

Encountering Althusser

Politics and Materialism in
Contemporary Radical Thought

Edited by

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Introduction: Encountering Althusser

A detour of theory

The work of Louis Althusser and his associates in the 1960s and 1970s attempted to rethink the philosophical and political potential of Marx's thought. The publication in 1965 of *For Marx* and *Reading Capital* quickly took on the dimensions of a genuine event, both for Marxist theory and in the wider critical intellectual culture, not only in France, but internationally. On the one hand, those two volumes proposed a renewal of Marxism by means of its elaboration as a rigorous theoretical research programme in critical dialogue with, but possessing its own relative autonomy from, left-wing political practice and organisation; on the other hand, these interventions combatively declared the emergence of a current of Marxist theory with ambitions to measure itself against the most advanced theoretical developments that had occurred outside the Marxist tradition in the twentieth century, as a mode of 'immanent politicisation'. This operation aimed to strengthen the materialist tendency within Marxism, detaching it from economistic and evolutionist deformations and all idealising figures of reconciliation. Althusser's attempt to write a philosophy for Marx purified of onto-theological remainders began as a search for a non-Hegelian dialectic without guarantees, but soon led him to undertake a series of theoretical 'detours', passing by way of limit-readings of Marx with political philosophers of the eighteenth century (Montesquieu, Rousseau) and, subsequently, those belonging to what he would come to call a forgotten 'underground current' of materialist thought (Epicurus, Machiavelli, Spinoza, Hobbes, later supplemented with Heidegger, Derrida, Wittgenstein and Deleuze). What emerged from this line of research was a differential and topological analysis of societies within the capitalist mode of production and a radically renewed theory of ideology, inspired in part by another long theoretical detour he continuously made throughout his intellectual life, via Lacan's return to Freud.

The style of thought and sometimes contradictory substantive theses that came to be known as 'Althusserianism' rapidly developed into one of the most influential intellectual paradigms that defined the politico-theoretical conjuncture of pre- and post-1968. It gave rise to a wide variety of new initiatives in many disciplinary fields, on an international scale. Equally as significantly, the prominence of Althusserian themes and approaches stimulated a series of vigorous debates in which the main coordinates of the 'contemporary radical thought' of those years were delineated.

Yet the theoretical dimension of Althusser's work was always directed toward political ends. Althusser's attempt to 'reinvent' Marxism as a sophisticated theoretical paradigm was never an end in itself. Rather, his 'detour of theory' aimed to stimulate political renewal in the French

and international communist movements in the long decade straddling 1968. His fidelity to the French Communist Party (PCF) and the model of party organisation as such was not without ambivalence. On the one hand, Althusser's criticism of economistic, evolutionist and revisionist positions from within the PCF had the effect of convincing many young activists to stay within a party from which they may otherwise have departed. On the other hand, his interventions were also taken as providing support, albeit not without contradictions, for breaks with communist party orthodoxy, particularly by those attracted to Maoism. While remaining within the PCF, and keeping his distance from traditions to the left of it, Althusser issued increasingly stronger criticisms of his party from the 1960s onwards, until he sought open conflict in the late 1970s, claiming that the party leadership attributed to itself 'the ideological guarantee of a kind of Absolute Knowledge', even to the extent of 'reproducing in the Party itself, in the difference between its leaders and its militants, the structure of the bourgeois State'.¹

Changes in the political conjuncture in the 1980s – coinciding with personal tragedy in Althusser's own life, when he killed his wife H el ene Rytman in an act inexplicable to himself² – saw an increasing marginalisation of his work and the debates associated with them. Many of the themes explored in Althusser's work, such as the critique of essentialism, humanism, teleology and philosophies of the subject, remained important reference points for philosophical discussions. However, the Althusserian initiative's distinctive articulation of theoretical practice with a specifically Marxist form of political engagement increasingly appeared to many to be unable to confront the new challenges of the 'crisis of Marxism' (ironically, announced by Althusser himself), and a new politico-philosophical conjuncture marked by the rise of various 'post-socialisms' and 'post-Marxisms'. The 'moment of Althusser', it seemed, had definitively passed; as 'a transitional formation, the product of a very specific theoretical and political conjuncture whose mutation helps to explain its fate',³ Althusser's thought was consigned to the past, a remnant, to which one could seemingly only return in a nostalgic way.

