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Between the tenth and eleventh theses on Feuerbach: Althusser's return to new materialism

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Introductory note: from 'aleatory materialism' back to...

The current revival of interest in Althusser has often taken shape through the re-appropriation of his late thought, or what Gregory Elliott has called, a phase of 'aleatory materialism'. There have been many heterogeneous approaches and interpretations that have struggled to determine the status of this 'aleatory move', and to demonstrate how Althusser's thought is still very contemporary in large part due to this final 'rupture' in his development. Undoubtedly, Althusser himself facilitated this reading with the use of new metaphors, which effectively erased the traces of previous dogmatic concepts. It is then pertinent to ask whether this was a sign of his final delirium, or a real theoretical transformation that needs to be taken seriously?¹ Can, then, his last phase be read as a testament to the crisis of Marxism and recognition of the final defeat of socialism?² This is a symptomatic turn, where the monstrous term of *dialectical materialism* disappears, while a brand new *aleatory materialism* spreads wings, fuelled by the post-Marxist turn that started taking shape during the 1980s and has continued ever since. There are, however, ironical conclusions that might be argued to follow logically from pressing this aleatory reading to an extreme: namely, does this narrative not suppose that Althusser encountered truth at the end of his path? In this case, would his late phase not constitute a specific revenge of what he suppressed in his early thought, a certain 'return of the repressed'? If he had so dramatically insisted on the demarcation of the Marxist legacy from the early Marx,³ does he not finally pay the price for this primary repression?

However, there is an important path, or red thread, that leads from this aleatory move to earlier ruptures in Althusser's thought. I would like to suggest that instead of suturing Althusser to this aleatory phase alone, we should instead read different ruptures in his thought together. Without the inherent tension and 'parallax view'⁴ of different phases of Althusser's thought it remains difficult to comprehend his incessant call for 'new materialism'. The true kernel of his

intellectual trajectory is to be found in the repeated attempt, to which he (re)turns again and again, to think both reproduction (causality) and revolutionary politics (contingency) at the same time, which is perhaps most explicit in his grappling with Machiavelli.⁵

The textual context of the red thread of these ruptures-in-thought is constituted by Marx's *Theses on Feuerbach*. It is also by reference to this text that I want to defend the most valuable contribution of Althusser's late phase, namely, his emphasis on theorising a perspective that is able to grasp novelty. Not merely in the sense of a 'symptomatic' strategy that would make certain elements and blind spots visible, Althusser tried to rethink the question from the perspective of the *fait à accomplir* [the fact to be accomplished]. This points to the temporal paradox of every novelty (politics), but also to a theoretical paradox of the object of every new science: something that is not yet there, but can be only asserted retroactively. This paradoxical alignment seems to be internal already to Marx's *Theses on Feuerbach*, the text that changes the course of Marx's trajectory. Balibar has recently argued that Marx's *Theses* have to be read as a set of contradictory but complimentary utterances on materialism and the temporality of revolution. To return to Althusser today cannot be understood without his return to Marx and their shared advocacy of 'new materialism'. In Balibar's words, 'if we are to still work with Marx today, then we need to 'identify with Marx at the distance'. This identification does not allow for embracing either side of the initial alternative of simple fixation on contingency (aleatory materialism) or else a return to some vulgar sort of dialectical materialism.⁶ The combative spirit, the rupture and the return to dialectics with and against Hegel is the only path that insists on and continues the call for a new materialism, which Althusser already forty years ago termed the 'materialist dialectic'.⁷

... the *Theses on Feuerbach*: announcement of rupture

The *Theses on Feuerbach* is perhaps the most visionary text that Marx ever wrote. Admittedly, they pose more problems than they manage to solve, but we should not forget that Marx never intended to publish them. Though they were written at the same time as the similarly unpublished *German Ideology* of 1845, they only served as a sketch, perhaps a draft, for further research. Their eventual publication constituted a genuine theoretical event, with the eleventh thesis becoming one of the most quoted and discussed theoretical sentences of all time. The sentence that was supposed to finish with all interpretation, with all previous philosophies, ironically triggered a flood of new interpretations, because it opened the strategic question for any emancipatory thought or materialism: how to think and invent the new link between theory and practice?

