinerary (the very re-traversal I will pursue in what follows). In particular, Althusser's engagements with Freudianism generally and Lacan's version of it especially, re-examined in light of the Hegelian motif of the sick animal taken up by both Lacan and Althusser, promise to facilitate Marxism and psychoanalysis mutually illuminating and but-tressing each other.

Moreover, my revisitation of the Althusserian corpus from the early 1960s through the mid-1980s, one oriented by features of Hegelian philosophy and Freudian-Lacanian psychoanalysis, concludes by bringing to the fore a surprising incarnation of the late Althusser, an Althusser contemporaneous with and related to, but not fully visible within, the "aleatory materialism of the encounter" now quite familiar to his readers. That is, I will end by sketching nothing other than an Althusserian theory of freedom, of a radically autonomous, instead of heteronomously subjected, subject. This little-noticed Althusser should be startling to all those who, not without good reasons, associate him with an uncompromising determinism resulting from his syntheses of Spinozism, Marxism, and structuralism during the 1960s.

Already in Althusser's 1963-1964 seminar on Lacan at the École Normale Supérieure (ENS), he identifies Lacan's "great discovery" as a recasting of the ontogenesis of the socialized, acculturated "human subject" out of "the biological little human being." This recasting is one in which, as Althusser has it, "culture" (as the Lacanian symbolic order into which the neonate is thrown even before the moment of physical birth) precedes and induces each and every ontogenetic movement from "biology" to "culture," rather than culture being the entirely secondary outgrowth and after-effect of biology.<sup>13</sup> 1964's "Freud and Lacan" likewise subsequently declares:

That is, no doubt, the most original part of Lacan's work: his discovery. Lacan has shown that the passage from (in the limit case, pure) biological existence to human existence (the child of man) is effected

13 Althusser 1996a, p. 91; Johnston 2015a

under the Law of the Order that I will call the Law of Culture and that this Law of Culture can be conflated in its *formal* essence with the order of language.<sup>14</sup>

This just-quoted 1964 echo of a precise moment in the preceding 1963-1964 seminar occurs early on in the third section of “Freud and Lacan.” The prior second section, which begins by asking, “What is the *object* of psychoanalysis?,”<sup>15</sup> eloquently (and rather poignantly) foreshadows this point about Lacan’s “discovery.” Therein, Althusser portrays the familial unit, with its analytically disclosed structures and dynamics (i.e., its Oedipal “complexes”), as the key site and/or agency in and through which “culture” catalyzes and oversees the young child’s transition from biology to culture, from animality to subjectivity. The family, as itself an entity straddling several lines between the natural and the social, is responsible for pulling the infant up and over these very borders.<sup>16</sup>

Also in the second section of “Freud and Lacan,” Althusser succinctly and deftly differentiates psychoanalysis from an array of other disciplines in relation to which it recurrently is at risk of losing some or all of its unique disciplinary distinctiveness (in *Reading Capital*, Althusser again underscores this distinctive specificity of analysis and its object<sup>17</sup>). With its field-specific object the unconscious, itself the consequent product of the repressed ordeals of Oedipal socio-cultural deanimalization and subjectification, analysis is, first of all, irreducible to the life sciences. Whereas biology deals with nature, analysis deals with the transitions and borderlines between nature and non-nature/more-than-nature.<sup>18</sup> Furthermore, just as the liminal status of psychoanalysis and its unconscious blocks any absorption of analysis into the natural sciences, so too does it prevent wholly and comfortably including analysis amongst the “human sciences” (i.e., the humanities and social sciences). Insofar as analytic ontogenesis straddles and moves across the frontiers between the natural and the human, it is as irreducible to anthropology, history, psychology, or sociology (the human sciences mentioned by Althusser

14 Althusser 1996b, p. 25

15 Ibid., p. 22

16 Ibid., pp. 22-23

17 Althusser 2009, p. 173

18 Althusser 1996b, p. 23

here) as it is to, for instance, biology and neurology.<sup>19</sup>

To refer back to the end of the prior block quotation, Althusser italicizes the word “*formal*” in his rendition of Lacan’s account of the socio-symbolic/linguistic constitution of the analytic unconscious. This emphasized adjective signals a qualification to Althusser’s admiration—Lacan receives more emphatic praise in this vein a year later in *Reading Capital*<sup>20</sup>—of the Lacanian appreciation and foregrounding of language in psychoanalysis. As the sizable bulk of 1966’s “Three Notes on the Theory of Discourse” soon suggests, Althusser believes that Lacanian analysis, left to its own devices, is confined to formalism; only as a “regional theory” of the “general theory” of historical materialism does Lacan’s theory of the unconscious avoid being purely formal (and, hence, idealist *qua* anti-materialist).<sup>21</sup> Lacan (at least the middle-period one of the 1950s-era “return to Freud”) is being contentiously accused of insufficient materialist credentials.

Particularly due to Althusser’s “flirtation” with structuralism in his best-known works of the mid-1960s,<sup>22</sup> it might seem odd to certain readers—it perhaps even appears to them to be a case of the proverbial pot calling the kettle black—to find Althusser objecting to Lacan’s purported formalist tendencies. Does not the Marxist share with Lacan not only certain structuralist inclinations (however heterodox), but also, closely related to structuralism’s sensibilities, a French neo-rationalist epistemology and perspective on the sciences past and present indebted to the likes of Gaston Bachelard, Georges Canguilhem, and Alexandre Koyré? For the time being, I will put aside serious and legitimate questions regarding the accuracy or inaccuracy of Althusser’s characterizations of Lacan’s alleged formalist leanings. That said, Althusser himself, despite certain widespread perceptions of him as “formalizing” Marxism via structuralism and neo-rationalism, recurrently protests against formalisms in (philosophy of) science generally and the human sciences (including Marxist historical/dialectical materialism as well as psychoanalysis) specifically. In “*Du côté de la philosophie*” (the fifth lesson of the 1967 ENS seminar series “Philosophy Course for Scientists”), Althusser harshly condemns neo-positivism for its transubstantiation of

19 Ibid., p. 23

20 Althusser 2009, p. 16

21 Althusser 2003, pp. 38-84

22 Althusser 1976, p. 126

all particular material objects into the abstract logical form of any object whatever.<sup>23</sup> “Elements of Self-Criticism,” in its qualified partial confession of “coquetting” with structuralism, stringently denies that Marx, including the one of *Reading Capital* and *For Marx*, is a “*formalist*.”<sup>24</sup> And, in the posthumously just-published book-length manuscript *Être marxiste en philosophie*, Althusser pointedly repudiates the Galilean-Cartesian formalist line of twentieth-century French epistemology and history of science by insisting that mathematized physics cannot be reduced to pure mathematics alone<sup>25</sup> (this makes for strange bedfellows, given that the eighteenth-century giant of early-modern British empiricism, David Hume, already warns against this very reduction<sup>26</sup>).

In a later text on psychoanalysis, 1976’s “The Discovery of Dr. Freud” (i.e., the essay at the center of “The Tbilisi Affair”), Althusser explicitly contrasts Freud’s naturalism (allied with the empirical, experimental sciences of nature, especially biology and its branches) with Lacan’s formalism (allied with mathematics and logic, particularly topology as well as game and knot theories) to the detriment of the latter.<sup>27</sup> He states:

Freud... always compared himself to a researcher in the *natural* sciences—notto a mathematician or a logician, as Lacan likes to do—and he was 100 percent right. He even compared himself so well to a researcher in the natural sciences that he was convinced—and he never stopped saying as much—that one day psychoanalysis would be united with neurology, biochemistry, and chemistry. For Freud knew that his discovery could become *the object of a natural science* (I recall here that Marx says that historical materialism ought to be considered for what it is, a ‘natural science,’ for history is part of nature, since nothing else exists in the world except nature). Nonetheless, Freud also knew that one does not *decree* that a discovery *has become* a science. He knew that certain objective conditions must be satisfied for that transformation of a discovery of nature to be possible. He knew that those conditions were not extant in his day. I will add that they are not present in our day but that there exist serious hopes stemming from recent developments in the neuro-

23 Althusser 1995, p. 287

24 Althusser 1976, pp. 126-131

25 Althusser 2015, p. 86

26 Hume 1993, pp. 19-20

27 Johnston 2013a, pp. 39-58

bio-chemistry of the human body and brain, on the one hand (an aspect anticipated by Freud), and from historical materialism, on the other (an aspect that Freud could not intuit). Experience shows that a discovery becomes a science only when it can establish *theoretical links* between its own discovery and other existing sciences.<sup>28</sup>

For Althusser, Lacan is not the (one-and-only) truly orthodox Freudian he so adamantly and repeatedly claims to be. Furthermore, Althusser’s underscoring here of the naturalist inclinations consistently exhibited by Freud is of a piece with his contemporaneous crediting of Freud’s “discovery” (i.e., the new “science,” or *science-à-venir*, of psychoanalysis) with advancing the causes of atheism, (dialectical) materialism, and even freedom.<sup>29</sup> Also noteworthy in this passage is Althusser’s somewhat unexpected (given his [in]famous mid-1960s thesis of the Bachelardian-style 1845 “epistemological break” in Marx’s itinerary) favorable invocation of the naturalism Marx first formulates in the 1844 Paris *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*—one in which human history is immanent to natural history, the former being a twisted permutation of the latter.<sup>30</sup>

Other features of the preceding block quotation call for, and promise to reward, careful unpacking in this context (although it will be a little while before I return to Althusser’s hopes, expressed in this same quotation, regarding the eventual dual supplementation of analysis by biology and Marxist materialism). To begin with, Althusser therein proposes that, sometimes, a young science-to-be (such as psychoanalysis) must wait patiently for future developments in other scientific fields before it can become a science proper by eventually forging appropriate “*theoretical links*” between itself and these subsequent advances in other sciences. Prior to this moment in “The Discovery of Dr. Freud,” the article “Freud and Lacan” depicts Lacan’s establishment of connections between Freudian analysis and post-Freudian structural linguistics as just such an appropriate forging of theoretical links, a maneuver replacing Freud’s recourse to and reliance upon pre-Freudian, nineteenth-century physics.<sup>31</sup> Similarly, in both the 1966 correspondence with René Diatkine as well as 1980 addendum to a public intervention at a gathering triggered

28 Althusser 1996b, p. 97

29 Ibid., p.90; *ibid.*, p.107; Althusser, 1996b, p. 107; Althusser 2015, pp. 82, 297

30 Marx 1992, pp. 355, 389-390; Johnston 2015a; 2016c

31 Althusser 1996b, p. 24

by Lacan's controversial dissolution of the *École freudienne de Paris*, Althusser accurately corrects the erroneous image of Lacan as a linguistic reductionist, doing so by rightly underscoring the weight of the "like" (*comme*), to be contrasted with other prepositions such as "by," in "the unconscious is structured like a language" (*l'inconscient est structuré comme un langage*).<sup>32</sup> In 1964 (and, perhaps, 1980 too), Althusser is much more favorably disposed towards Lacanianism, with the latter's linguistic, structuralist, and formalist inclinations, than in 1976. But, *circa* 1976, he prefers Freud's biological, empirical-scientific, and naturalist inclinations instead.

In *Initiation à la philosophie pour les non-philosophes* (1977-1978), Althusser, promptly on the heels of "The Discovery of Dr. Freud," exhibits a genuine ambivalence *vis-à-vis* Lacan as regards the scientific status (or lack thereof) of psychoanalysis. On a prior occasion, in a footnote to one of Althusser's contributions to *Reading Capital* ("The Object of *Capital*"), he emphasizes the importance of fighting to secure the scientific uniqueness and self-sufficiency of psychoanalysis as founded on the basis of Freud's distinctive discovery of the unconscious:

...Freud's 'object' is a radically new object with respect to the 'object' of the psychological or philosophical ideologies of his predecessors. Freud's object is the *unconscious*, which has nothing to do with the objects of all the varieties of modern psychology, although the latter can be multiplied at will! It is even possible to see the number one task of every new discipline as that of *thinking* the specific difference of the new object which it *discovers*, distinguishing it rigorously from the old object and constructing the peculiar concepts required to think it. It is in this basic theoretical work that a science wins its effective right to autonomy in open combat (*C'est dans ce travail théorique fondamental qu'une science nouvelle conquiert de haute lutte son droit effectif à l'autonomie*).<sup>33</sup>

Subsequently, *Initiation à la philosophie pour les non-philosophes* evinces sympathy for Lacan's endeavors along these very lines. In the late 1970s, Althusser opines:

Was it better to place, as Lacan does today in France, the accent on the real autonomy of analytic theory, thereby running the risk of its provisional scientific isolation, but also the risk of its solitude? This second

32 Ibid., pp. 64, 70; Ibid., pp. 136-137

33 Althusser 2008, p. 362; Althusser 2009, p. 173

attitude appears the more just, at least for the moment. It is sometimes necessary to leave a theory in a state of prudent scientific *incompleteness*, without anticipating the discoveries of neighboring sciences.

Experience also shows, in effect, that one does not decree the completion of a science.<sup>34</sup>

He continues:

The experience of the history of analytic theory demonstrates, in any case, that objective abstractions, not ideological, but not yet scientific, can and must subsist in this state, to the extent that neighboring sciences have not attained a point of maturity such that it permits the reunification of neighboring scientific 'continents.'

In the same way that time is needed to lead the class struggle to its conclusion, time also is necessary in order to lead to the constitution of a science as science. Moreover, it is not certain that analytic theory can don the form of a science properly speaking.<sup>35</sup>

In a footnote to the second sentence of the first of these two block quotations, G.M. Goshgarian provides the original version of this sentence from an earlier draft of Althusser's manuscript:

This second attitude appears the more just, even if Lacan did not resist the temptation to complete philosophically that which Freud had taken the jealous care of always leaving in a prudent state of scientific incompleteness, not wanting to anticipate the discoveries of neighboring sciences.<sup>36</sup>

Taking these three passages from *Initiation à la philosophie pour les non-philosophes* together, Althusser, apropos the Lacanian version of Freudian psychoanalysis specifically, presents a mixed picture of Lacan's endeavors in relation to Freud's purported (proto-)science. To begin with, whereas Lacan is positively credited in 1964 with a timely and justified theoretical linkage of analysis to structural linguistics, he here, in 1977-1978, is assessed differently along two distinct lines.

On the one hand, and as seen in the first of the three prior block

34 Althusser 2014a, p. 296

35 Ibid., pp. 296-297

36 Ibid., p. 296

quotations, Althusser, consistent with his above-quoted take on Freud in *Reading Capital*, approvingly portrays Lacan as bravely maintaining the disciplinary sovereignty and self-sufficiency of psychoanalysis while waiting patiently for pertinent future scientific breakthroughs in an unforeseeable interdisciplinary landscape yet to materialize. This Althusser, inconsistently in relation to some of his earlier claims cited by me previously, does not depict Lacan as partnering analysis with any other particular scientific discipline (whether linguistics, mathematics, and/or logic). On the other hand, and as revealed by the older manuscript fragment footnoted by Goshgarian (i.e., the third block quotation immediately above), the Althusser of this period nonetheless mildly rebukes Lacan for allegedly trying prematurely to finalize the Freudian framework through recourse to the tradition and discipline of philosophy.

The last sentence of the second of the preceding three block quotations (“Moreover, it is not certain that analytic theory can don the form of a science properly speaking”) happens to dovetail, whether the Althusser of *Initiation à la philosophie pour les non-philosophes* is aware of this or not, with Lacan’s own contemporaneous conclusions regarding the scientificity (or, rather, non-scientificity) of analysis.<sup>37</sup> Foreshadowed by moments in his twelfth, twentieth, and twenty-first seminars (*Problèmes cruciaux pour la psychanalyse* [1964-1965], *Encore* [1972-1973], and *Les non-dupes errent* [1973-1974]),<sup>38</sup> the very late Lacan of the twenty-fourth and twenty-fifth seminars (*L’insu que sait de l’une-bévue s’aile à mourre* [1976-1977] and *Le moment de conclure* [1977-1978]), at exactly the time of Althusser’s writing of *Initiation*, concludes that, when all is said and done, psychoanalysis is not a science.<sup>39</sup> Analysis remains, instead, a somewhat nonsensical art, namely, “a babbling practice” (*une pratique de bavardage*), as the title of the published opening session of the unpublished *Seminar XXV* has it. This final verdict of Lacan’s renounces not only his 1950s-era scientific ambitions for analysis *vis-à-vis* structural linguistics—it abruptly breaks with and repudiates Lacan’s then very-recent efforts at rendering analytic theory and practice scientific via a program of thoroughgoing logico-mathematical-style formalization (i.e., the increasing recourse to “mathemes” and turns to topology distinctive of Lacan’s intellectual trajectory during the early-to-mid 1970s). As does Althusser

37 Johnston 2013a, pp. 40-41, 58

38 Lacan 1964; Lacan 1998, p. 117; Lacan, 1973

39 Lacan 1977a; Lacan 1977b

explicitly, this last Lacanian verdict implicitly leaves open the potential-yet-unforeseeable becoming-scientific of psychoanalysis through possible extra-analytic developments *à venir* in the sciences.

A few pages later in *Initiation à la philosophie pour les non-philosophes*, at the end of the same chapter (the fourteenth, entitled “Psychoanalytic Practice” [*La pratique analytique*]) of this manuscript in which the three block quotations above are situated, Althusser again addresses the issue of analysis’s openness, a receptivity uncertainly tactical or strategic, in the face of the unpredictable scientific future. He muses:

A day perhaps will arrive where one will be able to surpass the current stage of this indicative putting-into-relation, but which remains without result, when new discoveries will intervene in the apparently ‘neighboring’ sciences (neurophysiology? the theory of familial structure and ideology?). But one cannot anticipate these future developments without running great risks, confronted, in vain, by Reich in his time, and pursued today by the proponents of a spontaneist leftism.<sup>40</sup>

Althusser then adds:

If a science wants to safeguard its independence and just simply last, it should accept sometimes living for a very long time, and perhaps indefinitely, in the solitude of its own defined abstractions, without wanting to confound them with the abstractions of other existent sciences.<sup>41</sup>

With the warning about “spontaneist leftism” issued by the last sentence of the first quotation, I suspect that Althusser has in mind, as descendants of Wilhelm Reich, both Frankfurt School Freudo-Marxism *à la* Herbert Marcuse as well as, closer in time and place, the libidinal anarchism of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s anti-Oedipalism. Moreover, this same quotation echoes the hopes voiced in “The Discovery of Dr. Freud,” ones quoted by me previously, that the two disciplines of biology (here, “neurophysiology”) and Marxist materialism (here, “the theory of familial structure and ideology”) might sooner or later produce “new discoveries”—with these future breakthroughs in psychoanalysis’s disciplinary “neighbors” permitting the establishment of “theoretical links” between them and analysis. Incidentally, “The Discovery of Dr. Freud” already

40 Althusser 2014a, p. 303

41 Ibid.

credits Freud with an awareness, ostensibly exceeding that of Lacan, of familial, moral, and religious “ideological state apparatuses,”<sup>42</sup> a credit re-extended in the manuscript *Sur la reproduction*.<sup>43</sup> I will come back to these anticipations momentarily.