Renewals

Recent years, however, have witnessed a renewed interest in Althusser's thought, as a younger generation of researchers interpret it in very different forms.⁴ In the first instance, this is due to the prominence of some of Althusser's former students and those influenced by him in contemporary critical thought, such as Balibar, Ranc  re, Macherey, Badiou, Žižek, Laclau and Butler. The themes developed by these authors, also and perhaps even most significantly in their criticisms of and departures from classical Althusserian positions, have allowed hitherto neglected elements of the original Althusserian synthesis to become visible. Among the most significant of these themes, one could mention the problematic status of theoretical anti-humanism in a period of the 'return of the subject', notions of ideological subjection and interpellation, of over- and underdetermination and articulation, and the relationship between structure and conjuncture. These discussions have indicated the extent to which seemingly settled debates of the past still have the potential to engage critical energies in unforeseen and productive ways.

Perhaps even more importantly, the posthumous publication of some of Althusser's writings from different stages in his intellectual development, published in English under the

titles of the *Humanist Controversy and Other Writings* and particularly the so-called 'late' writings collected in the *Philosophy of the Encounter*,⁵ has encouraged an intense international discussion and debate of Althusserianisms old and new. The central topics of these debates have ranged from the reformulation of conflicting notions of materialism, of the 'encounter' as both philosophical concept and political construction, of the nature of politics and the political, to the internal cleavages in Althusser's thought itself. The late Althusser's variously entitled 'materialism of the encounter' or 'aleatory materialism' can be regarded as a deepening of some of the most productive perspectives of the original Althusserian moment, particularly in the way it offers many points of contact for a dialogue with thinkers associated with contemporary radical thought in its different affiliations, ranging from post-structuralism to post-workerism, deconstruction, left-Heideggerianism, among many others. At the same time, Althusser's formulation of these themes arguably maintains a stronger connection to the Marxist tradition than many recent post-Marxisms, particularly in terms of his continuing affirmation of the dictatorship of the proletariat, the primacy of politics and the articulation of economics and politics in a theory of the social whole. Representing a novel philosophical position in its own right, the 'untimely' arrival of the late Althusser's thought has thus intersected with and strengthened a widespread revival of interest in the history of Marxism and its possible contemporary forms of inheritance.

Returning to Althusser

In his later years, Althusser explored what he called an 'underground current' in the philosophical tradition, 'the materialism of the encounter', attempting to free it from its historical repression. Concepts such as the encounter, the swerve and the take [*prise*] became for him a type of golden thread linking such diverse thinkers as Spinoza, Machiavelli, Hobbes, Rousseau, Marx, Heidegger and Derrida in their search of a materialism freed from necessity and teleology. Even more importantly, Althusser's specific encounter with these authors and problematics enabled him to open up new and unexplored trajectories within his own work.

The encounter with Althusser that we propose in this volume is motivated by a similar need: namely, the need to free the thought of Althusser from the repression to which it was subjected until recently, in the long decades of post-Marxisms and the *pensée unique*. Yet given Althusser's subterranean influence on so much of contemporary radical thought, this encounter today can only take place in the form of a 'return', understood in the specific sense in which his own work was conducted as a return to, or ongoing encounter with, Marx and Marxism.

For Althusser, a return to a thinker and the way one reads an intellectual source is never innocent or obvious. With reference to Spinoza, Althusser ceaselessly emphasised that one can read neither a text nor the world in the transparency of their givenness; on the contrary, their internal dislocations reveal any immediate reading to be a religious myth, a 'yearning for a reading *at sight*'.⁶ Consequently, at stake in any return is not simply the repetition of a theoretical formula or its application in such a way one would forever circulate in the fictive immediacy of an originary text, but rather, the reinvention of a philosophical and political wager. Thus, in his return to Marx, Althusser's principal aim was to think Marx in his historical context, thereby enabling readers to put Marxism into effect in their own times.