Althusser was no alien to the history of interpretations and interventions on the *Theses*. For him, they signal the break, or more precisely, they lay at the 'anterior edge of the rupture' that is fully developed in Marx's *German Ideology*.⁸ We could paraphrase him by saying that the *Theses* 'interpellate' us, because they function with a performative call to a new materialism that does not yet exist. In the following section I will explore Althusser's diagonal reading of the Tenth and Eleventh theses, to which Ernst Bloch ascribed central importance for understanding the place and task of dialectical materialism. The theoretical triangle philosophy-politics-science specific to Althusser's own project is condensed and located precisely between these two theses.

The tenth thesis: the struggle of materialisms, or One divides into two standpoints

The standpoint of the old materialism is 'civil' society; the standpoint of the new is human society, or associated humanity.⁹

Let us begin with the most obvious question: what, according to Marx, should be the kernel of a new materialism that breaks with both German idealism and Feuerbach's materialism? Marx's answers lie in a displacement of perspectives, overcoming the contradictions between *bürgerliche Gesellschaft* and *menschliche Gesellschaft*. Hegelian interpretations of this passage usually stress the temporal dimension, which is crucial for the formation of a new materialism. As Ernst Bloch says, 'only the horizon of the future, which Marxism occupies, with that of the past as the ante-room, gives reality its real dimension'.¹⁰ In a similar vein, the noted Slovenian Marxologist Božidar Debenjak reads this thesis as arguing that 'the standpoint of isolated individuals and bourgeois society should be overcome with new materialism'.¹¹ Undoubtedly the temporality of what some authors have named the *futur antérieur*, of 'not-yet-existing' materialism, is deservedly emphasised when reading this thesis. There is a certain contradictory coexistence, or rather productive tension, between temporalities that informs and marks any new materialist analysis. However, there is another possible path, which emphasises another, more Althusserian dimension and focuses on the term *Standpunkt*. As the term implies, it has to do with a spatial dimension, or more precisely with the search for a new theoretical topography, which later became a very heated discussion among Marxists.¹² The question of the theoretical space, of which discipline and the perspective from which we can see the 'object' is linked back to the question of temporality. The new materialist analysis addresses both: the temporality of the future, the theoretical and political space in the making, but also of material analysis of the past and present that needs to be grasped in a new way. Pierre Macherey argues that new materialism has to include both standpoints; not only is there a need for a historical analysis that enriches our understanding of the world, but also the horizon of the future already entailed in the transformation of the present: 'new materialism will have to include the standpoint of historical and social *praxis* and also be capable of rethinking the process of *Selbstveränderung* which relates to the real future of things and men'.¹³ This is Marx's real contribution, naming and understanding what Althusser would call the 'fait à accomplir', or change in progress.

First, Marx evokes the standpoint of *bürgerliche Gesellschaft* in order to conduct a specific historical analysis of bourgeois society and its ideology (free individual, autonomy of social spheres, production, bourgeois law), and then focuses upon the standpoint of human society. Marx makes a contradictory move that destabilises the very point of departure of historical analysis. The standpoint of 'human society' is speaking from the point of view of the future, from the 'not yet existing' community, or what will later be called communism. If one can easily dismiss this Marx as an evolutionary, linear thinker, even a romantic, the more important point is to retrieve the productive tension that is inscribed in the new materialism.

The standpoint of *bürgerliche Gesellschaft* was already at the time of the *Theses* a matter of the future, since Marx and his theoretical position had hitherto remained within the horizons of Feuerbachian philosophy. The *Theses* announced the break and detected the kernel of