As the preceding clearly shows, Althusser, between 1963 and 1980, puts forward a series of disparate, and sometimes contradictory, assertions apropos Lacan and Lacan’s handling of analysis’s scientific, interdisciplinary standing: Lacan justifiably connects Freudian psychoanalysis with Saussurian structural linguistics; Lacan unjustifiably connects Freudian psychoanalysis with pure mathematics and formal logic; Lacan rightly recasts the relations between biological nature and cultural nurture; Lacan wrongly neglects biology altogether; Lacan appropriately and patiently maintains the disciplinary sovereignty of analysis; Lacan inappropriately and impatiently fills out analysis with philosophy (and/or mathematics and logic). This tangle of mismatched threads aside, a more recurrent, unchanging refrain of Althusser’s with respect to Freudian psychoanalysis is audible across the same years of his thinking and writing: For the time being (*circa* the 1960s and 1970s), it is advisable for analysis to maintain itself in its own intradisciplinary independence while awaiting potential, but far from necessary and guaranteed, advances yet-to-come in adjacent fields, particularly the life sciences and historical/dialectical materialism. In line with his stress on these interdisciplinary possibilities being unforeseeable and unpredictable contingencies, Althusser cautions that analytic theorists and practitioners may have to wait for a long time indeed, perhaps indefinitely, before such further biological and materialist breakthroughs come to pass (if they ever do). A deleted paragraph from the manuscript *Être marxiste en philosophie* echoes these points.<sup>44</sup>

My own ongoing work, unfurling under the banner of “transcendental materialism,” involves a wager that the time Althusser projects into an uncertain future has arrived now (especially with developments in the life sciences over the course of the past few decades). In a companion piece to the present intervention, I assemble a systematic account of dialectical and historical materialisms out of Althusser’s myriad, variegated assessments of them—an account revealing the indebtedness of my fashions

42 Althusser 1996b, pp. 98-99

43 Althusser 2014b, pp. 192-193

44 Althusser 2015, p. 87

of interfacing biology and Marxism to some of his recastings of these materialisms.<sup>45</sup> Herein, my focus obviously is on what Althusser has to say regarding Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis (along with some references to Hegel’s philosophy). And, here again, certain Althusserian inspirations for my endeavors (in this case, those triangulating analysis, the life sciences, and a Hegelian Marxism) become visible. However, before I intensify this visibility, several more of Althusser’s explorations of the just-mentioned disciplinary intersections deserve mention and examination.

Beginning with the life sciences—as I show in the aforementioned companion piece to the present essay, a certain biological naturalism indeed has a place in Althusser’s versions of historical and/or dialectical materialism<sup>46</sup>—Althusser indicates that psychoanalysis is related to these fields without being reducible to them, without having its own disciplinary/scientific autonomy compromised. For instance, in a lengthy footnote to “Freud and Lacan,” he remarks:

Desire (*Le désir*), a fundamental category of the unconscious, is understandable in its specificity only as the idiosyncratic meaning of the discourse of the human subject’s unconscious (*le sens singulier du discours de l’inconscient du sujet humain*): the meaning that emerges in and through the ‘play’ of the signifying chain of which the discourse of the unconscious is composed. As such, ‘desire’ is marked by the structure that commands human development. As such, desire is radically distinct from organic ‘need’ (*«besoin» organique*), which is biological in essence. Between organic need and unconscious desire, there is no essential continuity—any more than there exists an essential continuity between the biological existence of man and his historical existence. Desire is determined in its equivocal being (its lack in being [*manque-à-être*], Lacan says) by the structure of the order (*la structure de l’Ordre*) imposing on it its mark and consigning it to an existence without place, the existence of repression (*refoulement*), to its resources and its disappointments.

One does not gain access to the specific reality of desire by starting from organic need, any more than one gains access to the specific reality of historical existence by starting from the biological existence of ‘man.’ On the contrary, just as it is the categories of history that allow one to define the specificity of the historical existence of man, includ-

45 Johnston 2015a

46 Ibid.

ing such apparently purely biological determinations as his ‘needs’ or demographic phenomena, by distinguishing his historical existence from a purely biological existence, so the essential categories of the unconscious are what allow one to apprehend and define the very meaning of desire by distinguishing it from the biological realities underlying (*supportent*) it (exactly as biological existence underlies and supports historical existence) but without either *constituting* it or *determining* it.<sup>47</sup>

Obviously, the majority of this passage consists in Althusser underscoring the distance Lacan takes from certain sorts of scientific, ideological biologisms and naturalisms shaping non-Lacanian sectors of the post-Freudian psychoanalytic world. However, as I have suggested elsewhere, Lacan’s non-naturalism is not tantamount to the garden-variety kinds of anti-naturalism widespread in Continental European and European-inspired philosophy/theory.<sup>48</sup> In Lacanian metapsychology, the role of the “need” (*besoin*), as per the need-demand-desire triad, to which Althusser refers indicates as much.<sup>49</sup>

That said, it should be noted that the last sentence of the preceding quotation reveals Althusser’s concession that both Freudian-Lacanian psychoanalysis and Marxist historical materialism in fact are “supported” by an “underlying” biological-natural base, although their respective objects of discipline-specific investigation (i.e., libidinal and political economies) are irreducible and (relatively) autonomous with respect to this shared base.<sup>50</sup> Indeed, Althusser himself, with his version(s) of historical/dialectical materialism(s), ultimately admits that, in the larger scheme of things, cultural history both arises from and breaks with natural history—that is, human societies and subjects embody the immanent transcendences of a self-denaturalizing nature.<sup>51</sup> Tacitly in line with the Hegelian speculative-dialectical logic of quantity and quality so dear to much of the Marxist tradition, the discontinuities Althusser emphasizes in the above-quoted footnote from “Freud and Lacan”—these are the ruptures/gulfs between both “organic need and unconscious desire” as

47 Althusser 1993, pp. 41-42; Althusser 1996b, p. 177-178

48 Johnston 2012, pp. 23-52; Johnston 2013b, pp. 48-84; Johnston 2015d, pp. 141-170; Johnston 2016c

49 Johnston 2013c

50 Althusser 2015, pp. 272-273

51 Johnston 2015a

well as “the biological existence of man and his historical existence”—are not absolute. Instead, these discontinuities are “leaps” both, one, originally produced in and out of nature by the accidents of evolutionary processes and, two, subsequently facilitated within human phylogenies and ontogenies by the cooperation of organic/biological forces and factors.

Althusser’s correspondence with Diatkine voices a similar stance as regards the relations (or lack thereof) between psychoanalysis and biology. In Althusser’s first letter of July 18, 1966, he declares:

Those who make the slightest theoretical concession to biology, to ethology, are *lost* for any *theoretical* reflection concerning psychoanalysis: they lapse quite quickly, if they are analysts, into *psychology* (or into culturalism, which is the ‘psychology’ of societies), psychology, that is, the *site* of the *worst* ideological confusions and ideological perversions of our time. Understand me well: I do not mean that they cannot furnish interesting *elements* of a clinical-practical-empirical order—indeed, occasionally of a theoretical order—but these are only *elements* that must be confiscated (*dérober*) from them since the logic of their system inevitably leads them to a *theoretical impasse*, down a path on which those who follow them can only go astray.<sup>52</sup>

The verb “*dérober*” (translated here as “confiscated”) also could be translated as “purloined,” “robbed,” “snatched,” or “stolen.” Hence, Althusser is suggesting that some of the biological resources latched onto by lapsed, straying analysts of crude ideological naturalistic inclinations must not be left to them, abandoned along with the pseudo-analytic vulgar naturalism so forcefully repudiated in this passage from Althusser’s correspondence. Like Lacan, Althusser rejects biologism/scientism in analysis without, for all that, denying the relevance of science generally and the life sciences specifically for analytic theory and practice. Thus, Freudian-Lacanian psychoanalysis and Marxist historical/dialectical materialism both should “confiscate” (i.e., annex, expropriate, etc.) from pseudo-analytic naturalisms certain of the biological “elements” these psychologistic ideologies (i.e., “the *worst* ideological confusions and ideological perversions of our time”) inadequately contain. Of course, in the background of all this is the Althusserian distinction between science and ideology.

Later, in *Initiation à la philosophie pour les non-philosophes*, Althusser distinguishes between scientific and Freudian challenges

52 Althusser 1993, pp. 35-36

to modern bourgeois ideological constructions of human nature and subjects (constructions in which humans feature as self-interested individuals who are transparent to themselves and know their own interests). Specifically, he warns against reducing Freud's innovations along these lines to variations on the older naturalistic-materialist theme that humans have brains and bodies that govern their minds without their physically generated minds fully knowing this corporeal governance.<sup>53</sup> For this style of materialism, long pre-dating not only Freudian psychoanalysis, but also Marxian historical materialism, conscious thinking is "unconscious" (*qua* ignorant, unknowing) of the extra-mental causes and influences producing and shaping it. What is "unconscious" from this perspective is a determining Outside external to self-aware cognition, a non-conscious, unthinking Beyond transcendent in relation to minded subjectivity. But, as Althusser rightly states in conformity with an insistence (one shared with Lacan) on the originality of Freud's discovery of the unconscious, "Freud did not speak of this 'outside'; he spoke of an outside *inside thought itself*."<sup>54</sup> One could say that, in good Lacanian fashion, Althusser here is contrasting the external non-consciousness of "contemplative materialism" (appropriately borrowing a phrase from the first of Marx's "Theses on Feuerbach") with the "extimate"<sup>55</sup> (i.e., internally external, intimately foreign) unconscious proper to Freudian psychoanalysis.

I suspect it is no accident that Althusser feels compelled in this instance explicitly to contrast Freud's contributions with the tradition of materialisms inspired by the natural sciences. As he well knows and even occasionally underscores (as revealed above), Freud himself emerges out of the nineteenth-century psycho-physicalist current of this materialist tradition (through his medical education in neurology) and consistently swears fidelity to the scientific *Weltanschauung*<sup>56</sup> (with Althusser, as I highlighted earlier, playing off this Freud against Lacan to the detriment of the latter). Moreover, some of Althusser's reflections as regards the peculiar Freudian concept of *Trieb* (drive, *pulsion*) testify to his awareness of the complex mixture of proximity and distance between psychoanalysis and biology: *...drive... is quite an interesting concept, for*

53 Althusser 2014a, pp. 287-288

54 Ibid., p. 288

55 Lacan 1992, p. 139; Lacan 2006, pp. 224-225, 249

56 SE 22: 158-182

Freud never managed to give a satisfying definition of it, which did not prevent the concept from 'functioning' quite suitably within metapsychological 'theory' and in practice. Why this impossibility in defining it? Not because of its imprecision but because of the impossibility of thinking its precision theoretically. This concept seeks its definition in an impossible difference with instinct, that is, with a biological reality (*une réalité d'ordre biologique*). I say impossible since for Freud, the drive (*Trieb*) is profoundly bound to a biological reality, even though it is distinct from it. Freud extricates himself by saying that the drive (which is always sexual) is like a 'representative' of the somatic within the psychical (*un «représentant» envoyé par le somatique dans le psychique*), is 'a limit concept between the somatic and the psychical.' That indication is precise, but at the same time one sees that, to think it, Freud is forced to resort to a metaphor ('representative') or to think not the thing but the concept itself! ('a limit concept between the somatic and the psychical'), which clearly amounts to acknowledging the impossibility of thinking scientifically the object that is nonetheless designated with great clarity. It is, moreover, quite remarkable that the region beyond this 'limit' designates biological reality, from which will surely come, in conjunction with the reality known by historical materialism, the discoveries that will one day allow the elaboration of the scientific theory of the unconscious.<sup>57</sup>

Althusser's references here are first and foremost to Freud's metapsychological paper on "Drives and Their Vicissitudes," whose opening pages indeed involve Freud himself openly avowing both the difficulty of defining the drive as a stable, precise concept and the tentative, provisional status of his efforts to do so.<sup>58</sup> In particular, Althusser has the following well-known paragraph from that 1915 essay in mind:

If now we apply ourselves to considering mental life from a *biological* point of view, an 'instinct' (*der 'Trieb'*) appears to us as a concept on the frontier between the mental and the somatic (*als ein Grenzbegriff zwischen Seelischem und Somatischem*), as the psychical representative (*als psychischer Repräsentant*) of the stimuli originating from within the organism and reaching the mind, as a measure of the demand made upon the mind for work in consequence of its connection with the body.<sup>59</sup>

57 Althusser 1993, pp. 217-218; Althusser 1996b, pp. 102-103

58 SE 14: 117-122

59 GW 10: 214; SE 14: 121-122

The “biological” is one of several disciplinary “points of view” from which Freud scrutinizes what is at stake in the structures and dynamics covered by the hypothetical metapsychological concept of *Trieb als Trieb überhaupt und an sich* (i.e., *pulsion comme pulsion tout court et en soi*, drive as drive overall and in itself). What is more, this “*Grenzbegriff*” (border[line] concept or, as Althusser has it above, “limit concept”), given its multifaceted interdisciplinary liminality, is simultaneously both/and as well as neither/nor in relation to distinctions between, on the one hand, body, soma, nature, biology, and the like and, on the other hand, mind, psyche, nurture, society, history, and so on. Consequently, Freud indicates that, in order satisfactorily to theorize drive(s) in general, psychoanalysis requires a number of partnerships with and borrowings from other disciplines (especially the life sciences as well as certain of the social sciences and humanities too).

A few features of Althusser's just-quoted remarks apropos the Freudian *Trieb* as a border/limit concept warrant mention before I proceed further. To begin with, Althusser, here and elsewhere, admirably avoids lapsing into a Continentalist and pseudo-Lacanian revisionist tendency attempting to downplay and sideline the naturalist aspects and moments within Freud's corpus. In other words, his appreciation of Freud is not interpretively blinkered by the ideological anti-naturalism and anti-scientism to be found in various guises throughout twentieth-century Continental philosophy/theory generally, including within many currents of Lacanianism (itself not to be confused with Lacan's own thinking). Instead, Althusser rightly insists upon a non-reductive relationship, but a relationship all the same, between more-than-biological drives and biological instincts (“for Freud, the drive (*Trieb*) is profoundly bound to a biological reality, even though it is distinct from it”). He knows very well that many Continentalists' anti-naturalisms and anti-scientisms, especially amongst phenomenologists and existentialists, are nothing more than anti-materialist idealisms equally anathema to both Marxism and Freudianism properly understood.<sup>60</sup>

Additionally, Althusser is correct about the metaphorical status of Freud's talk of the “representative” function of *Trieb*. The paragraph from “Drives and Their Vicissitudes” I quoted a moment ago does not employ the German word “*Vorstellung*,” itself typically translated as (ideational) “representative” or “representation.” *Vorstellung à la* Freud

60 .....  
Johnston 2015a

could be said to have an exact and non-metaphorical standing as a precise metapsychological concept. Althusser likely would admit (at least a certain Althusser on particular occasions) that the Lacanian recasting of Freudian *Vortstellungen* as “signifiers” amounts to a further clarification and sharpening of this analytic concept (or set of concepts). The German word translated as “representative” in the above quotation from “Drives and Their Vicissitudes” instead is “*Repräsentant*” in the senses of “ambassador,” “attaché,” “delegate,” “deputy,” “emissary,” “envoy,” “mouth-piece,” “proxy,” “spokesperson,” “stand-in,” “substitute,” “surrogate,” etc. All of these senses utilize the intersubjective relationship between the represented person(s) and the representative person(s) as a metaphor describing the (partially) intrasubjective rapport between the bodily and the mental.

Finally, Althusser, at the end of the prior quotation from “The Discovery of Dr. Freud,” once more, as in other instances, mentions the same pair of potential disciplinary supplements/supports for psychoanalysis: biology and Marxist materialism (“the region beyond this ‘limit’ designates biological reality, from which will surely come, in conjunction with the reality known by historical materialism, the discoveries that will one day allow the elaboration of the scientific theory of the unconscious”). Here again, Althusser treats Freudian analysis as a potential science that has the possibility of becoming an actual science if and when unpredictable advances transpire within the life sciences and Marxism and, then, between these disciplines and analysis itself. He repeatedly invests hope in the theoretical and practical promises of a future alliance between psychoanalysis, biology, and historical/dialectical materialism.

As regards Marxism and psychoanalysis, Althusser, as I underscored earlier, credits Freud with implicitly being a spontaneous historical/dialectical materialist already aware, *avant la lettre*, of the breadth and depth of the influences of Althusserian ISAs. A deleted line in the original manuscript of *Initiation à la philosophie pour les non-philosophes* similarly suggests that, “one could compare profitably the Freudian topography with the Marxist topography of the base and the superstructure.”<sup>61</sup> But, whereas the Althusser of the late 1970s portrays Marxism and psychoanalysis as more or less equal partners and correspondingly preserves a degree of self-sufficient sovereignty for analysis on its own, the better-known Althusser of the mid 1960s adamantly contends that analysis must secure a solid disciplinary-scientific standing

61 .....  
Althusser 2014a, p. 292

precisely through being grounded on and by historical materialism (a project he appears to endorse up through the early-to-mid 1970s). In the 1969 “Note to the English Edition of ‘Freud and Lacan,’” he maintains as much.<sup>62</sup> Moreover, as already remarked, the entirety of “Three Notes on the Theory of Discourse” (1966) is devoted to arguing that analysis can and should be a regional theory tethered to and anchored by the foundational general theory of historical materialism.

As I mentioned a while ago, the Althusser of *Être marxiste en philosophie* proposes, in a deleted paragraph of that manuscript, that analysis has to remain proximate to but still unmoored from both biology and Marxist materialism for the historical time being. However, right on the heels of this (omitted) proposal and in the un-deleted, non-omitted main body of his text, he indicts any and every philosophy of science in which one particular science is lop-sidedly and unjustifiably elevated into a universal theory of everything, an all-encompassing metaphysics both ontological and epistemological, as being philosophically idealist.<sup>63</sup> Could this not be read as an implicit self-criticism of, among other things, the earlier Althusserian program of reducing the rapport between historical materialism and psychoanalysis to a one-sided relationship in which the former unilaterally enjoys total hegemony, precedence, priority, ultimacy, and the like *vis-à-vis* the latter?