At the same time, by grasping the theoretical repetition of an author as his or her differentiation – in short, by knowing that to do it again is to do it differently – Althusser turned to one of the great theoretical problematics of French critical thought in the second half of the twentieth century: namely, the return to a tradition in order to undo it from within, intensifying its productive contradictions in the act of seeking to efface them. One need only think of Lacan's return to Freud, in order to analyse repetition as return of enjoyment, as its surplus stepping over the limits of the pleasure principle and seeking an excess over life; Deleuze's return to Nietzsche, pinpointing the torsion immanent to repetition that makes nothing but difference recur; or Derrida's return to Heidegger's formula of being as ecstatic difference to itself, in order to understand the disseminating deferral of difference. Althusser's texts on Marx's philosophy reverberate with similarly diverging formulas of a repeating reinvention.

Both the originality and aporia of Althusser's return to Marx can be partially traced back to a very peculiar combination of an epistemological with a 'deconstructive' strategy of reading. While Bachelard presupposed that a new scientific approach occurs unreservedly, by destroying the entire metaphorical texture of errors characterising previous positions in a theoretical field, a deconstructive understanding of symptomatic reading finds in the old problematic the trace of the new one. The tension generated by this double understanding of the potential of a symptomatic study of an author made Althusser constantly repeat his return to Marx, until he finally encountered in him a finite and heterogeneous body of ideas that cannot be reduced to the purity of a theoretical rupture. Rather, it can only be comprehended in the complex construction of an unfinished concatenation of concepts, each opening a specific field of problematisation, each supplementing and differing from the other, across and within their 'breaks'; in other words, in the ongoing encounter that is the 'permanent revocation of the accomplished fact' of Marxism itself as an unfinished project.⁷

Encountering Althusser

The most recent volumes of critical commentaries on Althusser in English date from the early to mid-1990s, prior to the widespread availability of the late Althusser's texts in the Anglophone world in the last decade.⁸ This volume seeks to fill this significant gap.

The texts collected in this volume originated in contributions to an international conference hosted by the Theory Department at the Jan van Eyck Academy in Maastricht in October 2009. Additionally, a number of other authors were invited to contribute texts in order to compose a representative volume of contemporary Althusserian scholarship in different fields, in an international (admittedly, largely European) perspective. The division of the texts in four different sections aims to provide a survey of a significant dimension of Althusser's thought, while also representing an intervention into the existing forms of discussion of the Althusserian legacy.

Aleatory materialism and the philosophy of the encounter

The late Althusser's proposal of the philosophy of the encounter or an aleatory materialism has constituted one of the most fertile fields of investigation in Althusserian scholarship in recent years, giving rise to divergent and sometimes opposed readings regarding supposed continuities

and discontinuities in the development of Althusser's thought. Following the publication in French of Althusser's 'late' writings in the 1990s, one interpretative current attempted to argue for a break or even *Kehre* in Althusser's thinking, which abandoned the theoretical structure of *For Marx* and *Reading Capital*. More recently, another interpretation has emphasised continuities and attempted to demonstrate an on-going break in Althusser's thought, within and against itself, in an act of self-critical redefinition. Many of the texts in this section subject these readings to philological scrutiny, seeking to delineate the internal coherence of the late Althusser's incomplete texts, comparing them to his earlier positions, and identifying productive research fields that emerge from these encounters. Their unifying concern is to measure the extent to which aleatory materialism or the philosophy of the encounter can be interpreted and proposed as an intervention into the *Kampfplatz* of contemporary radical thought.