Feuerbach's idealism in *abstract Man*. The latter possesses a generic essence, which according to Marx should not be posed as isolated, in itself, but as the 'ensemble of social relations'.¹⁴ Even if this move is clear or, *à la Althusser*, 'irreversible', Marx himself is not completely immune to the same criticism that he launched against Feuerbach. Can it be objected that he only substituted Feuerbach's humanism of Man with the humanism of society, with the abstract ideal of humanity, or in contemporary jargon, the *coming community*? Does Marx not fall behind his own critique and departure point? There have been different attempts to read in Marx merely an eschatologisation of humanity. As Macherey lucidly asks, 'is humanity proper not always-already existing no matter what the conditions?'¹⁵ In opposition to the liberal theoreticians of the social contract who projected their own ideal onto the past, in the 'state of nature', Marx projected the 'ideal of society' forwards to the future of communism. Nevertheless, there is one major difference. The theorists of the social contract referred to the 'state of nature' and to the contract as theoretical fictions, which remained necessary structural fictions that establish and support the existing state of affairs, the state founded upon bourgeois law. In Althusser's words, they theorised the political from the perspective of the 'accomplished fact' [*fait accompli*], positing the results before their analysis. In opposition to this, Marx's vision of the future society demanded a radical negation of the existing state of affairs, including the state, which should eventually be dissolved. Marx spoke from the perspective of a fact yet to be accomplished, from a temporality of the 'not-yet-existing'. But is this type of gesture, this utopian construction, not simply a continuation of the long tradition in philosophy from Plato and Thomas More to Marx's contemporaries Owen and Saint-Simon, who famously paved the way for the future, not-yet-existing, communist society? Or worse, could we not say that today, this futurist projection, which some authors have called an 'obsession with future',¹⁶ has become the normalising discourse of the self-realisation of individual desires, of the post-Fordist reorganisation of capitalist relations?¹⁷ However, for Marx the communist future was never either a capitalist or socialist utopian dream. His direct attack on a merely utopian construction of an 'ideal society' applied to the present comes to play an important role in the *Communist Manifesto*; but is already explicit in the third and fourth *Theses on Feuerbach*.¹⁸ Here, Marx argues that contradictions have to be destroyed theoretically and practically. This theoretical slogan is also a political maxim: communism is necessarily informed by the horizon of the future, but that implies real politics in the present, not endlessly waiting for a miraculous event. The young Marx equated communist politics with the abolition of private property, but in the *German Ideology* he defined communism as 'the *real* movement which abolishes the present state of things'.¹⁹ The ideal of human society is not constructed on the abstract ideal of humanity, but on the destruction of the existing state of affairs. Against a 'politics of philosophers' and utopian thinkers that posit and prescribe philosophical or moral norms to be applied in politics, he opens a path for an encounter between revolutionary theory and practice.

From a temporal standpoint to a theoretical standpoint

Perhaps even more than the other theses, the tenth thesis explores precisely this revolutionary encounter from a theoretical perspective. The fundamental theoretical problem of *new materialism* needs to be answered in terms of rethinking a relationship between philosophy and the science of history. In this respect, we can partially agree with Macherey's conclusion that 'it

is necessary to elaborate a concept which allows thinking together the determined (historical-social) and universal (the global, which prioritises the whole over parts).²⁰ According to Macherey, we can find the key for new materialism in a concept that speaks from the position of universal (communist society) *and* includes historical analysis. This thesis should be understood against the contemporary disjuncture between these two fields and perspectives, where historical analysis is excluded from political philosophy,²¹ or alternatively, where historical analysis simply speaks from the perspective of 'the accomplished fact', from the management of the possible state of affairs (affirming the dominant ideology). No matter how much we support this theoretical proposal of achieving a new materialism, it is difficult to imagine how this extremely complicated operation could be undertaken by one concept alone.²² Even if the concept of *Standpunkt* pushes in the right direction, it does not yet allow Marx to step out of the theoretical deadlock that he detected and to a degree maintained. It pertains to the tension and difference between science and philosophy. The whole history of Marxism could be read through focus on this question: from more traditional Marxist responses that argued for objectivism and the 'eternal' contradiction of the productive forces and relations of production (for example, Kautsky, economistic readings, Lukács) to a more subjectivist-messianic hope for the coming society (such as in Benjamin and Bloch). It is clear that Althusser himself did not supply a satisfactory answer, as many of his unpublished manuscripts on the topic of theory and practice testify. What is clearer is that Althusser's solution does not stake its fortunes on any single concept providing a universal solution, a formula that could be applied to all historical situations. *New materialism*, then, will contain both the reflection of the future society, the horizon of the universal, but also the historical analysis of the past and present situation. The 'parallax view', in this thesis, constantly moves between the standpoints of philosophy and historical analysis, which includes a certain risk, or rather a constant rethrowing of a dice for any new materialist enterprise. As against a priori knowledge or the external guarantee of teleology or the empiricism of facts, new materialism demands a theoretical apparatus that does not already know the results in advance.