In my companion piece to the present text,<sup>64</sup> I carry out an immanent critique of Althusser’s renditions of historical/dialectical materialism having, as one of its consequences, a rebalancing of the rapport between such materialism and psychoanalysis. Therein, I contend that multiple key materialist moments in the Lacanian *oeuvre* from the 1930s through the 1970s—these moments appear to go unrecognized by Althusser and are missing from his account of Lacan’s “great discovery” regarding the relations between biological nature and cultural nurture—furnish ideas regarding the bio-material conditions of possibility for the effective existence of the socio-historical mediation of human beings, an existence whose reality is absolutely central to the entire edifice of Marxist materialism itself. To resort to a hybrid of Hegelian and Lacanian terminology that allows for a circumnavigation back to the start of this intervention, these specifically organic possibility conditions are the

62 Althusser 1996b, p. 32

63 Althusser 2015, p. 88

64 Johnston 2015a

symptoms of the “barred Real” of a “weak/rotten nature,” more exactly, of the sick, nocturnal human animal, a creature born into the body-in-pieces (*corps morcelé*) of a prolonged prematurational helplessness (*Hilflosigkeit*), depicted by Hegel, Kojève, Lacan, and Althusser himself alike.

At this point, I feel it appropriate to shift attention towards the very late Althusser of the 1980s. Of course, this particular period of Althusser’s career has become best known for its recasting of Marxism as an “aleatory materialism” (un)grounded upon the modality of contingency as its *Ur*-category. Indeed, a certain amount of scholarly ink has been spilled around the manuscript entitled “The Underground Current of the Materialism of the Encounter.” However, although this specific Althusser is, as will be seen shortly, relevant to my purposes in what follows, the comparatively less attended-to Althusser of the mid-1980s in dialogue with Fernanda Navarro (through both correspondence as well as the published interviews entitled “Philosophy and Marxism”) is the figure who is most crucial for my argumentative agenda herein. He has some surprises in store for many who think they already know him well.

In a letter dated July 10, 1984 to Navarro from their “Correspondence about ‘Philosophy and Marxism,’” Althusser makes a reference to Protagoras. He remarks:

...Protagoras’ myth... explains the origin of humankind and human societies; it is a lovely (*très beau*) materialist myth—unlike animals, people are ‘born naked,’ so that they have to work and invent arts and techniques to survive (*subsister*).<sup>65</sup>

Althusser obviously has in mind the moment in Plato’s *Protagoras* when the dialogue’s namesake rehearses a mythical narrative (“the human race was naked, unshod, unbedded, and unarmed”) cross-resonating with speculations articulated in various ways by certain other atomistic, materialistic thinkers of antiquity, thinkers equally dear to both (the young) Marx and (the old) Althusser<sup>66</sup> (as well as being echoed much later by the founding document of Renaissance humanism, namely, Giovanni Pico della Mirandola’s 1486 oration “On the Dignity of Man”<sup>67</sup>). Furthermore, this “materialist myth” represents a possible point of convergence—one could say it even functions as a *point de capiton à la* Lacan—between the

65 Althusser 1994b, p. 95; Althusser 2006, p. 216

66 Plato 1997, 321c-322a [p. 757]; Marx 2006, pp. 108, 112-114, 116

67 Mirandola 1998, pp. 4-5; Colletti 1979, pp. 234, 238-241, 243-246; Johnston 2014, pp. 159-160

life sciences, Marxist materialism, and Freudian-Lacanian psychoanalysis (i.e., the three disciplines Althusser hopes will link up productively with each other in the future).

In terms of analysis, and putting aside Freud's occasional phylogenetic speculations along with Lacan's criticisms of them,<sup>68</sup> human beings indeed are "born naked" in the sense of being initially thrown into existence as helpless by virtue of anatomical and physiological underdevelopment. Coupled with the natural-material "nakedness" of epigenetics and neuroplasticity—this biological nudity is tantamount to natural pre-programming for non/more-than-natural reprogramming or naturally determined underdetermination by nature, particularly as receptive openings, vacancies unfilled by the innateness of hard-wired endogenous instincts, for the exogenous education/formation of acquired drives and desires—this original ontogenetic condition (as Hegel's organic *Krankheit*, Freud's infantile *Hilflosigkeit*, and Lacan's *corps morcelé* as "*la maladie féconde, la faute heureuse de la vie*") issues forth in a number of fateful, momentous consequences. The young subject-to-be is pushed and pulled into the overdetermining embraces of specific significant o/Others as well as cultural-linguistic sociality in general. The child's libidinal economy comes to be thoroughly permeated and structured by the enveloping mediating matrices into which it is propelled and drawn starting from its original state of abject dependency and distressful fragmentation. Another prematuration even more protracted than that of the helplessness characteristic of very early life—this would be sexual prematuration, thanks to which genital-centric sexuality is forced to emerge and accommodate itself within fields already occupied by the forces and factors of prepubescent "polymorphous perversity"<sup>69</sup>—contributes to the thereafter insurmountable Real of the non-existent *rapport sexuel*, the irremediable absence of any nature-given complementary partnership between the sexes. For all of these (and other) always-already-inflicted natural wounds, socio-symbolic crutches, exoskeletons, prostheses, remedies, and supplements are called upon for compensation and amelioration. Specific connections between the life sciences and analytic metapsychology disclose at least this much, if not more.

At this juncture, it is worthwhile for me to turn back momentarily to an earlier Althusser so as to segue from the psychoanalytic to the

68 Johnston 2013a, pp. 59-77

69 Johnston 2016b

materialist implications of his 1984 invocation of Plato's *Protagoras*. In Althusser's second letter to Diatkine of August 22, 1966, he writes:

I believe you will agree with the very general principle that *absence* possesses a certain efficacy on the condition, to be sure, that it be not absence in general, nothingness (*le néant*), or any other Heideggerian 'openness' («*ouvert*») but a *determinate* absence (*absence déterminée*) playing a role in the space of its absence.

This is undoubtedly important for the problem of the irruption (*sur-gissement*) of the unconscious.<sup>70</sup>

In the very best of Marxist materialist fashions (as well as in a good Hegelian manner too, whether the author of these 1966 lines consciously intends so or not), Althusser insists on conceiving negativity (in this instance, "absence") as "determinate" *qua* precise and specific, as anti-mystically pinpointed (or, at least, pinpointable) with rigorous theoretical exactitude. Without coming anywhere close to lapsing into flat-footed scientific positivism, he fiercely rejects its opposite extreme at the same time, dismissing the misty, amorphous negativity of idealisms, spiritualisms, and romanticisms (i.e., indeterminate, as opposed to determinate, absence) as part and parcel of intellectually bankrupt and ideologically insidious obscurantism (i.e., "absence in general, nothingness (*le néant*), or any other Heideggerian 'openness' («*ouvert*»)”—as I have argued elsewhere, certain contemporary figures, such as Giorgio Agamben, Alain Badiou, and Slavoj Žižek, explicitly posit [Agamben as a Heideggerian] or flirt with [Badiou and Žižek as dialectical materialists] this sort of "openness" appropriately criticized by Althusser-the-dialectical-materialist<sup>71</sup>). Incidentally, several of my own Hegel-and-Marx-inspired, psychoanalysis-related speculations apropos negativity and "privative causality" (i.e., Althusser's absence-as-efficacious) resonate sympathetically with this admirable Althusserian line of thought.<sup>72</sup>

Before directly addressing the Marxist dimensions of "Protagoras' materialist myth," and so as to facilitate the transition to the topic of Althusserian materialism, further specifications as regards the role(s) of "determinate absence" in psychoanalysis are necessary. Freudian-Lacanian analysis, especially when viewed with crucial facets of Hegelianism

70 Althusser 1993, p. 91; Althusser 1996b, pp. 60-61

71 Johnston 2012, pp. 23-52

72 Ibid., pp. 23-52; Johnston 2013d, p. 95; Johnston 2015b; Johnston 2016e; Johnston 2016c

visible in the background, depends upon the positing of several such absences: the factual, ground-zero absence of self-sufficiency (as the prolonged prematurational helplessness marking the first stretch of human ontogeny); the bio-material absence of harmonious, synthesized organic integration and coordination (as the sick animal of Hegel's *Ohnmacht der Natur*, Freud's conflicted id at war with itself, Lacan's material-structural-phenomenological *corps morcelé*, and my anorganic, as neither inorganic nor organic, body-and-brain-in-pieces<sup>73</sup>); and, the evolved givenness of the absence of any inflexibly fixed and fundamentally imperative foundation of naturally innate and irresistible instincts (as Hegel's plasticity of habits, Freud's "objectless" drives, Lacan's radicalization of this Freud in conjunction with such Lacanian concepts as need, demand, desire, *das Ding*, *objet petit a*, *jouissance*, fantasy, etc., and my "splitting" of *Trieb*). As the young Althusser of 1947 quoted at the outset of this intervention puts this with respect to Hegel, "At the level of nature, man is an absurdity, a gap in being (*un trou dans l'être*), an 'empty nothing,' a 'Night'"—with this nocturnal emptiness to be understood here as associated with determinate absence. Furthermore, Althusser, throughout his mature thinking, is well aware of just how pivotal these privative causes—they indeed amount to highly specific and specified negativities quite different from the vague, hazy Nothing(ness) of Heideggerianism and similar sorts of pseudo-profound, negative-theological mysticisms—are for the meta-psychological foundations of the entire edifice of theoretical and practical analysis. Similarly, he is absolutely accurate in maintaining that these determinate absences are "undoubtedly important for the problem of the irruption (*surgissement*) of the unconscious."

On the basis of the preceding, I would suggest at this point that the aforementioned determinate absences as privative causes theorized within the overlap between the (post-)Darwinian life sciences and Freudian-Lacanian psychoanalysis also are essential ingredients for a historical/dialectical materialist account of "the problem of the irruption" of properly human history out of evolutionary natural history. This suggestion gestures at the three-way intersection Althusser himself repeatedly brings into view between biology, analysis, and materialism. As I argue in this intervention's companion piece, a veritable plethora of moments in Althusser's corpus, ones less well known than those (in)famously insisting on the 1845 "epistemological break," involve qualified historical/dia-

73 Johnston 2012, pp. 23-52; Johnston 2013b, pp. 48-84; Johnston 2015d, pp. 141-170; Johnston 2016b; Johnston 2016e; Johnston 2016c

lectical materialist acceptances on his part of Marx's characterization of "human nature" as social laboring.<sup>74</sup> For both Marx and this relatively unfamiliar Althusser, bio-material being makes it such that humans are thrown into existence destined for sociality and labor as their entwined twin fates.

As I indicated before, the helplessness of infant and child, for Freud, helps explain why human minds are inherently inclined toward being profoundly influenced and thoroughly (pre)occupied with various and sundry others both known and unknown. Couched in Lacan's vocabulary, this *Hilfflosigkeit* propels the nascent *sujet à venir* into the arms of alterity Imaginary (others as inter-subjective alter-egos), Symbolic (Others as trans-subjective socio-linguistic orders), and Real (Others as enigmatic Things). Early on in an individual's life history, this ontogenetically primordial condition forcefully impresses upon his/her soma and psyche marks of, for instance, compliance, cooperation, dependence, submission, and subjection. Succinctly stated, early helplessness, at the ontogenetic level, contributes to human nature leading naturally into the dominance of nurture over nature—with Lacan seeing this as a pivotal possibility condition for what the Althusser of the mid-1960s praises as Lacan's "great discovery" regarding the (retro)action of "culture" on "biology." In Marxian terms, the *Hilfflosigkeit* disclosed by both biology and psychoanalysis helps further elucidate why sociality is an inevitable basic feature of human nature (as naturally social).

Of course, historical materialism (again with Hegel as a forerunner) adds to this, at what would be the Freudian phylogenetic level, a further emphasis on collective, in addition to individual, helplessness. Perhaps one might even go so far as to run the risk of recourse to Ernst Haeckel's "ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny": As with gradual decrease in the *Hilfflosigkeit* of the individual as he/she ontogenetically takes shape, the human species as a whole, over the course of both its evolutionary and non-evolutionary histories, phylogenetically has moved from being relatively more to relatively less powerless in the face of at least certain challenges posed by surrounding physical, chemical, and organic natural forces and factors. For Hegel and Marx alike, and to cut a very long story very short, the meeting of basic human needs in the teeth of such challenges requires not only laboring, but laboring socially—with the resultant Hegelian "systems of needs" and/or Marxian "divisions of labor" generating and perpetuating modes of permanent helplessness in terms

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of the lifelong dependencies of socially laboring persons upon each other. The combination of individual (as per a synthesis of psychoanalysis and human developmental biology) and collective (as per a synthesis of historical/dialectical materialism and evolutionary theory) *Hilflosigkeit* compels humans to live as socially laboring beings. But, what is more, this compounded helplessness, involving the privatively causal determinate absences I enumerated three paragraphs above, is part of what makes possible the self-denaturalizing essence(lessness) of “human nature,” this nature’s endogenous openness to being overwritten and reworked exogenously by sociality and laboring in ways charted by both Freudian-Lacanian analysis and Marxian materialism.<sup>75</sup>

However, as regards Althusser’s relations with historical materialism specifically (rather than psychoanalysis), more than just individual and collective *Hilflosigkeit* is involved in the congenital nudity into which humans, according to the Protagorean-Platonic myth invoked by Althusser, are hurled at birth. Admittedly, the great French Marxist himself does not explicitly reason in detail along the lines I am about to advance. Nonetheless, on the basis of evidence and arguments put forward by me in the complement to the present intervention,<sup>76</sup> I strongly believe that the caveats and clarifications I am about to articulate are entirely in the spirit of a certain Althusserianism, even if absent from the black-and-white letter of Althusser’s writings themselves.

To start spelling out these caveats and clarifications, I would claim that Althusser’s Protagoras-inspired materialist “nakedness” includes, in addition to distinctively human varieties of helplessness, the absences both of, one, conflict-free, intra-organic unity as well as of, two, fixed, inflexible predetermination via natural preprogramming. The first absence is crucial to a dialectical materialist Mao Tse-Tung, the author of 1937’s “On Contradiction,” quietly adored by Althusser despite his reluctance publicly to avow this love while remaining a card-carrying member of a Moscow-controlled Parti communiste français.<sup>77</sup> The second absence, arguably essential to Althusser’s renowned/notorious insistence on an anti-Feuerbachian repudiation of the very idea of “human nature” (*als Gattungswesen*) by Marx starting in 1845, is something that life-

75 Hegel 1979, pp. 167-168; Marx 1992, pp. 326-331, 350, 389-390; Marx & Engels 1970, p. 42; Marx 1977, pp. 250-251, 259; Marx 1977, pp. 389-390; Marx 1993, pp. 84, 243, 323, 496; Marx 1976, pp. 1021-1022, 1053, 1068; Marx 1977, p. 521

76 Johnston 2015a

77 Mao 2007, pp. 67-102; Althusser 2005, pp. 87-128; Johnston 2013a, pp. 23-28

scientific discoveries involving epigenetics and neuroplasticity, discoveries largely postdating Althusser’s death, enable to be recast from an anti-naturalist anti-humanism into a naturalism of a self-denaturalizing and more-than-naturally-mediated human “nature.”<sup>78</sup> Incidentally, contemporary biological considerations regarding the evolution, anatomy, and physiology of the human central nervous system have led to models of the brain as a “kludge,”<sup>79</sup> thus naturalistically reinforcing the first type of absence too. These two determinate absences can be identified as the related factors of anorganicity (as Hegel’s sick animal of weak nature, Freud’s internally divided id, Lacan’s body-in-pieces, my split drives, and the kludgy brain-in-pieces) and receptivity (as Hegelian *Plastizität*, Marxian *Elastizität*, and their subsequent materialist and psychoanalytic permutations) respectively. Taken together, anorganicity and receptivity should be posited as the twin presuppositions (more precisely, the privative causes) cooperatively making possible the full transformative power of Marxian *praxis*. How so?

Marx’s account of practice *qua* labor clearly assumes a distinctively human openness to transformative mediations. In fact, his historical materialism hinges on this. For Marx, *praxis* as laboring gets properly human history (as distinct from natural history generally as well as the “histories” of non-human animal species specifically) up and running insofar as it sets in motion an ongoing, oscillating dynamic of mutual modifications between the subjects and objects of labor. That is to say, laboring subjects change themselves in the processes of changing the objects upon which they labor, with thus-changed subjects further changing these and other objects... and so on and on in this circuit of reciprocal, back-and-forth influences and alterations. But, obviously, Marx takes it for granted that humans, in their peculiar subjective being, naturally are highly receptive to and largely constituted by the external matrices of mediation furnished by the objective realities of their surrounding environments, milieus, circumstances, etc.—including those features of these objective realities that are themselves externalizations of laboring subjects’ prior activities (i.e., objective realities both natural and social).<sup>80</sup>

78 Johnston 2015a

79 Linden 2007, pp. 2-3, 5-7, 21-24, 26, 245-246; Marcus 2008, pp. 6-16, 161-163; Johnston 2012, pp. 23-52; Johnston 2013b, pp. 48-84; Johnston 2013e, pp. 175-176; Johnston 2013a, p. 75; Johnston 2014a, pp. 142, 146, 181-182; Johnston 2016c

80 Johnston 2016a

Theorized together at the intersections of Hegelian *Realphilosophie*, Freudian-Lacanian metapsychology, and contemporary (neuro)biology, the related variables of anorganic negativity and receptive malleability permit, expressed in Hegelese, positing Marx's just-noted presuppositions. These two variables bio-materially co-constitute humanity's plastic nature (for dialectical materialism, inner antagonisms within a thing, such as those characteristic of the anorganicity of the human animal, indeed contribute to that thing's receptiveness to being changed at the hands of external influences). Hence, Marx's historical materialism, as grounded on his theory of labor-as-*praxis*, is itself in turn to be grounded on contributions coming conjointly from philosophy, psychoanalysis, and the life sciences (rather than, as per the Althusser of the mid-1960s, historical materialism being the general Theory-with-a-capital-T of "theoretical practice," the foundational *Ur*-discipline as a Marxist queen of the sciences<sup>81</sup>). But, what about helplessness as per both the life sciences and psychoanalysis, given my earlier stress upon this?

Integrating both *Hilflosigkeit* and *Plastizität*, I now would maintain that neither the former nor the latter on its own automatically is enough to result in the social laboring central to historical materialism and, hence, to Althusser too. One easily can imagine, on the one hand, living beings who are, in varying ways and/or at varying moments, helpless without being plastic and, on the other hand, living beings who are plastic without, in any way and/or at any moment, being helpless. In the hypothetical case of helplessness-without-plasticity, reliances upon exogenous others do not leave transformative traces upon an endogenous nature simply due to this nature's unreceptive, impermeable rigidity; moreover, a non-plastic being will not allow in general for its proper essence to be fundamentally mediated and modified by its enveloping environs. Correlatively but conversely, in the hypothetical case of plasticity-without-helplessness, the being lacking *Hilflosigkeit* is not irresistibly compelled to be profoundly influenced by relations with others; this being's self-sufficiency (i.e., non-helplessness) makes it less likely that ties with conspecifics will be privileged in terms of the mediations and modifications reflected in this being's plastic nature, its essenceless essence (perhaps like a chameleon, its being will take on the colors of its inanimate surroundings, but not those of its fellows).