André Tosel's chapter considers the strengths and limitations of aleatory materialism. On the one hand, for Tosel the late Althusser successfully criticised the logocentric presuppositions of conventional materialisms. On the other hand, Tosel questions whether the new concept enabled Althusser to think the contingent relationship between ideology and class struggle and whether his heterodox genealogy of materialism ultimately ends up imitating traditional forms of philosophy. In a similar way, Panagiotis Sotiris's text focuses on aleatory materialism both in terms of its points of originality as well as in its contradictions. While Sotiris notes continuities with Althusser's earlier texts, for instance, in the insistence on non-historicism and on the need for a transformation of philosophical practice, he ultimately argues that the late writings's emphasis upon the importance of contingent encounters is a source of contradictions. The texts by Giorgos Fourtounis and Vittorio Morfino, on the other hand, offer examinations of the importance of Machiavelli for Althusser's definition of aleatory materialism. While Fortounis reads the Florentine Secretary's influence on Althusser through the lenses of the homology between the notions of 'aleatory encounter' and that of an 'absolute beginning' (both understood as notions of the radical emergence of a structured singularity or 'aleatory structuralism'), Morfino reads Althusser's Machiavelli through Darwin. For Morfino, it is the latter author who enables us 'to pose in a correct way the thesis of the primacy of the encounter over the form' and to refute Schmittian interpretations of the role played by Machiavelli in the late Althusser's aleatory materialism. The last two chapters of this section address the question of the thesis of the discontinuity, or even rupture, between the early and the later Althusser. Katja Kolšek's text argues that the relation between the epistemology of Althusser's earlier materialist philosophy and the supposed ontology of his later period consists in the void as the object of the parallax view, between overdetermination and aleatoriness. Finally, G. M. Goshgarian demonstrates the continuity between early and late Althusser by showing how Althusser's theory of the encounter, in which Spinoza's *Ethics* in particular played a pivotal role, is prefigured in work from the late 1950s to the mid-1960s. Albeit distinct from the materialism of the encounter he elaborated from 1972 onwards, Goshgarian's notion of an 'early late Althusser' sets out to indicate the existence of similar problematics throughout the period between 1959 and 1967.

Althusser's non-contemporaries

Althusser's theoretical production, in all of its phases, was marked by a series of encounters with significant 'others', from both within and outside the Marxist tradition. Simultaneously his

contemporaries and non-contemporaries, not simply in the sense of chronological proximity or distance but also in the sense of uniting and dividing concerns, Althusser's distinctive readings of these authors helped to define his own project to a much greater extent, and included a much wider range of authors, than is commonly recognised in existing critical commentary. Furthermore, particularly in Althusser's late writings, we can retrospectively discern 'subterranean currents' of influence of which even and especially Althusser was unaware, overdetermining his texts and opening them up to their productive incompleteness.

The contributions to this section of the volume trace the extraordinary conflictual richness of Althusser's practice of reading Marx by means of and through his non-contemporaries, who were at the same time Althusser's own *unheimlich* interlocutors. Mikko Lahtinen's chapter introduces Machiavelli as an author occupying a solitary key position in Althusser's philosophical topology. As the first theoretician of the political conjuncture, Machiavelli is important for Althusser due to his analysis of the conflictual relations of forces that compose a conjuncture and the 'occasions' it discloses for intervention. However, in comparison with Gramsci, Lahtinen argues, Althusser evades any concrete analyses regarding the political relationship of intellectuals and masses and the question of organisation. Similar themes are explored in Warren Montag's chapter, which approaches Althusser's Machiavelli through one of his encounters with Foucault, the marks of which are only legible in the margins of both authors' texts. Machiavelli, Montag claims, allowed Althusser to return to the problem of multiple temporalities posed in *Reading Capital*, in order to emphasise the production of the new over that of reproduction. Montag not only highlights the Althusserian resonances of Foucault's Machiavelli, but also discerns a tension in Foucault, oscillating between the idea that the prince is an impersonal integration of a conflictual field of forces and the figure of the prince's reintegration into a paradigm of sovereignty. Peter D. Thomas continues this effort to complexify Althusser's reading of different authors by revisiting his encounter with Gramsci. Thomas deconstructs Althusser's early criticism of Gramsci, claiming that rather than the Hegelianising model of the social totality attributed to him by Althusser, Gramsci instead presupposes the non-contemporaneity of the present and an anti-essentialist theory of trans-latability of politics, philosophy and history – a position to which the late Althusser seemingly comes close, in the interval of a distance taken, in his considerations of a non-philosophy to come.