Marx deployed the concept of *Standpunkt* to criticise the then-existing materialism, which, at its best, interpreted circumstances from a fixed standpoint of bourgeois society operating within the existing ideological horizons. Feuerbach's materialism conveys a critique of religion, which politically resulted in a separation of church from state and in the struggle for recognition of the political rights of man. In opposition to the old materialism, Marx assumes a different position that does not fall into the false dilemma of choosing *between theory and practice, thought and reality, object and subject*. The new perspective enables him to think together, or in the parallax way,²³ two different standpoints: the standpoint of the present analysis, what he will develop as the critique of political economy (the capitalist mode of production) and the standpoint of the future society, of the communist horizon. This is the point where my thesis runs close to the argument advanced by Lukács, who correctly observes that the capital is not a simple object. If capital were a simple object, then it would not be Marx's discovery, but could be simply ascribed to Adam Smith or David Ricardo. If we are to understand the militant Marx, then we need to understand how the universal dimension is inscribed in the very understanding of capitalist production. For Lukács, this is condensed in the point of negation of civil society, that is, in the proletariat as the real discovery of Marx.²⁴ It is the figure of the proletariat that provides an adequate response to Macherey's demand for a standpoint with a precise universalist concept. This is the place where old materialism splits into 'two' and

where, perhaps, the infamous history of historical and dialectical materialism begins. Althusser understands this theoretical shift as crucial for his return to Marx and for establishing the 'break' in which the *Theses* play an *avant-garde* role.²⁵

Althusser's conceptualisation of the break in the *Theses*

If we follow Althusser's reading closely, Marx's science of history does not yet exist in the *Theses*, because he only raises the topic of social relations and mode of production in the *German Ideology*.²⁶ The *Theses* are the point where Marx breaks with his own humanism; from this point on, there is no way back to his old materialist positions. The second rupture, the anticipation of a new philosophical practice, remained less important for the mature Marx, though still extremely relevant. The new philosophical practice was not only present in the standpoint of communism and the proletariat; it was also – and here, I argue against Althusser – constitutive for the analysis of the commodity and the value-form.²⁷ The necessity of a new philosophical practice was taken seriously by some Marxists, perhaps most notably (and often on opposing sides) by Georg Lukács and Louis Althusser.²⁸

Althusser's intervention, however schematic, has to be understood as a criticism of humanist Marxism and its appropriation of the young Marx.²⁹ To return to Marx's new materialism in the era of actually-existing materialisms, when materialism had become the dominant philosophical orientation, brought new challenges. In *For Marx*, Althusser detects two key ideological enemies, which he problematically labelled as 'Stalinism': the economistic deviation and the philosophical deviation ('humanism').³⁰ The first deviation was ascribed to vulgar Marxism (or liberal economics), which begins and ends its theoretical journey in terms of the primacy of the productive forces. The hidden kernel of 'economism' is embodied in a teleology of progress; its practical-political effects were crystallised in the rise of technocracy and the insistence on development of the industrial model and technology. The second deviation – Althusser's philosophical arch-enemy – is humanism, which functions along the dual lines of a 'dissident' critique of Stalinism, on the one hand, and a critique of consumerist capitalism, on the other. An unlikely alliance of ethical philosophers, humanists and phenomenologists tried to realise the essence of the human in socialism or capitalism with a human face.³¹ Instead of the primacy of the productive forces, we find the creativity of generic humanity and the alienation of modern society, which Althusser directly attacks in *Reply to John Lewis*. Finally, Althusser would argue that these deviations do not oppose each other, but constitute a scientific-philosophical duality that forms the One, which we could name the One of the actually-existing materialism.

Again, despite the schematic criticism expounded by Althusser, the call for a renewal of materialism is clear: to be a Marxist does not mean scholastically repeating Marx's quotes, but entails locating the limitations inherent to Marx himself.³² Althusser challenged the dominant Marxist standpoint of production. Due to the underdevelopment of Marxist theory of the state and ideology, and in light of the crisis of the communist project and theoretical tendencies, Althusser waged a battle for a new return, seeking to assume a new standpoint: the standpoint of new materialism becomes that of *reproduction*.³³ This conceptual shift, which assigns primacy to reproduction, implies that production is already split within itself. This also points to his reading of *Capital*, which shows that the capitalist mode of production is impossible

to understand without both the 'primitive accumulation' of capital, and also the element of the political (state and law as the machinery and mechanism for social reproduction).³⁴ More specifically, Althusser is interested in the functioning of ideology and ideological state-apparatuses. This involves a move away from the theory of commodity-fetishism as the sole ideological formation inherent to capitalist production,³⁵ and towards an understanding of ideological formation as a general reproduction of social forms, which goes against the theory of reflection.³⁶