However, viewed under the lights of biology and psychoanalysis as combined in and through a certain philosophical anthropology, hu-

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man beings are both helpless and plastic. What is more, *Hilflosigkeit* and *Plastizität* conspire so as to result in human nature amounting to a nature that necessarily inclines itself towards (self-)denaturalization via social laboring. Individual and collective helplessnesses dictate both: one, different dependencies, lasting lifetimes and spanning generations, of persons upon each other (i.e., sociality); as well as, two, struggles large and small, shared and singular, to meet needs, wants, and the like (i.e., laboring). And, thanks to varying types and degrees of plasticity, humans again and again are broadly and deeply transformed in and through their social laboring dictated by their helplessnesses.

As seen, Althusser, on a number of occasions, sees fit to praise Freud as a spontaneous (proto-)historical materialist. In particular, he justifiably construes Freud's multiple reflections on the family and *Kultur* as anticipating his later Marxist conceptualizations of superstructural ISAs and their subjectification-effects. There is much to be said in favor of Althusser's sense that, given Freudian and Lacanian emphases on psychical susceptibility to socio-symbolic constructions and reconstructions, historical materialism's theoretical formulations apropos both infrastructural and superstructural dimensions and dynamics are not without significant implications for analysis itself.

But, as also seen here, there is a different Althusser who, on a number of other occasions, goes so far as to propose performing a Marxist annexation of psychoanalysis in which analysis is relegated to being a subsidiary sub-domain of historical materialism. This particular Althusser perceives such materialism and analysis as in a one-way, hierarchical relationship between general/grounding and regional/grounded theories respectively. Based on everything I already have put in place in this intervention, I feel it safe now bluntly and briefly to claim that this one-sidedness of a certain Althusserian interfacing of Marxism with Freudianism and Lacanianism can and should be replaced with a two-way, de-hierarchized rapport between these two frameworks (a suggestion already made by one of Althusser's enemies, namely, Jean-Paul Sartre, who pleads for something along these lines in his later *Search for a Method* introducing the *Critique of Dialectical Reason*<sup>82</sup>). Other Althusserers I have foregrounded in both this essay and its companion piece likely would agree with me.<sup>83</sup>

82 Sartre 1968, pp. 60-65

83 Johnston 2015a

Yet, is there not a fundamental sticking point, a bone in the throat, of the rapprochement I am negotiating between historical/dialectical materialism and psychoanalysis? Specifically, does not Freudian-Lacanian analysis insist upon the idiosyncrasy, peculiarity, and singularity, if not also autonomy and self-relatedness, of minded persons in fashions anathema to Marxism generally and Althusserianism especially? Are not Marx and Althusser vehement anti-individualists committed to a die-hard socio-economic determinism absorbing and dissolving individual subjects into trans-individual structures?

I will put aside here questions as to whether Marx himself is an anti-individualist and a determinist in these manners. Suffice it for the time being to say that I consider such depictions of Marx's thought to be grotesque oversimplifications. However, as for Althusser, this is an issue with regards to which his mid-1980s correspondence and interviews with Navarro contain significant stipulations diametrically opposed to the freedom-denying, subject-squelching tenets typically attributed to him. This set of exchanges is contemporaneous with Althusser's pivot towards an aleatory materialism of the encounter, a materialism palpably at odds with the necessitarian monism of a Spinozistic-structuralist rendition of Marxism. Hence, the text of the interviews "Philosophy and Marxism" reiterates, in line with "The Underground Current of the Materialism of the Encounter,"<sup>84</sup> that doing full justice to Marx's enduring legacy requires forging an anti-determinist historical/dialectical materialism favoring the unpredictable contingency of events (as aleatory encounters) over the predictable necessity of laws (as non-aleatory teleologies).<sup>85</sup> This much already is indicated in "The Underground Current of the Materialism of the Encounter" and will be relatively unsurprising for anyone already familiar with this aleatory materialist Althusser apart from the dialogues with Navarro.

But, Althusser's conversations with Navarro go further along these lines in ways that promise to be comparatively more surprising. At the end of a brief letter of January 7, 1985, Althusser writes:

Of course there are... 'possibilities' within social determination, if only because there are several different orders of social determination and because this creates a *play*—of gaps, blank spaces, or margins (*des lacunes, des blancs, des marges*) in which the subject may find his path de-

84 Ibid.; Johnston 2016a

85 Althusser 2006, pp. 254-256, 261-262

termined or not determined by social constraints; but this non-determination is an effect, a sub-effect (*sous-effet*), of determination, of determinations; what I called not only overdetermination (*sur-détermination*), but underdetermination (*sous-détermination*).... Do you see what I mean?<sup>86</sup>

He expands upon these proposals in a missive to Navarro dated April 8, 1986:

The interpellation of the individual as subject, which makes him an ideological subject, is realized not on the basis of a *single* ideology, but of *several ideologies* at once, under which the individual *lives* and *acts* [*agit*] his practice. These ideologies may be very 'local,' such as a subject in his *family* and at *work*, in his immediate relations with his family and friends or his peers (*ses proches ou semblables*); or they may be broader, 'local' in the broad sense, either 'regional' or 'national.'

Such ideologies are, for the most part, always initially inherited from the past, the tradition. What results is a *play and a space* (un jeu et un espace) of multiple interpellations in which the subject is caught up (*est pris*), but which (as contradictory play and as space) constitutes the 'freedom' (*la «liberté»*) of the individual subject, who is *simultaneously* interpellated by several ideologies that are neither of the same kind nor at the same level; this multiplicity explains the '*free*' *development of the positions adopted by the subject-individual* (l'évolution «libre» des prises de position de l'individu-sujet). Thus the individual has at his disposal a 'play of manoeuvre' [*jeu de manœuvre*] between several positions, between which he can 'develop' («*évoluer*»), or even, if you insist, 'choose' («*choisir*»), determine his course [*se déterminer*], although this determination is itself determined, but in the play of the plurality of interpellations... The theory of the ISAs is therefore quite the contrary (*tout le contraire*) of a determinist theory in the superficial sense (*au sens plat du terme*).<sup>87</sup>

The manuscript *Sur la reproduction* already contains an acknowledgement that a complex plurality of ideologies, ideological apparatuses, and interpellations always are operative simultaneously within any given social

86 Althusser 1994a, p. 121; Althusser, 2006, p. 236

87 Althusser 1994a, pp.127-128; Althusser 2006, 241-242

structure.<sup>88</sup> Therein, Althusser even refers to “choice” (*choisir*), albeit with what sounds like a bit of a sarcastic sneer.<sup>89</sup>

However, more sincerely and less sneeringly, the above-quoted Althusser of the mid-1980s, consistent with his contemporaneous turn to an aleatory materialism as the proper “philosophy of Marxism,”<sup>90</sup> begins sketching an account of freedom nonetheless compatible with the more deterministic dimensions of his Marxism. The very late Althusser’s compatibilism might be another symptom of him perhaps becoming the student of his former student Badiou.<sup>91</sup> Moreover, what fairly could be described as Badiou’s similar compatibilism involves, for him, avowed reckonings with Sartre, Althusser, and Lacan. Badiou depicts Sartre as the voluntarist, Althusser as the determinist, and Lacan as the compatibilist in this triad of his twentieth-century French “masters.”<sup>92</sup> But, Badiou’s triangulation of these three figures is misleading. Although he is correct about Lacan being a compatibilist throughout his intellectual itinerary, he obscures the compatibilism not only of the mature Sartre (as per the *Critique of Dialectical Reason*), but also that of the older Althusser (as per both “The Underground Current of the Materialism of the Encounter” and “Philosophy and Marxism”).

Althusser’s reputation, even amongst some of those who knew and know him quite well, as an unflinching, die-hard determinist is based not only on works of the mid-1960s such as *For Marx* and *Reading Capital*, but also on the celebrated essay “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses” (and the larger, unfinished manuscript from which it is drawn). One would not be unjustified in believing that the inventor of the theory of ISAs espouses an uncompromising determinism, given that the word “subject” is employed by this author in the sense of that which is heteronomously subjected to ideological interpellation (an employment diametrically opposing the modern philosophical meaning of “subject” as that which autonomously determines itself in its self-grounding/grounded spontaneity).<sup>93</sup> Yet, in the material quoted above from his back-and-forth with Navarro, Althusser returns to a qualified notion of free subjectivity

88 Althusser 2014b, pp. 199-200

89 Althusser 2011, p. 232; Althusser 2014b, p. 200

90 Althusser 2015, p.260

91 Badiou 2005, p. 250; Johnston 2009, p. 136

92 Johnston 2009, pp. 62-63; Johnston 2013a, pp.103-104, 107-109, 166, 176

93 Althusser 2014, pp. 187-201, 227-228, 230, 236, 261-266

not by renouncing his prior investigations into the infrastructural and superstructural functions of ISAs and their interpellations, but precisely by further nuancing and extending the ramifications of structural complexities already gestured at in *Sur la reproduction*.

These specific late-Althusserian nuances and extensions are foreshadowed by Aristotle (with his discussion of reflective deliberation in “Book 3, Chapter 3, §10” of the *Nicomachean Ethics*<sup>94</sup>) and Hegel (in terms of, for example, malfunctions and breakdowns in *Sittlichkeit* as collective objective spirit prompting the separate self-assertion of *Moralität* as individual subjective spirit, a drama exemplified by the tragedies to which Antigone and Socrates succumb<sup>95</sup>) as well as Lacan. With references to these latter three thinkers (i.e., Aristotle, Hegel, and Lacan), I put forward, in my 2008 book *Zizek’s Ontology*, the concept of “inverse interpellation”<sup>96</sup> (to which I recur in a 2013 article<sup>97</sup>). However, what I fail to acknowledge there, with my narrow focus strictly on “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses” (i.e., Althusser’s thinking *circa* 1970), is that Althusser himself subsequently, in the mid-1980s, performs this inversion of interpellation; admittedly, what he proposes in the two block quotations above from his correspondence with Navarro is exactly what I describe in *Žižek’s Ontology*, via Aristotle, Hegel, and Lacan, as inverse interpellation. *Mea culpa*. With reference to an article by Mladen Dolar, it would be entirely fair to say that Althusser himself ends up, shortly before his death, going “beyond interpellation.”<sup>98</sup>

However, this “beyond” is arrived at in and through, rather than apart from, interpellation(s), as Althusser clearly indicates in the above-quoted passages revisiting the classic account of interpellation over a decade after its original formulation. To be more precise, Althusser’s stipulations conveyed to Navarro directly imply a dialectical logic (that of “more is less”<sup>99</sup>) in which the “more”/“surplus” of “overdetermination” (*sur-détermination*) itself immanently generates out of itself the “less”/“deficit” of “underdetermination” (*sous-détermination*), in which an excessively complex “plurality of interpellations” short-circuit each

94 Aristotle 1999, Book 3, Chapter 3, §10 [pg. 35]

95 Hegel 1977, pp. 119-122, 266-289; Hegel 1955, pp. 407-410, 412, 443-447

96 Johnston 2008, pp. 112-113

97 Johnston 2013d, p. 96

98 Dolar 1993, pp. 75-96

99 Johnston 2012, pp. 23-52; Johnston 2013, pp. 91-99

other so as to produce a (temporary, rare) nullification of any and every subjection-inducing interpellation. In such (exceptional) circumstances, the thus-created absence of interpellation, to reconnect with some lines I quoted earlier from Althusser's second letter to Diatkine (August 22, 1966), functions as a "determinate absence" *qua* privative cause causing the emergence of a "free subject-individual" (instead of an unfree subject-effect). A specific, particular set of "gaps, blank spaces, or margins" can, and sometimes does, ignite the "irruption" of "a *play and a space*," "a 'play of manoeuvre,'" within which indetermination, "freedom," and "choice" are able to come to be and operate. Obviously, this is the exact converse of "normal" interpellation in which an ISA as a determinate presence positively causes, via interpellation, the "subject" *qua* heteronomous subjugation by and subjection to an ideology. Furthermore, and appropriately worded in a Hegelian style—this is appropriate by virtue of the fundamentally dialectical nature of Althusser's compatibilism—the distinction between determinism and non-determinism is, for this Althusser, internal to determinism itself ("this non-determination is an effect, a sub-effect, of determination, of determinations," "he can 'develop,' or even, if you insist, 'choose,' determine his course [*se déterminer*], although this determination is itself determined, but in the play of the plurality of interpellations").

My main complaint with respect to this very late Althusser is simple but serious. The primary problem I see with his conception of free subjectivity already is visible in the material from the Navarro correspondence just discussed. But, it is most glaringly explicit at a certain moment in the interviews with her ("Philosophy and Marxism"). Therein, Althusser declares:

...if Epicurus' atoms, raining down in the void parallel to each other, encounter one another, it is so that we will recognize—in the swerve (*déviaton*) produced by the clinamen—the existence of human freedom in the world of necessity itself (*l'existence de la liberté humaine dans le monde même de la nécessité*).<sup>100</sup>

This bluntly encapsulates an equivocation between the simple absence of determinism (i.e., Althusser's "non-determination," "underdetermination," "swerve," and "clinamen") with the full-blown presence of freedom.

100 Althusser 1994b, p. 42; Althusser 2006, p. 262

But, as I have insisted repeatedly on a number of other occasions,<sup>101</sup> mere indetermination is not robust self-determination. This is far from denying the importance of a rigorous theoretical establishment of indeterminism, a systematic philosophical debunking of determinism. Indeed, such an establishment/debunking is a necessary prerequisite for any account of autonomous subjectivity, especially if one is a self-respecting materialist worthy of the name. Nonetheless, what is necessary is not, by itself, immediately sufficient.

To conclude by tying together the entirety of this intervention with its companion text,<sup>102</sup> the (self-dehumanizing and self-denaturalizing) human beings of a certain Althusserian historical/dialectical materialism could be described, in this materialism's intentional and unintentional resonances with both Hegelian philosophy as well as Freudian-Lacanian psychoanalysis, as a mass of sick, perverted primates fallen ill at birth. The earth of the anthropocene is the accidental by-product of weak-natural evolution, namely, the deviations and swerves of a natural-historical clinamen without aims, ends, or goals (i.e., *sans teloi, ohne Warum*). The young Sartre's non-materialist-*qua*-anti-naturalist existentialism speaks of a single "condemnation to freedom" as distinctly characteristic of human subjects. The older Althusser, between the lines of his sadly scattered and tragically interrupted final texts, shows those who still read him with the care he continues to deserve a humanity delivered to the edge of the abyss of autonomy, the midnight madness of that night shining out from the glassy black pupils of each and every human visage, by two negligent parents: the barred Real of an underdetermining weak/rotten nature and the equally barred Symbolic of a likewise underdetermining socio-cultural nurture. These last insights of the mature Althusser deserve to be made lasting. Twenty-first-century materialism is under an obligation to adopt these orphans as its own.

101 Johnston 2013d, pp. 96-97; Johnston 2013f; Johnston 2014b; Johnston 2014c, pp. 208-209; Johnston, 2015c, pp. 134-135; Johnston 2015b; Johnston 2016c

102 Johnston 2015a

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# Fidelity that is not Interpellation: Reading Althusser's Misreadings

Agon Hamza

## Abstract:

This paper intends to examine the fate and the relevance of the work of Louis Althusser from the perspective of Slavoj Žižek's system. It won't aim at drawing a balance sheet of what is still relevant in Althusser's work, what is applicable to our situation, rather it will endeavour to show the possibilities (or not) of an Althusserian analysis of our predicament and thus pointing out his limits, from a Žižekian perspective.

## Keywords:

Althusser, Marx, Žižek, ideology, Hegel

## Why celebrate Althusser?

What does it mean to celebrate the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the publication of *For Marx*, the collective work *Reading Capital*, in the present philosophical, political and ideological conjuncture, which has more or less declared Althusser to be a 'dead dog' and his project to be worthy of nothing? Let us present some provisional theses. In an elementary level, the project of Louis Althusser can be defined as a "return to Marx." This return consists of a philosophical reading of a non-philosophical work, i.e. Marx's *Capital*. But, the question is why return to Althusser at all, in the present era which has effectively done away with the political and ideological struggle which is foreign to Althusser? The main political and ideological terrain in the current conjuncture (at least in Europe) is the struggle against the austerity measures, whereas neoliberalism constitutes our greatest enemy. Employing an elementary Althusserian operation of "drawing lines of demarcation", we come to striking conclusions. Firstly, there is a striking similarity between the liberals and the contemporary leftists: the word *capitalism* has disappeared from our vocabulary. In a Maoist fashion, which was very dear to Althusser himself, the struggle against the austerity measures and neoliberalism are not our principal contradictions. The principal problem of capitalism is not in neoliberalism, or in austerity politics, nor in new forms neither of authoritarian or apartheid regimes, nor in the xenophobia and racism, nor in the West or USA as such. But, it is in the capitalist form itself, that is, in the *value form*. Instead of referring to neoliberalism as the cause for our plights and miseries, we should (at the risk of sounding archaic), bring back the critique and the overcoming of *capital* as the ultimate goal of our thinking and actions. This is what the basic Althusserian lesson would be.

Secondly, as the revival of an interest in Althusser's *Capital* seems to be happening in light of the financial meltdown of 2008 and of various political experiments taking place all around the world, it looks like it is a crucial moment to examine the conditions and grounds onto which

the refoundation of Marx is taking place and the role of Althusser in it. But, let us argue that regardless of the fact that Marx's writings actively constitute the contemporary debates of the Left, nevertheless we are not confronting the big ideological and political issues of our present era: classes and class struggle, party-form of political organisation, Communism, et cetera. In rereading Marx today, in all the attempts to reactualize him and make his work our contemporary, we seem to fail to recognize what the purpose of rereading Marx is: the construction of a proper political vision and program. In this sense, Marx remains a foreigner to us.

But, how should we read *Capital* and Marx in general? Let us state the first preliminary thesis, which is also the fundamental thesis of this paper. Marx's *Capital* occupies a very odd position in the history of the social sciences. It is considered neither a philosophical treaty, nor an economic platform. Certainly, it is not a book which provides a political vision nor a particular program. However, as paradoxical as it might seem, these are the three crucial dimensions through which *Capital* should be read. It is at this point where the problematic opened up by Althusser is revealed, which is to say, a set of questions and problems that preoccupied the philosopher throughout his philosophical project and which remain relevant and timely for our predicament.

### The Althusserian problematic

What does the problematic opened up by Althusser consist of? I want to argue that Althusser gave an alternative perspective to the immanent tension between philosophy and politics. The shape that this tension assumes is that of an obstacle. Let us pursue the standard Marxist vocabulary: the relation between Philosophy and Marxism on the one hand, and Politics and Communism on the other (as theory and practice) is a relation of tensions, obstacles and uncertainty. What does this mean?