In their respective chapters, Caroline Williams and Katja Diefenbach discuss the enduring presence of Spinoza throughout Althusser's work. Mapping the internal cleavages in Althusser's reading of Spinoza, Williams specifies the different usages made of his thought, in order to tackle epistemological, topological and ideological problematics. By highlighting the difference that Althusser introduces between the subject (subjected through interpellation) and the subject of the unconscious (subverting the first position), Williams emphasises in Althusser the concept of 'a subjectivity without a subject', which Alain Badiou has characterised as Althusser's 'intra-philosophical mark of politics'. Diefenbach, in a different perspective, refers to Deleuze in order to problematise the residual Hegelianism and instabilities in the idea of immanent causality in the early and late Althusser. Focussing on the category of intensive infinity in Deleuze, Diefenbach questions the extent to which traces of Lacan's causality of the impossible and the Heideggerian influences in the meta-ontological concept of the encounter developed by the late Althusser can be reconciled with Spinoza's idea of positive determination and dissimilar expression.

Finally, Sara R. Farris provides a comparative analysis of Tronti and Althusser's reflections on the state in the 1970s. In their proximity – both declared the crisis of Marxism and the insufficiency of Marx's theory of politics and state, criticised determinism and economism, and found Lenin's reflections on the nature of the state to be superior to Marx's – Farris detects a major cleavage. While Tronti affirmed state mediation as the only possible level of political confrontation, Althusser asserted in the late 1970s the primary role of the masses for a politics aiming to disable the state machinery.

Thinking production and reproduction

One of the central aims of *Reading Capital* was to contribute to the revival of a philosophically informed Marxist critique of political economy. At the same time, chapters in that book and many of the essays collected in *For Marx* explored themes related to different forms of political struggle and, in particular, the tradition of ideology theory. Classical Althusserianism was constituted by a productive tension between these dimensions of production and reproduction, without ever being able to offer a wholly satisfactory answer regarding the conditions of their relationship or, even more crucially, their transformation.

The texts in this section of the collection draw upon both classical Althusserianism and the late Althusser in order to think production and reproduction at the same time, in their distinction and unity, as integral elements of the capitalist mode of production. In particular, they aim to explore the resources that Althusser provides for reunifying perspectives from the critique of political economy and the critique of politics that are often divided in much contemporary post-Marxist thought. This section of the collection thus explores the extent to which Althusser's renovation of a Marxist critique of political economy has the capacity to interact productively with contemporary themes such as political anthropology, necessity versus contingency, class constitution and primitive accumulation.

The section opens with an analysis by Ceren Özselçuk focusing on Althusser's treatment of the concept of economy, which is scrutinised both in terms of the role Althusser ascribed to it in the development of Marx's critique of political economy and in terms of the tensions that the concept itself creates within Althusser's own work. Still remaining within the horizon opened by *Reading Capital*, Michele Cangiani's text analyses Althusser's problematic approach to the structure of the first volume of *Capital* in its productive frictions, that is, as a fruitful *misinterpretation* which allows a deeper understanding of the Marxian problematic. Moving to Althusser's texts of the late 1960s and 1970s, Frieder Otto Wolf highlights the problem of reproduction, emphasising in particular the anti-functionalist dimensions of Althusser's conjugation of the problem of the reproduction of the relations of production and the critique of domination. Finally, Jason Read's chapter considers Althusser's 'aleatory materialist' phase through the lenses of the category of primitive accumulation. Placing his thought at the crossroad of traditions which include Deleuze, Badiou and Negri, Read attempts to re-read primitive accumulation not just through an engagement with Marx, but with and against the dominant and underground currents within the history of philosophy.

The materiality of ideology, the primacy of politics

Althusser's work in the 1960s opened the way towards an exploration of the materiality of ideology, particularly in texts such as 'Marxism and Humanism' and the famous 'Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses' essay. Positioning ideology in terms irreducible to the consciousness of a subject or a class, Althusser provided elements for theory of the subject as a material effect of ideology, centred on the concept of 'interpellation'. However, this line of research on ideology was linked to the problem of thinking the state and its abolition in terms of the primacy of politics as a transformative instance that immanently ruptures the relations of production and reproduction of the capitalist mode of production. Subsequently some of the debates, criticisms and attempted inheritances of Althusser's thought have tended to assume a binary opposition in terms of thinking about Althusser's conceptualisation of the relationship between ideology and politics.