Last but not least, the struggle for *new materialism* occurs on two levels: first, it is conceived as a critique of the dominant ideology and philosophical humanism; and second, as a critique of scientific revisionisms. In Althusser's conjuncture, the actually-existing materialism was based upon the standpoint of productive forces supplemented by the horizon of humanism, while Althusser's new tenth thesis is to be read as an encounter between reproduction (a new historical analysis) and the horizon of communism. This implies that a strategic link and tension between scientific and philosophical deviations is never without political effects. It also heralds the entry into the new field of politics, the move from the 'level of interpretation'. It is here that we find the strategic difference between the tenth and eleventh theses.

The eleventh thesis: to transform philosophy... and the world

The philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point is to *change* it.³⁷

Already the first reading brings to light an explicit inconsistency between the tenth and eleventh theses, but also a dramatic and, perhaps, even irreconcilable tension within the eleventh thesis itself. The eleventh thesis is a radical rupture: it performs the jump from the level of interpretation to the level of transformation and transformative politics.³⁸ Are these levels mutually-exclusive, in a specific relation of 'critical complementarity', or should one of the levels be simply abandoned, overcome at the expense of the other? Is Althusser's reaction to the eleventh thesis not a clear rejection, once we try to evaluate it in terms of his concept of 'theoretical practice'? Althusser wants to achieve the abolition of a schematic separation between (political) practice and theory, and ultimately bring theory under the primacy of practice. But already for Marx, the separation of theory and practice was not pertinent; he actually dissolved the old Aristotelian universe and distinctions of *praxis*, *poiesis* and *theoria*.³⁹

The rupture evoked in the eleventh thesis is not a simple logical consequence of the preceding theses, but rather an 'aspect change', which is irreversible and retains a specific relationship with both aspects.⁴⁰ Another important observation is condensed in the famous 'subject of change'. The eleventh thesis does not have the same subject as the tenth thesis, which referred to philosophy generally; rather, the eleventh thesis refers specifically to the community of philosophers and scientists. The subject of the eleventh thesis is the (in)famous *es* that remains hidden at first glance.⁴¹ Philosophy will perform a different role than that explained in the previous *Theses*.⁴² The eleventh thesis does not stop at a final opposition of two fields: philosophy (interpretation of the world) and politics (transformation of the

world). While some theorists and political activists saw in this thesis a call for the abolition of philosophy and the beginning of revolutionary practice, I will argue that this interpretation is incompatible with Marx's and Althusser's proposal for a new materialism.

The eleventh thesis has been subjected to many interpretations in the history of philosophy, but today it is perhaps most productive to intervene in the context of recent debates about the 'Communist Hypothesis'. Frank Ruda succinctly synthesises different readings of this short and enigmatic phrase. He categorises these readings into three distinct interpretative strands: transformative, reversing and exaggerate.⁴³ The first *transformative interpretation* advocates a new philosophy of practice, which has to replace the existing interpretation of the world; philosophy needs to think practice and not just remain stuck in salon-discussions, which merely circulate different ideas.⁴⁴ A typical representative of this interpretation was Ernst Bloch, who reads the eleventh thesis through the early Marx, relying upon a specific relation between the proletariat and philosophy: 'Philosophy cannot be realised without the abolition of the proletariat, the proletariat cannot be abolished without the realization of philosophy'.⁴⁵ The second *reversing interpretation* argues that to change the world means to interpret it differently; the world is constantly changing, so a different interpretation of this same change is needed. Adorno is the most visible supporter of this thesis, insisting upon the specificity of philosophical interpretation. Ruda ascribes the final, *exaggerated interpretation* to Žižek, who advocates the view that only through excessive, exaggerated reading are we able to intervene in the world; that is, we have to frame the meaning of the past (and the present) insofar as we want to influence the historical unfolding of events.