Throughout his work, from the early theological writings up to his materialism of the encounter, Althusser repeatedly wrote of the singular nature of Marx's project. For Althusser, Marx made a double discovery: he founded the science of history (historical materialism) and discovered a new practice of philosophy (dialectical materialism). Althusser maintained that the discovery of *historical materialism* was the condition for establishing a new practice of philosophy. Let us go with a longer quote from Althusser, which in this case is justified:

This 'epistemological break' concerns conjointly *two distinct theoretical disciplines*. By founding the theory of history (historical materialism), Marx simultaneously broke with his erstwhile ideological philosophy and established a new philosophy (dialectical materialism). I am deliberately using the traditionally accepted terminology (historical materi-

alism, dialectical materialism) to designate this double foundation in a single break. And I should point out two important problems implied by this exceptional circumstance. Of course, if the birth of a new philosophy is simultaneous with the foundation of a new science, and this science is the science of history, a crucial theoretical problem arises: by what necessity of principle should the foundation of the scientific theory of history *ipso facto* imply a theoretical revolution in philosophy? This same circumstance also entails a considerable practical consequence: as the new philosophy was only implicit in the new science it might be tempted *to confuse itself with it*. *The German Ideology* sanctions this confusion as it reduces philosophy, as we have noted, to a faint shadow of science, if not to the empty generality of positivism. This practical consequence is one of the keys to the remarkable history of Marxist philosophy, from its origins to the present day.<sup>1</sup>

Althusser is correct in pointing out the break in Marx's oeuvre, however what he is missing is that the very distinction between science and ideology is, in the last instance, an ideological position par excellence. What Althusser is missing is the very Hegelian-inspired tendency that led to that break. That is to say, Marx's critique of political economy, or more precisely, his *Capital* could only be written after Marx re-read Hegel's *Science of Logic*. In this sense, the 'epistemological break' occurred but for the exact opposite reasons as thought by Althusser himself. That said, the thesis I want to propose can be formulated as follows: yes, there was an 'epistemological break' in Marx's work, but the break that occurred is, in the last instance, a rupture in his path that permitted him to conceptualize his 'critique of political economy'. While Althusser assumed that the concept of "science" that Marx was using in *Capital* came from Darwin and physics, it is, in fact, better understood as the concept of science used by Hegel in *Science of Logic*, which starts with a clear statement that a scientific enquiry is not merely one which does not presuppose anything, no essence and no being, but which examines the presuppositions which come with what is posited, its "ontological commitments." This is precisely what Marx does in *Capital*: he analyzes the presuppositions that are being posited by the logic of Capital itself, rather than mimic a physicist or a biologist who observes impartially the object that he is trying to analyze. The science proper of Marx is the science of letting the commodity tell its own story, and not the science that, beginning with Galileo, requires the planets to be "mute".

Let us proceed further with examining how Althusser employs this concept. As Balibar argues: "it seems to me that in reality it is instead an original concept which Althusser introduced between 1960 and 1965, a concept which, it is true, owes 'something' to Bachelard and

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1 Althusser 2005, pp.33-4

which does indeed rest on certain common philosophical presuppositions but which in fact has a quite other object and opens a quite other field of investigations".<sup>2</sup> In fact, *Capital* is the work "by which Marx has to be judged" and this is the work in which Althusser puts most of his effort: to the "scientific work" of Marx, and especially his *Capital*, with the *philosophical thesis* which would best suit his scientific project. In this enterprise, his task was that of "determining the type of philosophy which best corresponds to what Marx wrote in *Capital*,"<sup>3</sup> which would result not in Marxist philosophy, but in philosophy *for* Marxism. Hence his famous statement that it is difficult to be a Marxist in philosophy. As a result, one of the possible ways of constructing the philosophy for Marxism is through the critique of ideology. The logical question to be posed here: what is the function of philosophy for Althusser?

The main task of philosophy is to draw lines of demarcation between scientific practice and ideological propositions. Philosophy is defined in its double relation to the sciences and ideologies. In this regard, philosophy is a *dividing activity of thought*. It thinks demarcations, distinctions, divisions, within the realm of thought. Therefore, philosophy has an intervening role by stating *Theses* that contribute to "opening the way to a correct way" of formulating the very problems in which it intervenes. According to Althusser, by stating *Theses* (which should be understood as positions), philosophy produces *philosophical categories*. When he defines philosophy as the "class struggle in theory, in the last instance", Althusser is being very precise: philosophy functions by intervening not in matter, or bodies, nor in the class struggle, but it *intervenes in theory*. This intervention provokes or produces theoretical effects. In other words the "enigma of philosophy is contained in the difference between the reality in which it intervenes (the domain of the *sciences* + theoretical *ideologies* + philosophy) and the result that its intervention produces (the distinction between the *scientific* and the *ideological*)."<sup>4</sup> The indispensable result is what he calls *philosophy-effect*. In this sense, philosophy does not think, neither in sciences nor in politics. Philosophy's function should "serve sciences, rather than enslave them" and to reiterate this in Badiou's vocabulary, philosophy has the task of articulating and criticizing the effects of the events of the class struggle. Therefore, everything that happens in philosophy has "in the last instance, not only political consequences in theory, but also political consequences *in politics*: in the political class struggle".<sup>4</sup> Taking all this into account the intervention in the two distinct realities (that of scientific and ideological) is internal and the *philosophy-effects* produce changes within itself. Based on this

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2 Balibar 1978, p.208.

3 Althusser 2006, p.258

4 Althusser 1976, p.38.

how are we to re-think Althusser's theory of the critique of ideology? Here I want to argue that in a certain way, his entire theory of the critique of ideology is at the service of this thesis - which in his idea of re-thinking Marxism, is meant as a means for proving it right, supplementing it, and rendering it compatible with his project of re-reading Marxism. The entire Marxist enterprise in philosophy is centered on the possibility of distinguishing between science and ideology, not only in their realities, but also in the reference to the work of Marx himself. This thesis led Althusser to conclude that: "Marx could not possibly have become Marx except by founding a theory of history and a philosophy of the historical distinction between ideology and science."<sup>5</sup> In this respect, I would argue that his philosophical project of reading Marx philosophically is centered on the concept of the 'critique of ideology.'

### Žižek as a critic of Althusser

The philosopher who works on the problematic opened up by Althusser is Slavoj Žižek, although his work is grounded on a completely different orientation. As it is well known, this triad of psychoanalysis, Hegelian philosophy, and Marx's critique of political economy, constitute the space of *Žižekian thinking*. Indeed one couldn't ask for a more arduous path to follow with his attempt to not only redeem but reinvent this triad of theories (and practices). They are all discredited and subjected to the harshest critique possible: the predominant Lacanian orientation is politically conservative, the entire history of philosophy for the past two centuries has been defining and shaping itself in opposition to Hegel, and last but not least, no political and ideological enterprise has been more condemned than communism. Žižek's move is already well known: we should be critical of Marx, not at the level of making a compromise with him, but rather with radicalizing Marx himself. This radicalization takes the form of going back from Marx to Hegel. Not supplementing Marx, or reading Marx with... Spinoza, as it is fashionable in our era and as Althusser conceptualised and read Marx. But rather, the only way to radicalize Marx is to uncompromisingly subject him to Hegel's system.

Slavoj Žižek's engagement with the work of Althusser has a long history. Since his first book in English, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* until his latest *Absolute Recoil: Towards a New Foundation of Dialectical Materialism*, Žižek continuously returns to Althusser's work and critiques him from many perspectives. Although Žižek recognizes the extraordinary importance of Althusser's work, nonetheless his position is that Althusser fails to realize what he promises to do. In what follows, I will schematically theorize the advantages of Žižek (via Hegel and vice versa)

.....  
5 Althusser & Balibar 2009, p.17

over Althusser.

Let us consider his *The Sublime Object of Ideology*. In a certain level, this book should be understood and read as Žižek's endeavor to overcome the limits of Althusser's project in general, and his theory of ideology in particular.<sup>6</sup> In the beginning of the introduction to *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, he engages immediately with Althusser. Žižek accepts the break inaugurated by Althusser, "by his insistence on the fact that a certain cleft, a certain fissure, misrecognition, characterizes the human condition as such: by the thesis that the idea of possible end of ideology is an ideological idea *par excellence*."<sup>7</sup> Althusser relies on Spinoza, in order to formulate his theory of the critique of ideology. On the other hand, Žižek constructs his method and the critique of ideology based on Hegel and Lacan. The difference between Althusser and Žižek is, bluntly and schematically put, the difference between the *symptomatic reading* and the *ideological fantasy*. The implications from this are far more complicated than they may appear. Althusser's critique of ideology is based on the distinction between the real object and the object of knowledge.

In his famous text *Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses*, Althusser theorizes the famous concept of *ideological interpellation*, which is central to any functioning of the ideology:

I might add: what thus seems to take place outside ideology (to be precise, in the street), in reality takes place in ideology. What really takes place in ideology seems therefore to take place outside it. That is why those who are in ideology believe themselves by definition outside ideology: one of the effects of ideology is the practical *denegation* of the ideological character of ideology by ideology: ideology never says, 'I am ideological'. It is necessary to be outside ideology, i.e. in scientific knowledge, to be able to say: I am in ideology (a quite exceptional case) or (the general case): I was in ideology. As is well known, the accusation of being in ideology only applies to others, never to oneself (unless one is really a Spinozist or a Marxist, which, in this matter, is to be exactly the same thing). Which amounts to saying that ideology *has no outside* (for itself), but at the same time *that it is nothing but outside* (for science and reality).<sup>8</sup>

This constitutes the center of the Althusserian problematic, or the contradictions that constitute the terrain on which the Althusserian problematic is founded upon. The central concept in Althusser's venture

.....  
6 We should note that in 1989, when *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, Althusser's work on the materialism of the encounter has not been published yet, and it was very likely that Žižek didn't know of them. However, we should note that in his later books, Žižek elaborates on that period. Cf. Žižek 2014.

7 Žižek 1989, p.2.

8 Althusser 2001, pp.118-119

in rethinking Marxism is the idea of an *epistemological break*. What is the epistemological break? It is the philosophical (epistemological) operation which defines what Marxist philosophy is. In Althusser's conceptualization, the epistemological break is the wager through which we can determine the extent to which Marx (and Marxist thought in general) has liberated itself from the philosophical ideology, i.e. Hegel. And through this operation, Althusser is able to determine what Marxist philosophy is. The epistemological break, according to Althusser, is located in 1845 with *The German Ideology* and *Theses on Feuerbach*, which permitted Marx to become Marxist. That is to say, by breaking away from Hegelianism, humanism and anthropology, Marx was able to establish the science of history (historical materialism) and a new philosophy (dialectical materialism).<sup>9</sup> This is how the famous Althusserian dichotomy of science *versus* ideology can be understood at this level of the analysis. This is the typical Althusserian operation: the struggle which Althusser sought to locate, the scientificity, or what is scientific, in Marx's *Capital*, and thus provide philosophical concepts that would be used by science, by the means of distinguishing it from the ideologies.

From Žižek's perspective, and here we can pursue his reading method of *ideological fantasy*, we can say that the very distinction between science and ideology is ideological in itself. Therefore, from the same perspective, we can propose the following thesis: Althusser's oeuvre, as a classic critique of ideology and rethinking of Marxism, is ideological from the standpoint of Žižek's project.

### Althusser's Spinoza and Hegel

Pierre Macherey's arguably most important book is called *Hegel or Spinoza*. Its recent translation into English<sup>10</sup> sparked yet another debate on the tension between Spinoza and Hegel. Due to the structure and the limits of this paper, I will limit myself to presenting the main argument of this book: according to Macherey, Hegel wasn't fully capable of understanding Spinoza's system and at the same time, the latter serves as a critic *avant la lettre* of the former. Similarly to this, the recent translation of Frédéric Lordon's *Willing Slaves of Capital: Spinoza and Marx on Desire* argues that it is through Spinoza that we can comprehend the structures of capitalism. In this regard, Lordon argues that: "the temporal paradox is that, although Marx comes after Spinoza, it is Spinoza who can now help us fill the gaps in Marx."<sup>11</sup> Lordon points out a very important aspect of

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9 Althusser 2005 p.33

10 Macherey 2011.

11 Lordon 2014, p. x.

Marx's work, which holds true for Althusser's work as well: Marx's work, and especially the critique of political economy, can be understood only if it is positioned to, or read from a philosophical perspective. Balibar rightly argued that "whatever might have been thought in the past, *there is no Marxist philosophy and there will never be*; on the other hand, *Marx is more important for philosophy than ever before.*"<sup>12</sup> As explained earlier, Althusser's abandonment of Hegel has to be understood in terms of a refutation of French Hegelianism. How should we understand this? The first thesis concerns the philosophical and political conjuncture in post-war France. According to Althusser, "the fact that, for the last two decades, Hegel has had his place in French bourgeois philosophy is not a matter to be treated lightly."<sup>13</sup> The philosophical conjuncture in France, or, the "extraordinary philosophical chauvinism," as Althusser characterized it, was dominated by phenomenologists, *Lebensphilosophie* and bourgeois appropriation of Hegel. The return to Hegel, in the post-war period, took a specific form:

Great Return to Hegel is simply a desperate attempt to combat Marx, cast in the specific form that revisionism takes in imperialism's final crisis: *a revisionism of a fascist type.*<sup>14</sup>

Politically, the post-war reaction was at its highest. Philosophical chauvinism was accompanied by political provincialism, or revisionism. The systematic political critique was alienated in the usual moralistic blackmailing terms. In fact, the political revisionism was centered on the category of *fear*, as developed by the central figures of post-war writings, Camus, Malraux, Marcel, and others. By employing the notion of fear to analyze the political situation in France, they became Fukuyama-ists *avant la lettre*.

Against all these currents, in which the philosophical categories were used as a warrant for the most reactionary elements in the post-war situation, Althusser sought refuge in the philosophy of Spinoza. In the post-war predicament, in which philosophical currents were dominated by bourgeois appropriation of Hegel and phenomenologists (Marxists or not), Spinozism was indeed perceived as a liberator from that reactionary conjuncture, and being a Spinozist in philosophy was perceived as a liberating experience. We should remember that one of his main enemies, both philosophically and politically, was Maurice Merleau-Ponty, the author of a *Phenomenology of Perception*, as well as Jean-Paul Sartre's *Being and Nothingness*. Nevertheless, before arriving at this point, Althusser

12 Balibar 2007, p.1.

13 Althusser 2014, p.177

14 Ibid 189

was a Hegelian and this can be seen in his Thesis and other essays from that period. In other words, it was Althusser who has his own theoretical life divided into a humanist and a scientific-Spinozist period, and not necessarily Marx himself! Taking all this into account, what characterizes Althusser's early period is:

A full identification with Christianity and an attempt to create an alliance between Roman-Catholicism and Marxism

An underlying Hegelian framework, albeit a humanist Hegel, is present in his work, culminating in his Master Thesis and *The Return to Hegel*

A constant attempt to dissolve his theoretical alliances and build a new philosophical framework for his philosophical project, which culminates with abandonment of Christianity and Hegel

The shift in Althusser's position is evident: from identifying with Christianity and referring to himself as a Christian ("we Christians..."), he switches to dismissing religion as a "practical ideology."<sup>15</sup> On another level, he switches from an interesting defense of Hegel against the fascist revisionism, to dismissing Hegel as the philosophical rationalization of the existing state of things. In the midst of these conceptual shifts, he is continuously faced with the perplexing question: how to begin with a Critique? In the whole of his oeuvre, we can distinguish between its Christian and scientific perspective. Differently put, Althusser's critique is grounded first on Christian universality, or more precisely, based on his mastery of attempting to ground the critique in its Universalist Catholic fashion, Althusser opens up the space for two decisive moves in his philosophical and political life: a) paradoxically (or not so much), it was Christianity that enabled him to reject/abandon the Roman-Catholic Church, and b) it enables him to rethink Marxism in universal terms.

This has to be complicated further. In the section *On Spinoza* in his *Essays of Self-Criticism*, Althusser makes a long remark that is worth quoting:

Hegel *begins* with Logic, "God before the creation of the world". But as Logic is alienated in Nature, which is alienated in the Spirit, which reaches its end in Logic, there is a circle which turns within itself, without end and without beginning. The first words of the beginning of the *Logic* tell us: Being is Nothingness. The posited beginning is negated: there is no beginning, therefore no origin. Spinoza for his part begins with God, but in order to deny Him as a Being (Subject) in the universality of His *only* infinite power (*Deus = Natura*). Thus Spinoza, like Hegel, rejects every thesis of Origin, Transcendence or an Unknowable World, even disguised within the absolute interiority of the Essence. But with

15 See also Ibid., p.194-197

this difference (for the Spinozist negation is not the Hegelian negation), that within the void of the Hegelian Being there exists, through the negation of the negation, the contemplation of the dialectic of a *Telos* (Telos = Goal), a dialectic which reaches its Goals in history: those of the Spirit, subjective, objective and absolute, Absolute Presence in transparency. But Spinoza, because he “begins with God”, never gets involved with any Goal, which, even when it “makes its way forward” in immanence, is still figure and thesis of transcendence. The detour *via* Spinoza thus allowed us to make out, by contrast, a radical quality lacking in Hegel. In the negation of the negation, in the *Aufhebung* (= transcendence which conserves what it transcends), it allowed us to discover the Goal: the special form and site of the “mystification” of the Hegelian dialectic.<sup>16</sup>

In other words, according to Althusser, Spinoza rejected the notion of the Goal and by doing so he rejected every theory of teleology. In Althusser’s view, Spinoza was *the* critic of ideology of his time, which in that time had the form of religion. He refused to see ideology as an error or ignorance, but placed it in the level of the *imaginary* (First Level of Knowledge). In his radical criticism of

the central category of imaginary illusion, *the Subject*, it reached into the very heart of bourgeois philosophy, which since the fourteenth century had been built on the foundation of the legal ideology of the Subject. Spinoza’s resolute anti-Cartesianism consciously directs itself to this point, and the famous “critical” tradition made no mistake here. On this point too Spinoza anticipated Hegel, but he went further.<sup>17</sup>

In this regard, according to Althusser, the problem of Hegel is that he could not find a place for subjectivity without a subject:

For Hegel, who criticized all theses of subjectivity, nevertheless found a place for the Subject, not only in the form of the “becoming-Subject of Substance” (by which he “reproaches” Spinoza for “wrongly” taking things no further than Substance), but in the *interiority* of the *Telos* of the process without a subject, which by virtue of the negation of the negation, realizes the designs and destiny of the Idea.<sup>18</sup>

Here we encounter the basis upon which Althusser could put forward two of his important theses: 1) History is a process without a subject, and 2) the ‘materialism of the encounter’ is centered on the notions of void, limit, lack of the center, and contingency, etc. These two theses render visible the Althusserian paradox: the coexistence of one of the most radical anti-ontological positions (thesis 1) in an ontological framework. Indeed, this is the real kernel of the problem in Althusser’s project.