The texts in the last section aim to reunite the theorisation of ideology and politics in Althusser's thought, even and especially in its most problematic dimensions. The first text of Isabelle Garo provides a critical synthesis of recent discussions and a general theoretical introduction to Althusser's continual movement between ideology and politics. Pascale Gillot focuses on the question of ideological interpellation by means of a close reading and encounter with Spinoza and Lacan, arguing for a specific understanding of Althusser's concept of the subject. Rastko Močnik, on the other hand, attempts to supplement Althusser's work with concepts drawn from discourse-analysis that were absent or under-theorized in his theory of ideology. He also attempts to answer the question regarding the possibility of a theory of interpellation outside psychoanalysis and its potential articulation with a theory of politics. The last two chapters focus on Althusser's oscillating conceptions of philosophy and its relations to science and politics. Ozren Pupovac's chapter revisits Althusser's critique of the subject, stressing the importance of the eleventh of the *Theses on Feuerbach*, whereas Gal Kim attempts to defend a reading that moves between the tenth and eleventh theses, in the perspective of the project of a 'new materialism'. Taken together, these contributions emphasise the extent to which Althusser's famous theses on ideology can only be adequately comprehended in a perspective that foregrounds question of the political constitution of the social formation and class struggle.

Between return and encounter

Taken in its totality, this collection presents novel perspectives on the potentials, limits and contradictions of Althusser's thought, in its various phases. Combining philological studies of recently published texts with re-examinations of classical theses, alongside engagement with the key themes of broader contemporary philosophical and political debates, this volume aims to contribute to the growing recognition that Althusser's work represents not merely one of the most important historical sources of contemporary radical thought, but also one of its unresolved challenges. Ultimately, returning to Althusser today does not mean to repeat his return to Marx or other thinkers, but to understand how such a strategy of a return to the past can function as a 'theoretical laboratory' for encountering the forms of a possible intervention in the present.

Notes

- 1 'Marxism Today' (Althusser 1990a), p. 278. See also 'What Must Change in the Party', (Althusser 1978b).
- 2 See the autobiography *The Future lasts a Long Time and The Facts* (Althusser 1993d) for Althusser's attempt to give an account of his act.
- 3 Elliott, 1992, p. 34. Elliott further argued that Althusser's work, 'occupied a unique and precarious place in modern intellectual history between a tradition of Marxism, which he radically criticized and sought to reconstruct, and a "post-Marxism," which has submerged its predecessor, and in which the class of '68 has found its self-image' (pp. 33–4).
- 4 Monographs dedicated to parts or the entirety of Althusser's thought that have been published in recent years include Warren Montag's *Althusser* (Palgrave Macmillan 2002); Luke Ferretter's *Louis Althusser* (Routledge 2005); a new edition of Gregory Elliott's now classic study *Althusser: The Detour of Theory* (Brill/Haymarket, 2007) and Mikko Lahtinen's *Politics and Philosophy: Niccolò Machiavelli and Louis Althusser's Aleatory Materialism* (Brill 2009). The first issue of the international Althusser studies Journal *Décalages*, under the editorship of Warren Montag, was published in 2012.
- 5 Both published at Verso (2003 and 2006, respectively).
- 6 Althusser and Balibar 1970, p. 16.
- 7 Althusser 2006a, p. 174.
- 8 The three most recent collected volumes in English date from 1993 (*The Althusserian Legacy*, edited by Ann Kaplan and Michael Sprinker), 1994 (*Althusser: A Critical Reader*, edited by Gregory Elliott) and 1995 (*Postmodern Materialism and the Future of Marxist Theory: Essays in the Althusserian Tradition*, edited by Antonio Callari and David Ruccio), though the journal *Borderlands* dedicated an entire issue to the late Althusser's thought in 2005, edited by David McInerney. In France, shortly after Althusser's death, Sylvain Lazarus edited *Politique et philosophie dans l'oeuvre de Louis Althusser* (PUF: Paris 1993). *Sartre, Lukács, Althusser. Des marxistes en philosophie*, edited by Kouvelakis and Charbonnier (Paris: PUF 2005) is partly dedicated to Althusser. Jean-Claude Bourdin has more recently edited the collection *Althusser: une lecture de Marx* (Paris: PUF 2008). In Italy, papers from the international Althusser studies conference in Venice in 2006 were published in two volumes, in *Rileggere il Capitale* (2007) and *La lezione di Louis Althusser* (2009), both edited by Maria Turchetto.