16 Althusser 1976, p.135.

17 Ibid, p.136

18 Ibid.

In fact, the future of Althusser depends on the work that is yet to be done on this paradoxical position. The first consequence to draw is, thus, that the two above-mentioned theses *inform* his philosophical project but also make it *inconsistent*. In a sense, “process without a subject” opens up a double space: a) for rethinking the theory of the subject in Marxist philosophy, and b) rethinking the relation between Marx and Hegel, in a non-teleological fashion. However, at the same time, Althusser abruptly closes up this possibility by qualifying the subject as an idealist concept. It is worth noting that his thesis on the process without a subject, which is intended to elaborate an anti-Hegelian position, comes as close as possible to the very Hegelian conception of the subject *qua* substance. Slavoj Žižek is the first one to elaborate on the Hegelian content of this thesis:

Louis Althusser was wrong when he opposed the Hegelian Subject Substance, as a “teleological” process-with-a-subject, to the materialist-dialectical ‘process without a subject.’ The Hegelian dialectical process is in fact the most radical version of a ‘process without a subject;’ in the sense of an agent controlling and directing it – be it God or humanity, or a class as a collective subject.<sup>19</sup>

For Hegel, Substance doesn’t exist; it is only a retroactive presupposition of the Subject. Substance comes into existence only as a result of the Subject, and it is for this conceptual reason that it is enunciated as a predecessor of the Subject. In this regard, the idea that the Substance is an organic whole is an illusion, precisely because when the Subject presupposes the Substance, it presupposes it as split, a cut. If the Substance would ontologically precede the Subject, then we would have a Substance which has Spinozist attributes, but not a Subject. However, can we keep this line of argumentation *à propos* the Althusserian concept of the process without a subject? If we hold this position, then we’re in the pre-Kantian universe. The Hegelian approach assumes that this understanding of Substance is dogmatic religious metaphysics, because being/Substance is posited as a totality, as indivisible One. This totality can be accounted for, as such, only in the fantasy (i.e. Kantian antinomies of Reason). In this regard, for Hegel, it is impossible to think of the Substance that will become a Subject, because it is always-already a Subject (“*not only* as a Substance, but *also* as a Subject”): it exists only with/in the Subject and without the former Substance, is simply a nothing. In this instance, we have to be precise: when Hegel talks about Substance and Subject, he is practically talking about the Absolute: it is the Absolute which is not *only* a Substance, but *also* a Subject. And the “absolute is essentially its

19 Žižek 2012, p.405.

result.”<sup>20</sup> As Hegel himself put it in his critique of Spinoza, with him the “substance is not determined as self-differentiating”, which is to say: not as a subject.<sup>21</sup> The hypothesis that I want to put forward is, that, if for Althusser there is no revolutionary subject, but only agents of the revolution (and therefore ‘history is a process without a subject’), then the proletariat can be read from the perspective of the Hegelian thesis. The proletariat here should not be understood in a Lukácsian sense, but it is rather something which renders meaningful Althusser’s concept that ‘history has no subject.’<sup>22</sup> This leads to the conclusion that the ‘agent of the revolution’ (proletariat), and ‘history has no subject’ is, indeed, the name for the Hegelian subject. Although in the first read it might resemble Lukács, we need to bear in mind that the very fact that the proletariat *lacks being* (there is no subject), is what makes it capable of *being the agent of its own coming to be*. The passage from non-being to being, through a historical process, is indeed very much Hegel’s subject. To make the link between the Substance as something split and the Subject, let’s go back to Žižek:

It is not enough to emphasize that the subject is not a positively existing self-identical entity, that it stands for the incompleteness of substance, for its inner antagonism and movement, for the Nothingness which thwarts the substance from within... This notion of the subject still presupposes the substantial One as a starting point, even if this One is always already distorted, split, and so on. And it is this very presupposition that should be abandoned: at the beginning (even if it is a mythical one), there is no substantial One, but Nothingness itself; every One comes second, emerges through the self-relating of this Nothingness.<sup>23</sup>

This enables us to propose the crucial thesis regarding Althusser’s Spinoza *versus* Hegel. We have to accept that Althusser is a Spinozist in a sense, but the fact that he has a theory of subjectivity, whereas Spinoza has none, allows us to ask, like Hegel before – “but, what are the conditions of possibility for ideological interpellation?” That is, yes, ‘being is infinite substance, but how then does the appearance of finite subjectivity come forth?’ - and the ontology that answers this is *not* the Spinozist one. This is the turning point, and the deadlock in Althusser: he supposed Spinozism as a way to critique the weak theory of negativity of the French Hegelians, a theory which gave rise to an unthought ideological concept of subject, but the ontology he needed, when he fully developed his critique, was not the one which allowed him to start his critique. If we complicate this further, we need to state that the “process without a

20 Hegel 1969, p.537

21 Ibid., p.373

22 Hegel writes that “substance lacks the principle of *personality*”, *ibid.*

23 Žižek 2012, p.378

subject” is an epistemological position, that is to say, it is not a matter of saying there are no agents, but that there is no ontological transcendental structure of agency. It is a process without a tie to the ideological sub-structure of the situation (without presupposing that the agents are “sub-jected” to the historically determined idea of the subject of the situation they are breaking away from). In this regard, Spinoza becomes his reference, because he is the ontological backbone of this position – he has an ontology of substance to go with an epistemology of the ideological subject. So, in order to show that Althusser breaks with Spinoza’s substance, we need to show that the ‘process without a subject’ (which is indeed very close to Hegel’s theory of becoming-true through processes) in fact has *no* ontological presuppositions. That is to say, the ontological commitments of Althusser’s epistemological positions *are different*, or *critical*, of the ontology he thought he was agreeing with, because, what Hegel calls a subject, is clearly more present (in Althusser’s formulation) in the word “process” than in the word “subject”. In his *Science of Logic*, in the chapter on the Absolute, when writing on the defects of Spinoza’s philosophy, Hegel argues that “*the substance of this system is one substance, one indivisible totality.*”<sup>24</sup> When Althusser proposes a ‘process without a subject’, as an anti-Hegelian/teleological thesis/conception of history, isn’t he effectively fighting Spinoza’s conception of the substance? Therefore, in his attempt to provide an anti-Hegelian thesis, Althusser effectively provided one of the best anti-Spinozist critiques of Substance. Therefore, “process without a subject” gains its complete meaning *only* if it is posited, and read, from the Hegelian Substance-Subject: “the living Substance is being which is in truth *Subject*, or, what is the same, is in truth actual only in so far as it is the movement of positing itself.”<sup>25</sup>

To proceed further, like with all theorists of the subject as ideological, Althusser, too, was also perplexed with the following: yes, the subject is ideologically formed, *but why does it ‘stick’?* What needs to be presupposed within “substance” in order to explain how ideology can “capture” something? It is the subject as ontological condition. That is to say, with Robert Pfaller’s thesis,<sup>26</sup> this requires us to presuppose a failure in substance, which is why the failure of interpellation can be a success.

Correlative to this, is Althusser’s reconstruction of materialism. Althusser’s aleatory materialism is devoid of First Cause, Sense, and

24 Hegel 1969, p.536.

25 Hegel 1977 p.10.

26 Pfaller 1998, p. 240-1. Here lies the difference with Žižek’s understanding of interpellation, according to his reformulation, or rather his reversal, of Althusser’s understanding of ideological interpellation. According to Žižek, ideology doesn’t interpellate individuals into subjects, but rather it interpellates subjects into their symbolic identities. In Žižek’s understanding, the subject is no longer an ideological construction, and this becomes a hole in the symbolic structure that ideology tries to intricate.

*Logos* – in short, a materialism with no teleology. According to him, “to talk about ‘materialism’ is to broach one of the most sensitive subjects in philosophy.”<sup>27</sup> Following this, he argues that “materialism is not a philosophy which must be elaborated in the form of a system in order to deserve the name ‘philosophy’”, but what is decisive in Marxism is that this materialism should “present a *position* in philosophy.”<sup>28</sup> According to Althusser,

in the philosophical tradition, the evocation of materialism is the index of an exigency, a sign that idealism has to be rejected - yet without breaking free, without being able to break free, of the specular pair idealism/materialism; hence it is an index, but, at the same time, a trap, because one does not break free of idealism by simply negating it, stating the opposite of idealism, or 'standing it on its head'. We must therefore treat the term 'materialism' with suspicion: the word does not give us the thing, and, on closer inspection, most materialisms turn out to be inverted idealisms.<sup>29</sup>

In this regard, we can elaborate further on the idea of philosophy as an activity of drawing lines of demarcations between different positions. Let's divide these positions as follows: scientific, political and philosophical. I want to add, also: religious lines of demarcations.

It is with regard to the conditions that philosophy realizes its function, as an activity of drawing lines of demarcations. It intervenes when, and where, the figure of consciousness has grown old, which is structured in a double level: temporal versus structural. In this level, we have the conception of philosophy that intervenes theoretically in existing conjunctures, as well as the other conception, of a philosopher as a night-time warden. Another level is that of philosophical intervention within the philosophical terrain as such, which is to say, between different philosophical orientations. The conclusion we can draw here is, that philosophy's conditions divide philosophy; that is to say that the novelities of a certain time change philosophy, which in turn, intervenes on the fields which condition it. The question that has to be asked now, after all these detours and reading of Althusser's theses, is the following: why is it that Althusser ended up betraying his own Spinozism? The most appropriate answer to this is, that he couldn't operate within a Spinozist horizon because he was a Christian. We shall come back to this in the subsequent section. But, let us briefly and schematically explore the concept of causality as elaborated by Althusser.

27 Althusser 2006, p.272

28 Ibid., p.256

29 Ibid.

## Structural causality

According to many of Althusser's students, this concept was central during their period of *Cahiers pour l'Analyse*. Structural causality is Althusser's most important endeavor to overcome Hegelian dialectics. But, the question is whether he really succeeded in doing so? Through the concept of structural causality, Althusser opposed the conventional conceptions of causality (linear and expressive). Some of Althusser's commentators (such as Ted Benton<sup>30</sup>) argued that when he theorizes structural causality, he fails to really grasp the specific causal relations in the totality of the society, and therefore it fails to be an important and useful political concept. What is structural causality? Althusser employs this concept in order to mark (or, designate) Marx's specific understanding of social totality, dialectics and contradictions. The starting point is the famous sentence from the afterword of the second edition of Marx's *Capital*, where he argues that “the mystification which dialectic suffers in Hegel's hands, by no means prevents him from being the first to present its general form of working in a comprehensive and conscious manner. With him it is standing on its head. It must be turned right side up again, if you would discover the rational kernel within the mystical shell”.<sup>31</sup> Departing from this, Althusser's claim is that Hegelian dialectics cannot be separated from his philosophical system, which is idealist. The radical difference between Marx's and Hegel's dialectics, according to him, “must be manifest in its essence, that is, in its *characteristic determinations and structures*”.<sup>32</sup> To summarize this, one needs to say that “*basic structures of the Hegelian dialectic such as negation, the negation of the negation, the identity of opposites, 'supersession', the transformation of quantity into quality, contradiction, etc., have for Marx (in so far as he takes them over, and he takes over by no means all of them) a structure different from the structure they have for Hegel*”.<sup>33</sup>

Departing from the distinction between Hegel's and Marx's dialectics, Althusser elaborates further on the relations between the structure and its elements. For Althusser, the linear causality is associated with Descartes, whereas the expressive one is adopted and employed by Hegel. Therefore, he introduces the concept of structural causality as a concept that analyses the effect of the whole on the parts. Althusser argues that through this concept we can understand that this concept is in fact “premised on the absolute condition that the whole is not conceived as a structure.” In this regard, the concept of structural causality over-

30 Benton 1984

31 Marx 1975, p.

32 Althusser 2005, p.93. See also *ibid*, pp.161-218.

33 *Ibid.*, pp.93-4.

comes the limits of the other two concepts. Analyzed from the perspective of *structural causality*, elements of the social whole are not extrinsic to the structural whole, nor does it exist as a manifestation of the immanent basis of the structure. The relation between the elements and the structure is complementary in the sense that the latter determines the elements of the whole. Let us proceed with a quote by Althusser, which indeed renders more meaningful the relationship between the totality and its elements:

In every case, the ordinary distinctions between outside and inside disappear, along with the 'intimate' links within the phenomena as opposed to their visible disorder: we find a different image, a new quasi-concept, definitely freed from the empiricist antinomies of phenomenal subjectivity and essential interiority; we find an objective system governed in its most concrete determinations by laws of its *erection* (montage) and *machinery*, by the specifications of its concept. Now we can recall that highly symptomatic term "*Darstellung*," compare it with this 'machinery' and take it literally, as the very existence of this machinery in its effects: the mode of existence of the stage direction (*mise en scène*) on the theatre which is simultaneously its own stage, its own script, its own actors, the theatre whose spectators can, on occasion, be spectators only because they are first of all forced to be its actors, caught by constraints of a script and parts whose authors they cannot be, since it is in essence an *authorless theatre*.<sup>34</sup>

In other words, Althusser maintains that the whole and the parts that constitute the whole are integral, that is to say they are indivisible. This concept caused many opposing positions, from different philosophical camps. In an interview with Peter Hallward, Jacques Rancière argues that the structural causality

allowed for a kind of double attitude. First one could say, here we are presenting theory, as far as can be from any thought of engagement, of lived experience; this theory refutes false ideas, idealist ideas about the relation between theory and practice. But one could also hope that theoretical practice itself might open up other fields for new ways of thinking about political practice... In fact it didn't open any such fields<sup>35</sup>

Indeed Rancière doesn't have to provide 'reasons', since he is stating a historical fact: "It didn't open up such fields" – but nonetheless, one can and should criticize the fact that it *could* have opened up the field,

34 Althusser & Balibar 2009, p.213

35 Hallward & Peden 2012, p.269

but something was missing. However, today we're in a better position to explore it and draw all the consequences from it.

According to Ed Pluth, "the concept of structural causality itself will never have much to say about the specifics of any model, time, space, or structure to which it is applied – such as, most notably, the capitalist mode of production, its origins, its conditions, its future."<sup>36</sup> But, yet he insists that philosophically, it continues to be a more important concept than it might appear, or than the way it has been presented. In his elaboration of Marx's "theoretical revolution", Althusser asks how would it be possible to define the concept of structural causality:

Very schematically, we can say that classical philosophy (the existing Theoretical) had two and only two systems of concepts with which to think effectivity. The mechanistic system, Cartesian in origin, which reduced causality to a *transitive* and analytical effectivity: it could not be made to think the effectivity of a whole on its elements, except at the cost of extra-ordinary distortions (such as those in Descartes' 'psychology' and biology). But a second system was available, one conceived precisely in order to deal with the effectivity of a whole on its elements: the Leibnizian concept of *expression*. This is the model that dominates all Hegel's thought.

Against these two modes of causality, the structural one is supposed to allow us to think the structure as a whole; or more precisely, it is supposed to permit us to think the whole as a structure, the relation between the cause(s) and its effect(s). In other words, as Pluth notes, Althusser developed this concept in order to be able to explain capitalism as a distinct mode of production in different situations. In this regard, "a structural cause may be seen to dominate and determine its situation, although it never functions as a TOTAL cause for all the effects/events in a situation. In this way it differs from an expressive cause, which, on the (bad) Hegelian model, is one that does permeate the whole; and it differs from a mechanical cause, the conditions for which are universally applicable to the situation in which it occurs."<sup>37</sup> How are we to understand this? Another quote from Althusser can illuminate the path:

If the whole is posed as *structured*, i.e., as possessing a type of unity quite different from the type of unity of the spiritual<sup>38</sup> whole, this is no longer the case: not only does it become impossible to think the determination of the elements by the structure in the categories of ana-

36 Pluth 2014, p.340.

37 Ibid, p. 345.

38 Cited from Montag 2014, p.74.

lytical and transitive causality, *it also becomes impossible to think it in the category of the global expressive causality of a universal inner essence immanent in its phenomenon.* The proposal to think the determination of the elements of a whole by the structure of the whole posed an absolutely new problem in the most theoretically embarrassing circumstances, for there were no philosophical concepts available for its resolution.<sup>39</sup>

In a letter to Althusser, after reviewing the manuscript of *Reading Capital*, Macherey protested against the concept of the *structured whole*, calling it a “spiritualist conception of structure.” In his response, Althusser writes that “I agree with what you say about the totality as an ideological conception of structure... But I must say, provisionally at least, that it seems difficult to go further.”<sup>40</sup> However, the theory of causality, or the question of causality as such is important for any theory of history. Although in employing this concept, Althusser criticized and tried to overcome the Hegelian model of expressive totality, more importantly he criticized the thesis of economy (as economic base), which determines superstructure (ideology, politics, culture, et cetera). In opposition to this, he developed what is now known as the causality of the “decentred centre”, by which the economic determination of base -> superstructure is now replaced by the ‘double determination,’ which involved another (additional) condition of instances in the social structures. In this regard, the overdetermined causality works in various ways, thus forming very complex interrelated instances of the social structure: politics, economy, religion, ideology, law, et cetera. It should be understood as following: every capitalist society is, “in the last instance”, determined by the economic base (or instance); however, this very structural relation is then ‘overdetermined’ by yet another instance. The concept of determination and overdetermination are inspired by the writings of the Chinese revolutionary Mao Tse Tung. In his famous essay *On Contradiction*, Mao argues that “contradiction is present in the process of development of all things; it permeates the process of development of each thing from beginning to end”.<sup>41</sup> This is what Mao calls “the universality and absoluteness of contradiction.” However, the type of the contradiction that is of interest for Althusser is another one. Mao distinguishes between the principal contradiction and the principal aspect of a contradiction. The distinction between the two can be rendered as follows: in capitalist society the two forces in contradiction, the proletariat and the bourgeoisie, form the principal contradiction. The other contradictions, such as those between the remnant feudal class and the bourgeoisie, between the peasant petty

39 Althusser & Balibar 2009, p. 207.

40 Ibid.

41 Mao 2009, p.58

bourgeoisie and the bourgeoisie, between the proletariat and the peasant petty bourgeoisie [...].<sup>42</sup> The concept of casual contradiction should be read together with overdetermination. Althusser rejects the thesis that ‘something is caused by the other thing.’ Instead, he maintains on the theory of domination and subordination within the social whole. In his *On the Materialist Dialectic*, Althusser writes that domination is not just an indifferent *fact*, it is a *fact essential* to the complexity itself. That is why complexity implies domination as one of its essentials: it is inscribed in its structure. So to claim that this unity is not and cannot be the unity of a simple, original and universal essence is not, as those who dream of that ideological concept foreign to Marxism, ‘monism’, think, to sacrifice unity on the altar of ‘pluralism’ – it is to claim something quite different: that the unity discussed by Marxism is *the unity of the complexity itself*, that the mode of organization and articulation of the complexity is precisely what constitutes its unity. It is to claim that *the complex whole has the unity of a structure articulated in dominance.*<sup>43</sup>

Here we can see the influence of Mao on Althusser, as it is here that he articulates the relations of domination between contradiction and its aspects.

Being an Althusserian in philosophy means that one is a Spinozist. In this sense, in the predominant readings of Althusser, he is a mere vanishing mediator between Marx and Spinoza. Taking into account the debates and the question of the relation between Marx and Hegel (or, materialism and dialectics) back to the sixties in France, Althusser maintained that “the true ancestor of Marx’s naturalistic treatment of society and history was not Hegel’s dialectical method, plagued with metaphysical idealism and a teleological view of nature and society, but Spinoza’s version of naturalistic monism.”<sup>44</sup> What are the consequences of the path chosen by Althusser? Althusser sought to challenge and overcome Hegel and especially his conception of totality by the whole structured in dominance. The latter, Althusser argued, can be found in Marx and thus comes his superiority to Hegel. But, this is Spinozist Marx. In the chapter of *Reading Capital*, entitled *Marx’s Immense Theoretical Revolution*, Althusser writes:

If the whole is posed as *structured*, i.e., as possessing a type of unity quite different from the type of unity of the spiritual whole, this is no longer the case: not only does it become impossible to think the determination of the elements by the structure in the categories of analytical and

42 Ibid., p.74.

43 Althusser, 2005 , pp.202-2

44 Longuenesse 2007, p.xiii

transitive causality, *it also becomes impossible to think it in the category of the global expressive causality of a universal inner essence immanent in its phenomenon*. The proposal to think the determination of the elements of a whole by the structure of the whole posed an absolutely new problem in the most theoretically embarrassing circumstances, for there were no philosophical concepts available for its resolution. The only theoretician who had had the unprecedented daring to pose this problem and outline a first solution to it was Spinoza. But, as we know, history had buried him in impenetrable darkness. Only through Marx, who, however, had little knowledge of him, do we even begin to guess at the features of that trampled face.<sup>45</sup>

This is a fundamental problem, which Althusser calls a *dramatic problem*. But, isn't Althusser's reading just as dramatic as the problem itself? In his understanding, it is the concept of overdetermination which marks the crucial point of opposition between Marx and Hegel. According to Althusser, the move from contradiction to totality in the Hegelian system would take place under a transcendently-guaranteed unity, a teleological passage from contingency to necessity which would hide the class dominance which operated and structured this passage to begin with—the structured whole is “a” totality, a totality constituted “in dominance.” His proposal was that Marx's theory of history included the “unification-in-dominance” as part of the structure that was thereby constituted, rather than as a teleological and naturalized principle, so that the class character of structures could appear. The Althusserian triad of expressive, linear, and structural causality perfectly corresponds to Hegel's own triad of formal, real, and complete grounds. Hegel's complete ground is exactly the complex structure in which every determining instance is defined in relation to all other determinations. In this sense, Althusser fails in challenging and overcoming Hegel's conceptualization of Ground. Critiquing Althusser's triad, Žižek argues that “Hegel outlined in advance the contours of the Althusserian critique of (what Althusser presents as) “Hegelianism”; moreover he developed the element that is missing in Althusser and prevents him from thinking out the notion of overdetermination -- the element of subjectivity which cannot be reduced to imaginary (mis)recognition qua effect of interpellation, that is to say, the subject as \$, the “empty,” barred subject.”<sup>46</sup> Or, as Longuenesse (from whom Žižek draws on this elaboration) says, Althusser's critique is

flawed because of the conception these authors have of totality. While Hegel's totality is defined as the Idea, a single principle positing its

45 Althusser 2009, p.207

46 Žižek 1993, p.140.

own differences by self-generation, the totality whose efficacy Marx tries to define is a complex totality of different structures, in which one structured whole of determinations (e.g. the totality of economic determinations, or “infrastructure”) may play a dominant role in the constitution of all other structural components of the complex whole.<sup>47</sup>

We should unequivocally argue that Hegel's notion of ground, exactly in understanding it as the totality of relations, is far more radical than Althusser's attribution of totality as a teleological move. The logical question thus is, why even bother to mention and let alone read Althusser, if his opposition to Hegel through Marx produced only misunderstandings?

### Symptomatic reading vs ideological fantasy

The first chapter of *Reading Capital* has a very significant title: From *Capital* to Marx's Philosophy. This title presents Althusser's philosophical operation in its goals and orientations. Althusser's reading and understanding of Marx is based on a *symptomatic reading*. In the beginning of that chapter, he writes that “there is no such thing as an innocent reading, we must say what reading we are guilty of.”<sup>48</sup> He and his students subjected Marx's *Capital* to a philosophical reading. This is opposed to three other readings: economic, historical and philological readings. I shall come back to this later. But, what does *symptomatic reading* mean? According to him, Marx was an astonishing reader. He distinguishes between some forms of reading, but the most important one is the symptomatic reading. The basic understanding of it is that through the method of symptomatic reading we can get the repressed essence of the text, or differently put, what is latent in a text, becomes apparent through that form of a reading. In other words, through a symptomatic reading we can problematize and construct the unconscious of the text. The epistemological break in Marx can be tracked only through this reading. In Marx's work, the ‘true’ philosophy is not to be founded on his “early period”, nor does it exist explicitly in his “mature period”. They are implicit, and they function only to the extent to which it permits Marx's scientific work to take place (i.e. historical materialism). Through a symptomatic reading, these concepts and his philosophy can be rendered explicit and can “establish the indispensable minimum for the consistent existence of Marxist philosophy.”<sup>49</sup> In Althusser's understanding, this is dialectical materialism, or Marxist philosophy. So, the symptomatic reading is a reading which

47 Longuenesse 2007, p.100.

48 Althusser 2009, p.14

49 Althusser 2009, p.35

insofar as it divulges the undivulged event in the text it reads, and in the same movement relates it to a *different text*, present as a necessary absence in the first. Like his first reading, Marx's second reading presupposes the existence of *two texts*, and the measurement of the first against the second. But what distinguishes this new reading from the old one is the fact that in the new one the *second text* is articulated with the lapses in the first text. Here again, at least in the way peculiar to theoretical texts (the only ones whose analysis is at issue here), we find the necessity and possibility of one reading on two bearings simultaneously.<sup>50</sup>

Althusser then tells us that

In the papers you are about to *read*, and which do not escape the law I have pronounced – assuming that they have some claim to be treated, for the time being at least, as discourses with a theoretical meaning – we have simply tried to apply to Marx's reading the '*symptomatic*' *reading* with which Marx managed to read the illegible in Smith, by measuring the problematic initially visible in his writings against the invisible problematic contained in the paradox of *an answer which does not correspond to any question posed*.<sup>51</sup>

Through this method of approaching Marx's texts (that is, a method inspired by Spinoza, Lacan's Freud and Marx himself), Althusser argued that we can provide answers for the questions which Marx never posed and give names to the concept he produced, such as *the concept of the efficiency of a structure on its elements*.<sup>52</sup> But, is this method still operative? We should remember the specificity of Althusser's project. His conception of philosophy was that of the theoretical intervention within a certain ideological and political conjuncture. As he put it himself in one of his seminars at *École Normale Supérieure*

The person who is addressing you is, like all the rest of us, merely a particular structural effect of this conjuncture, and effect that, like each and every one of us as a proper name. The theoretical conjuncture that dominates us has produced an Althusser-effect.<sup>53</sup>

In this sense, it is a certain political and ideological structure that produced one of the most important philosophical projects in Marxism in the previous century, which at the same time enabled its "effect" to

50 Ibid., p.29

51 Ibid.

52 Ibid., p.30

53 Althusser 2003 p.17.

intervene in itself. I will come back to this at the end of this paper. Earlier I argued that the difference between Althusser and Žižek lies on the fundamental difference between the *symptomatic reading* and the *ideological fantasy*. Žižek articulates his critique of Althusser's interpretative method in *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, which runs as following: our era is marked by cynicism and this is an ideological form. Or better still, cynicism is the dominant mode of the function of ideology. From this position, it is clear that confronted with such cynical reason, the traditional critique of ideology no longer works. We can no longer subject the ideological text to 'symptomatic reading', confronting it with its blank spots, with what it must repress to organize itself, to preserve its consistency - cynical reason takes this distance into account in advance.<sup>54</sup>

How should we understand the difference? The *symptomatic reading* permits us to identify and render visible the Other in a certain ideological relation (or, the relation of the relation) which is the interpellative instance or authority. Žižek writes:

If our concept of ideology remains the classic one in which the illusion is located in knowledge, then today's society must appear post-ideological: the prevailing ideology is that of cynicism; people no longer believe in ideological truth; they do not take ideological propositions seriously. The fundamental level of ideology, however, is not that of an illusion masking the real state of things but that of an (unconscious) fantasy structuring our social reality itself. And at this level, we are of course far from being a post-ideological society. Cynical distance is just one way - one of many ways - to blind ourselves to the structuring power of ideological fantasy: even if we do not take things seriously, even if we keep an ironical distance, *we are still doing them*.<sup>55</sup>

In other words, contrary to Althusser's method, the *ideological fantasy*, is concerned with the very construction of the Other, which masks the inconsistency and impossibility of the interpellative power. In psychoanalytic terms, while Althusser is concerned with revealing the symptom out of a given relation or text, Žižek's *ideological fantasy* method is, in the first place, concerned with questioning the very status of the authority which in a certain practice gives force to interpellation.

The most important critique of Althusser's concept of interpellation in contemporary philosophy comes from the so-called *Ljubljana School of Psychoanalysis* and from other Lacanian theorists. The main reproach towards Althusser and his theory of ideology is located on the

54 Žižek 1989, p.30

55 Ibid., p.33

concept of interpellation, the subject and its limits. In short, according to Lacanians, these are the main limits of Althusser and his philosophical project as a whole. Referring to Mladen Dolar's analysis of Althusser,<sup>56</sup> Alenka Zupančič has provided the most succinct position which marks the difference between Althusser and them:

the difference between the subject of structuralism (in this case Althusser's subject) and the subject of psychoanalysis. The latter is not an interpellated subject or individual who, after being summoned in an act of interpellation, becomes wholly subject (subject to and of the Ideological State Apparatus that summons it). On the contrary, the subject of psychoanalysis is that which remains after the operation of interpellation. The (psychoanalytic) subject is nothing but the failure to become an (Althusserian) subject.<sup>57</sup>

In this regard, according to Lacanian philosophers, Althusser "linked ideology, by conceptualizing it as a process of interpellation, to the sphere of mere imaginary subjectivity."<sup>58</sup> In his *Absolute Recoil*, Žižek argues that the Althusserian theory of ideology is fully capable of grasping the gap that "separates our ideological sense-experience from the external material apparatuses and practices" that sustains it:

The theory distinguishes two levels of the ideological process: external (following the ritual, ideology as material practice) and internal (recognizing oneself in interpellation, believing). Although Althusser refers to Pascal to account for the passage between them—follow the external rituals and inner belief will come—the two dimensions remain external to each other; their relationship is that of the parallax: we observe ideological practice either from the outside, in bodily gestures, or from the inside, as beliefs, and there is no intermediate space or passage between the two.<sup>59</sup>

In other words, Žižek's critique with respect to Althusser's theory of ideology does not rely only on the "gap that separates knowledge from belief." In order to render visible the gap that eludes Althusser's theory of the Ideological State Apparatuses, Žižek refers to the inverted formula of fetishist disavowal "I know very well... but...":

56 Dolar 1993, p. 78.

57 Zupančič 2000, pp. 41-2

58 Pfaller 1998, p.229.

59 Žižek 2014, p.51.

Belief thus supplements a gap, an immanent split, within knowledge itself, hence we are not dealing here just with a gap between knowledge and belief. The same goes for our stance towards the threat of ecological catastrophe: it is not a simple "I know all about the ecological threat, but I don't really believe in it." It is rather "I know all about ... and I nonetheless believe in it," because I do not really assume my knowledge.<sup>60</sup>

The thesis to which Žižek refers is indeed very condensed and is open to various interpretations. In a sense, Žižek's critique is fully justified. Moreover, drawing from Dolar, Žižek argues that "the emergence of the subject cannot be conceived as a direct effect of the individual's recognizing him or herself in ideological interpellation: the subject emerges as correlative to some traumatic objectal remainder, to some excess which, precisely, cannot be 'subjectivized', integrated into the symbolic space."<sup>61</sup> To sum up this critique, the difference between the Lacanians and Althusser resides in the fact that Althusser conceived the subject in the imaginary level, the imaginary misrecognition.

### The limits of Althusser

On many occasions, Althusser serves as a point of reference for Žižek. But, almost each time, Žižek reckons the insufficiency and incompleteness of Althusser's project. In what remains, I will proceed with a few schematic theses which will point out the insufficiency of Althusser and the primacy of Žižek's project over it.

The first thesis is that Althusser's project, in its totality, fails to do what it promises to do, including his *aleatory materialism* period. It is not able to address and it is not up to date with political, scientific and epistemological developments and challenges of our situation. The best example is his late period known as aleatory materialism, in which Althusser maintained that nominalism is the only position that is consistent in materialism. For him, "the world consists exclusively of singular, unique objects, each with its own specific name and singular properties. 'Here and now', which, ultimately, cannot be named, but only pointed to, because words themselves are abstractions - we would have to be able to speak without words, that is, to show. This indicates the primacy of the gesture over the word, of the material trace over the sign."<sup>62</sup> In the famous interview *Philosophy and Marxism*, when asked if nominalism is the ante-chamber of materialism, he answers: "I would say that it is not merely the

60 Ibid., p.52.

61 Žižek 2000, p.115.

62 Althusser 2006, p.265

antechamber of materialism, but materialism itself.”<sup>63</sup> In (an unpublished) Seminar XVIII from 1971, Lacan critiques Althusser from the standpoint of dialectical materialism:

If it is clear that if there is something that I am, it is not a nominalist, I mean that I do not start from the fact that the name is something that is stuck like that onto the real. And you have to choose; if one is a nominalist, one must completely renounce dialectical materialism, so that in short the nominalist tradition, which is properly speaking the only danger of idealism that can be put forward here in a discourse like mine, is very obviously rejected. It is not a matter of being realist in the sense that people were in the Middle Ages, the realism of universals. But it is a matter of designating, of highlighting the fact that our discourse, our scientific discourse, only discovers the real because of the fact that it depends on the function of the semblance.<sup>64</sup>

This is where the main difference between Lacan’s dialectical materialism and Althusser’s aleatory materialism lies. Although Lacan agrees with Althusser’s materialist nominalism of exceptions, “what nominalism does not see is the Real of a certain impossibility or antagonism which is the virtual cause generating multiple realities.”<sup>65</sup> From a Hegelian-Lacanian standpoint, there is always something more than mere “singular, unique objects”, and that is “the virtual Real which always supplements reality, “more than nothing, but less than something.”<sup>66</sup> The Žižekian proper thinking thus begins when we know that the ‘abstraction’ is an inherent part of reality itself: and this is the anti-nominalist philosophical position.<sup>67</sup> This holds also for Marx’s critique of political economy regarding the abstraction of value and the commodity form.

After all this, why do we all still read Louis Althusser and especially his *Reading Capital* and *For Marx*? First, we need to argue that although Althusser sought to overcome his preceding periods, he nevertheless doesn’t succeed in that. His critique of dialectical materialism should be applied to his *materialism of the encounter*. Althusser became and is Althusserian *only* with his *Reading Capital* and *For Marx*. When we go back to reading Althusser, we should go back to the problematic of those two books. But, the question that demands a much longer study is: should we repeat Althusser, and is Althusser as such repeatable? When

63 Ibid.

64 Jacques Lacan, *Seminar XVIII: On a discourse that might not be a semblance* (unpublished manuscript).

65 Žižek 2012, p.781.

66 Ibid., p.97.

67 For an elaboration of Žižek’s dialectical materialism, see Hamza 2015, pp.163-176.

we repeat Althusser, what remains out of his work which is worth reconsidering in our conjuncture? Thus, to repeat and read Althusser today should take the form of repetition that Žižek did to Lenin. This should be so especially because it means that repeating Althusser is not merely repeating a philosopher, but a militant who *also* did philosophy. It means not giving up on the idea that theory and philosophy must always keep in mind the sort of identifications it will allow for in the positioning of the political militant. The preliminary answer will take the form of the conclusion to this paper. Althusser is the name of the failure of every philosopher to rethink Marx and therefore Marxism and Communism without Hegel.

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# On Althusser

## Roger Establet

I had already read *Capital* twice, but always in order to research arguments and to situate myself in one or another of the Marxist-Leninist orthodoxies. In this way, within the communist section of Bastia, where I taught philosophy, we had organized a conference on salaries two years earlier, inspired by a text written by Maurice Thorez<sup>1</sup> on absolute pauperization that Marx's *Capital* cites. Throughout the discussion, a communist dockworker, on the basis of his own experience, had formulated serious doubts about this generalized fall of income.

In the professorial hall of the Marboeuf College, a colleague, historian of Corsica, Pierre Sim<sup>2</sup>, whom reached the echo of our statistical improvisations, summoned us.

- Salary! You know what the salary was at the time of my father? Men waited at the village square. The property landlord arrived and chose with his finger some of them: "you! You! You! And You!" Four jobs had been assigned, seven others would wait till tomorrow for a possible salary.

Maurice Thorez, whose son Paul would, from time to time, join us at the Louis-Le-Grand College, in a beautiful limousine, was able to better perceive the evolution of income.

We had undertaken to read *Capital* philosophically like Alquié, Gouhier or Guérout taught us to read Descartes, Rousseau or Spinoza, by bracketing all the current political problems: no question to confuse the text and its posterior interpretations. Althusser did himself give an example of this in his magnificent book on Montesquieu<sup>3</sup> and in his unforgettable course on Machiavelli. In this classical way we liberated our reading from all orthodoxies. And in the end we discovered a system of luminous concepts that allowed for the examination of history in a coherent and open manner. A problematic, to use a term dear to Louis Althusser.

And just in the moment when we planned *Reading Capital*, Bourdieu published an admirable analysis of the quest for independence of social classes in Algeria.<sup>4</sup> The explicit reference to Marx was rare, but this was the territory where the problematic of *Capital* had to guide us: "the concrete analysis of concrete situations." Thanks to Althusser's support, the admiring review of Bourdieu's work that I wrote could appear in "La Pensée,"<sup>5</sup> a Party journal.

Since then, I allowed myself, with others, mainly Christian Baudelot, to experiment with the Marxian problematic – in good company – on those terrains most relevant to it. And, following this laborious pathway, one is far from forming simplistic ideas about the societies under study, including our own: sometimes the essential data is missing, sometimes one also encounters researchers in the field who were guided by other

problematics than Marx's and who passionately highlighted the facts to properly illuminate the class struggles. I am thinking here, among others, of the sociologist of labor, Renaud Sainsaulieu, inspired by Crozier and Touraine and by the work on a long term project on the Ouvriers Spécialisés OS6, and I am certainly also thinking of Marie Duru-Bellat and Alain Mignat, whose works, broadly inspired by Raymond Boudon, has contributed to bringing school sociology closer to the everyday performances of teachers and their students.7 These discoveries about our capitalist societies should lead us not only to re-read Capital, but to reinforce the construction of a problematic that integrates the new discoveries about capitalism, particularly the discovery of human capital, which plays an essential role in production and whose reproduction very intimately concerns the class struggle in the imperialist metropolises, as Bourdieu and Passeron have shown.8 In a country like France the dividing line between social classes cannot only be defined by the inequalities of economic resources: one has to include "cultural capital", its hereditary transmission and its economic efficacy. This is an enormous, eminently collective work and one realizes that, Marxist or not, one is far from having a general theory of history and even further from disposing of a dreamlike vision of the future of societies. The 1970s renewal of the interest in the great text of Lenin9 about imperialism has rendered the task of social-class-analysis more passionate and even more difficult: today the social formation takes place on a global scale. And it is on this scale that one has to assess the contradictions without situating oneself in the petty frontiers of nations. And who knows if the rights that have been acquired by the popular classes in the imperialist metropolises are not also redistributed privileges? In any case, in 2010 the average income of 50% of the poorest French was attained or topped only by 0,6% of Indian households.10 And France is not the richest imperialist metropolis and there are southern countries that are poorer than India.

Vested in these researches, the Marx of *Capital* continues to inspire analysis and indicates paths of social transformation, even if the orthodoxies that have emerged have luckily faltered.

Roger Establet  
September 2015  
*Translated by Frank Ruda*

- 1 Thorez 1961.
- 2 Pierre Simi had realized a detailed study of "le Nebbio", an agricultural region in the North of Corsica and in 1981 he had published a reference book on the whole geography of Corsica.
- 3 Althusser 1959.
- 4 *Travail et travailleurs en Algérie*, in collaboration with Alain Darbel, Jean-Paul Rivet et Claude Seibel (Paris: Mouton 1963).
- 5 LA PENSÉE No 121 01/06/1965 -
- 6 Sainsaulieu 1988
- 7 Bellat & Mingazt 1997.
- 8 Bourdieu & Passeron 2000 .
- 9 Emmanuel 1962 & 1966; Magdoff 1975.
- 10 Jaffrelot 2012.

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# Interview with Pierre Macherey

## Agon Hamza & Frank Ruda

*Can you tell us a bit about the project of reading Capital at the École Normale Supérieure (under the direction of Althusser)? The manner in which it was initiated but also about your own engagement within this project?*

PM: Initially it was a research seminar, following those that Althusser had organized in the years before for the students of the École. The theme of this seminar was “Capital” and the very particular problems that reading this book posed, which was, Althusser thought, unlike others not really “introduced” in France, that is to say, if it was, this was only on the basis of a whole series of misunderstandings that were linked to the political history of French society and to the manner in which the workers movement was developed and organized within it that this book was directly of any interest. This project covered thus two territories at the same time: one was academic (it was a matter of knowing if this work of Marx is open to a “philosophical” reading, of the type that one was for example able to apply to the metaphysical Meditations of Descartes), the other was more conjunctural (it was a matter of evaluating, through the particular case of the reception of Marx in France, the possibilities of a socio-political change, in the sense of the revolutionary *Veränderung* of which he speaks in the Theses on Feuerbach). It was not self-evident to follow these two goals together: the only way to arrive there was to practice a way of moving that was free, open to paths of diverse research without any preconceived idea. This is what happened: the seminar took place in the usual manner, everyone provided his own contribution in which he invested his own competences, his curiosities, and his own interests; this is why there was a certain heterogeneity in approaching the problems that came up without any worry of completely resolving them, in some way seeing what happened and in each and every case proceeding in a largely improvised manner. When, in the following year, Althusser decided to assemble the texts that were presented in the framework of the seminar to make them appear together as a volume in the “Theory” collection, in which he had just published his “For Marx”, he himself had to try to give a more systematic appearance to this disparate ensemble, whose heterogeneity generated a richness that was not without a certain qualitative dissimilarity between the diverse contributions, as it is the case with any research that is conducted in a group. To this end Althusser had written afterwards, that aimed to give this collection the appearance of a book that forms a coherent whole, the long introductory text entitled “From Capital to the ‘philosophy’ of Marx” where the hypothesis of the “symptomatic reading” is introduced, constituted the central theme of this text.

This new presentation considerably changed the former spirit of work, which, in this moment, followed the logic not of a system but of a trial, in the sense that it was a free exploration whose goal was not fixed from the start. For my part, I had presented a contribution “On the process of the exposition”, which dealt with a particular point, as well as, in the background, with the general question of the “beginning in philosophy”: this was a working sketch that I had formulated back then in preparation for a PhD in philosophy with Jean Hyppolite, at that time head of the ENS, who sympathetically followed the movement of Althusser and his students. This contribution proposed certain hypotheses that could not pretend to present anything of a completed nature: it was the typical move of an advanced student who, after years of preparing for exam after exam, threw himself into personal research which, as soon as it had begun, was far away from attaining any definite results. Now, with fifty years of distance, I reread this contribution and I saw all its imperfections, which stand out all the more because it survived in a context which, in itself, had taken in reality or in appearance a much stronger consistency than my reflection at that moment was able to attain, that is, by the way, had not even sought to do so. When, afterwards, I was presented under the title of “co-author” of *Reading Capital*, I could not avoid feeling a certain malaise, for, to be honest, when I intervened in this enterprise at my level, this was not so much as an “author” per se, but, and this is not exactly the same thing, as a contributor. Actually, *Reading Capital* does not have but a single author: it is Althusser, who because he had collated this book on the basis of work-documents that had been sent to him, generated a completed oeuvre for which he bears the complete responsibility.

*What were the effects of the publication of this book in the intellectual scene in France at these times?*

PM: When it was barely out, the book generated a lot of interest because of the new tone it conveyed and because of the relative novelty of the themes it took on in a form which avoided as far as possible to resort to the stonewalling language of the university, which rendered it accessible to the general public. Particularly, it was engaged in the discussion on humanism, which at the moment of its publication had turned virulent. The “intellectual scene” at this time, as you called it, was dominated by the dawn of structuralism and by the decline of a certain Sartreanism. In this environment, the manner in which Althusser linked philosophy and politics under the label of “Theory” could appear to be original and provoked

a fashion, even a passion which lasted just until 1968, when he came to be the target of attacks, which in the following years came from all fronts and became more and more vehement: he himself inflected his move, preparing to clear the traces of any theoreticism, that infected him. But, and this is the most important point, the effects that “Reading Capital” produced have largely overflowed the French “scene”: its diffusion was also quite broad, especially in Latin-America; the book was translated pretty much in all languages (with the exception of Russian and Chinese!) and the movement was never interrupted: it even goes on today. If this book still exists today and was even metamorphosed into a sort of myth, it was because of this international audience which received it quite rapidly and which subtracted it from the all-too French debates, making even more noise while unfolding itself in a kind of fish bowl, in an auto-referential manner.

*3. Could we speak of an Althusserian moment in French philosophy? Could we say that the publication of “Reading Capital” and “For Marx” created such a moment? Or do you think, on the contrary, that such a characterization is problematic?*

PM: If the moment existed it did not last long. But the force of Althusser has survived this moment: his reception was taken beyond “Reading Capital” and it remains fundamentally open for any new research perspectives. His principal preoccupation was to arrive at another way of doing philosophy, by taking it outside of the closed frame of academic speculation and in particular making it benefit from the provisions that came from the human sciences, he was one of the first to do this in France. It is this concern which traverses the whole of his work and gives it a unity, in spite of the quite disparate character of his interventions. For him, philosophy was thought returning to itself, not in the empty heaven of pure ideas, but in a certain conjuncture, in view of producing practical and political effects: from this point of view, the author that had guided him as much as Marx did, which had constantly preoccupied him, is Machiavelli, to whom he dedicated many texts, which apart from their obvious incompleteness, are very interesting. It is regrettable that they are rarely known and studied.

*4. If seen retrospectively, could you clarify to us the way in which you would characterize the singularity of Althusser’s intervention, primarily in the po-*

*litical context of his time and his impasses, but maybe also the philosophical and scientific novelty which this moment has produced?*

PM: From the very beginning Althusser was shifting in relation to what you call “his time”, which he tried to overcome in revolutionary spirit. He wanted, and this is what is often explicitly repeated, to “make things move”. Did it happen? Yes and no. His attempt to give a new spirit to the French Communist Party by means of philosophy failed manifestly: and what had limited his approach is probably the fact that he made of the PCF, which was already on the verge of its decline, the principal target of his interventions. From this point of view, I think that he proved a certain blindness. He ought to have searched for other interlocutors, rather than the political heads, whose visceral workerism and the corporatism, which was its correlate, was the grounds for all its fundamental moves, that they were totally incapable of renouncing, which ended by costing them a lot. In the properly French context the political assessment of Althusser is thus far from generally positive. But one must not imprison oneself in this context, whose constraints he knew to force. In spite of the drift in which he dragged in for personal reasons, that he himself depicted in his autobiography “The Future Last Forever”, which was published after his death, he arrived difficulty at times, and even with more and more difficulty, to rebound and relaunched his move in new directions. It is this constant relaunch of his thought that never fixated on definitive acquisitions that bring about the principal interest in his work. For Althusser, Marxism was not a closed doctrine but a field of investigation, a “continent”, whose exploration Marx had begun, but which he was far from accomplishing the tour. And the effort of Althusser had been precisely to push further this exploration, to displace its lines, to make its theory while moving within it in the sense of what he called “theoretical practice.” At first, his idea was that what is lacking in Marxism is philosophy, and it is precisely this philosophy of Marx, which Marx himself did not develop, whose contours he had started to outline in his “For Marx”. Then he emphasized a new type of problem with respect to the notion of ideology, a question to which he attributed, as Gramsci did, a primordial importance, but which he took on with different instruments (and particularly those which were provided by psychoanalysis). He had understood that it is not enough to criticize ideology for its theoretical weakness: one also has to try to consider it from the point of view of its practical effects, which makes it into what one should call an acting social force and not only into something belonging to the “superstructure”, a veil of illusion that lies over reality and masks

it. And then he sought to tackle another lacuna in Marxism: its forgetting, its denial? of the problem of subjectivity. What type/kind of subjects are needed by capitalism? What kind of procedures of subjection does it use in the framework of the very social relations it installs? This interrogation lies at the heart of the text on the ideological state apparatuses, which is to my mind with “For Marx” and his works on Machiavelli the grand contribution of Althusser to contemporary thought. This unfinished text, which to a great extent is enigmatic, today still has a great force because in another language it intersects with the preoccupations that were at that time those of Foucault and Bourdieu. If there is today still an interest in reading Althusser, it is in this direction where one should turn.

*5. There was a particular sort of contemporaneity between Althusser's interventions on one side and Lacanian psychoanalysis, the French rationalist epistemologies and the new spirit of Maoism on the other. At which point, according to you, was “Reading Capital” related or itself conditioned by these other practices?*

PM: The relations between Althusser and Lacan were grounded in the beginning on a misunderstanding, tactically assumed by each of them: it was just simply the case that for circumstantial motives they needed each other at a certain moment, which created an apparent complicity between them, of which they personally were not fooled. But very quickly, it became manifest that their interests were not situated on the same level and were even rather divergent. What is real here is Althusser's constant interest in psychoanalysis: this interest made him into a kind of UFO in the world of French Marxists and particularly in the mind of the communist heads for whom Freud was the devil in person, the incarnation par excellence of bourgeois ideology. One of the goals of Althusser was to make it understood that Freud enabled a better reading of Marx, not because the one or the other are saying the same thing, but precisely because of their undeniable disparity which is fertilizing, intellectually stimulating, creating new ideas. Regarding the epistemology that was at that time practiced in France and that I prefer to call historical epistemology rather than rationalist epistemology, it was essentially represented by Bachelard and Canguilhem, whose writings interested us enormously and which we read certainly in a quite tendentious way. Retrospectively, I realize that Canguilhem, who has played a very important role in my own formation, must have been astonished by the way in which we interpreted

his works, drawing on them in a sense that was not the one he himself decided to start from (he was on the side of Neo-Kantianism, which then blended into Nietzscheanism, an explosive mixture!): but, as he was a very open spirit, he did not oppose this interpretation and even partially authenticated it in his book “Ideology and Rationality in the History of the Life Sciences”. As for Maoism, in the largely delirious forms that it took in France, this is an extremely complicated matter: the relation Althusser had with this movement to which he was in certain respects and in certain moments quite close, had been constantly tense, traversed by suspicion and by unfounded accusations. I would be tempted to say that they were formally of the same nature as those which, on the other side, Althusser had maintained with Lacan, of whom one nowadays understands that he was the great conservative thinker of this time, which does not at all diminish the interest that one can have in his writings.

6. *Althusser began inter alia by emphasizing a hypothesis according to which the Marxism of his time developed by a problematic representation of Marx. That is to say, he did not only seek to reinterpret Marx – bringing to the fore a new reading of him and a new method of reading – but it also was at the same time important for him to transform Marxism in its totality or as such. Later in his life, he considered his philosophical project a failure. Would you confirm Althusser’s judgment? And if this is the case, what kind of failure are we here dealing with? If not, how could we defend his project, even against his own evaluations?*

PM: There are failures, which, if one considers the other side of the page, where they are consigned, are successes. That the attempt of Althusser, who by the by does not display a homogeneous character and is not self-enclosed upon himself, has not led to results that could be considered to be definitive absolutely does not bother me, on the contrary. If Althusser is still interesting today it is because he had put into circulation a certain number of problems which had been of little interest before him. Certainly, he was not the only one to do this in his time. There was Foucault, Bourdieu, to whom I just referred; there was Deleuze and Guattari, Derrida, who did not employ the same thought-instruments as Althusser and who launched, on their part, lines of investigation whose orientations, without converging with it, intersected in certain points with those followed by Althusser. There is today someone like Judith Butler, who has revived the question of subjectivization in new ways, between psychoanalysis and politics. What one has to do is to confront these approaches,

to make them react each against the other, to see what comes out of them being put into relation. I believe there remains a lot to do in this sense.  
7. *How can we conceive of the object of Capital today, under the view of all the things that changed in the 50 years after “Reading Capital”?*

PM: The book of Marx seems to me more than ever topical, under the condition that one undertakes a very close reading, using optical instruments in a different manner: rereading Marx in the light of Foucault, for example, is a particularly fruitful undertaking, as I have explained in the study “The productive Subject”, which I reprinted in my book “The Subject of the Norms”. From this perspective, the project that was initiated by Althusser in “For Marx” still has a meaning, under the condition that one renounces to consider Marx as the author of a thought *sui generis*, coherent and final, which is only possible if one drastically simplifies the expected outcomes. Althusser was often accused of dogmatism, while for him Marxism was an approach completely without doctrinal character. In presenting work hypotheses that were very innovative under the sensational name of “theses”, he contributed to the creation of the conditions of this misunderstanding: but one has to try to read between the lines, to make a symptomal reading of it, which tracks down what is not-said, the lacunas, from a perspective of relaunching them. This being said, knowing how to conceive the object of Capital today, as you ask, cannot but be the result of collective research, which has today begun from different sides, but that is lacking a unifying element. What is painfully missing today in the sphere of theoretical research is a culture of collective labor, which allows for renewing the disparate threads. For my part, I think that this should be done in a different way than what one calls the “return to Marx”, as if Marx is going to “return”, with the posture of the supreme savior: return, this means a return backwards and this is hardly exciting. It is clear that one can no longer read Marx today as one read him fifty years ago, which would among other things, mean that one has not learnt anything in the interval. The task that one has to set for oneself and it is far from simple, is to reinvent Marx, a new Marx, who responds to the questions of our time, to that of globalization, the importance of which he had himself perceived at a moment when this phenomenon had hardly begun to appear, but that today is raised on another level, with an intensified urgency.

8. *Do you think that we are able to perform a symptomal reading of “Reading Capital”? And if so, what might such a reading reveal to us? What are*

*its displacements and lacks, given the fact that Althusser never used this concept in his later work again?*

PM: If there is a reading to be done of “Reading Capital”, fifty years after, as I have just said, it cannot but be, symptomal. That is to say, consistently detecting in this enterprise its non-said, its lacks, its flaws, and attempting to understand what these are saying without saying it, or even it must take us to think beyond what is explicitly stated. This is the only means to go further and to satisfy the actual exigencies in a world that is in full transformation: this happens so quickly that one barely knows where one is in it. It seems to me that Althusser, if one performs a critical reading of him and not a pure memorial celebration, can still supply a certain number of conceptual landmarks and elements of intellectual stimulation in which to situate oneself.

*9. How could the Althusserian theory of a new science of history be developed in view of the new conceptual means developed by recent sciences?*

PM: One cannot today ascribe the same value and the same weight to the word “science” that one could 50 years ago. The sense of this word is displaced. It is clear that the theoretical use that one made of it back then served as a kind of cover, to guarantee legitimacy and truth. One cannot see things like that anymore. Althusser, not without a certain brutality, tried to eliminate the frontier between science and politics, which is how he, without being aware, renewed Platonism: this attempt assigned, at least one can interpret it in this way, a powerful position to the regime of the Idea, making of society, albeit imperfect, an incarnation of spirit. This was not reasonable. Yet, is there nothing left of a “science of history”?” What can be saved perhaps is the representation of history as one continent of an entirely separate reality, with its own necessities that are called modes of originary conceptualization. Someone like Foucault, who is quite Nietzschean, mistrusting the reference to science, has gone quite far in this direction and I think that it might be interesting to turn to this side to revivify the research in this domain of society and its history, a research to which Marxism has a lot to contribute.

*Translated by Frank Ruda*

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Wiesmueller, the Vienna-Berlin-based Althusserian group "Allgemeinheit Zwei" ("Generality Two"). The group engaged in 1987 in the students' and workers' strike against the first bunch of austerity measures in Austria. It fought a couple of friendly theoretical battles with the Ljubljana Lacanian group and organized, in 1994, the conference "The Althusser Effect" at the French cultural institute in Vienna (participants, amongst others: Alain Badiou, Mladen Dolar, Jacques Rancière, Renata Salecl, Slavoj Žižek). Pfaller's publications include the books *The Pleasure Principle in Culture. Illusions Without Owners* (Verso, 2014) and *Wofuer es sich zu leben lohnt. Elemente materialistischer Philosophie* (Fischer, 2011). In 2007 he won the "Missing Link" award of the Psychoanalytic Seminar Zurich for connecting psychoanalysis with other scientific disciplines.

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