All readings agree that the point is to change the world, but each of them interprets this change in its own way.⁴⁶ One of the ways to explain their difference is to bring forwards their assessment of the relation between masses and ideas. How much distance or engagement should philosophy adopt in this respect? *Transformative interpretation* can be read as a 'leftist' deviation that sutures philosophy to politics; it is revolution that in 'the last instance' determines and also abolishes philosophy. This interpretation places its hopes in and devotes its organisational efforts to the coming proletarian revolution. It consciously acknowledges the primacy of practice and the organisation of social forces. The *reversing interpretation* is positioned at the political 'centre'. It advocates the defence of the autonomy of thought, which gives correct directions for political practice, which in turn executes changes. The relation between political and theoretical practice is, therefore, 'mediated'; a certain translation takes place between the fields. Finally, the *exaggerated interpretation* is closest to the 'rightist' deviation and advocates an enlightened role of philosophy that sutures politics to philosophy. In other words, the role of philosophy is not only that of giving directions, but actively intervening in the world; this position, in the last instance, gives primacy to theory over practice. It can be argued that the first and third interpretations do not acknowledge the distance between philosophy (as interpretation of the world) and politics (as changing the world). The *transformative interpretation* submits a philosophy of practice to a revolutionary goal, which will realise communism and philosophy, while the *exaggerated interpretation* subjugates politics to philosophy; philosophy is then without any distance to the world, which would leave us with a definition of philosophy-as-party. The *reversing interpretation* is the only one that maintains a distance; philosophy is assigned a relative autonomy and specific distance towards political practice. I will argue that in order to renovate the idea of communism, it is necessary to relate it internally to communist politics. This is possible only if we assess the movement from the tenth to eleventh thesis,

reading them together. It is this that constitutes the strategic theoretical nexus advanced by Althusser: the triangle between philosophy, politics and science.

Philosophy-politics-science and the oscillating definition of philosophy

Pierre Macherey argues that the eleventh thesis necessitates a completely new way of doing philosophy. Philosophy has to remodel the stakes, draw new demarcation-lines and find 'new means to transform itself, to enter in the play of *Selbstveränderung*'.⁴⁷ The standpoint of the new philosophy is, then, not *at a distance* from historical reality, but involves transformation, which entails an engaged position. Macherey's interpretation comes close to one of Althusser's pivotal definitions of philosophy, heavily influenced by his reading of Lenin. The task of any materialist philosophy is to declare war on all official ideologies and philosophies. Despite the similarities of both positions, however, there are some slight differences between Macherey and Althusser, which are of crucial importance.

Althusser wrote most directly on the eleventh thesis in his 'Note sur les *Thèses*', in the early 1980s.⁴⁸ The eleventh thesis needs to be observed from the perspective of the subject of the transformation, which is empty. It is not philosophers, or the philosophy of a 'new race' that will change the world. From this there follows a rather ambiguous conclusion: philosophy has to return to itself, it has to transform itself; only in that way will it be able to help to transform the world; in short, it is *at a distance*. Althusser's claim regarding distance seems paradoxical; perhaps one could even equate it with the Adornian *reversing interpretation* and its defence of the autonomy of philosophy. Althusser wrote his text in 1982: a historicist might remark that this is a clear sign of the time, a symptom of a larger crisis of Marxism, of sobering up after the political reality of the gulag and the beginning of the end of actually-existing socialism. Or could this be read as yet another self-criticism? Perhaps in this last phase Althusser became disillusioned with the role of philosophy and abandoned his former project of *philosophy as revolutionary weapon*?⁴⁹ There is only a small step to associating this *distance* with the idealist or armchair philosophy of which Lenin was so critical.

However, we should not forget that Althusser never abandoned his initial claims about the primacy of practice (politics) over theory and the primacy of change over interpretation. This remains the case in his reading in 'Note sur les *Thèses*', which can for now be paradoxically named a *taking up of position at a distance*. This ambivalent position enables Althusser to define philosophy as a specific practice; it declares that the space of this specific practice has yet to be formed; its specific autonomy is only established through struggle. One cannot presuppose the autonomy of philosophy as if it were disconnected from the world. But in the same vein, philosophical practice cannot be reduced to either science or to politics. How, then, are we to understand Althusser's insistence on the primacy of practice through philosophy? He conceives philosophy as a specific practice, which should affirm the primacy of practice. This is paradoxical, because philosophy can only affirm the primacy of practice over theory on condition that it refers to itself. Philosophy affirms theoretically the primacy of practice, as Althusser puts it: 'this indicates the place that philosophy occupies relating to its *stakes* and in relation to its possible effects, but *at the distance*, not in relation to objects that philosophy

thinks (philosophy has no object) but of theses that it formulates, that is to say on the condition that it takes into account its mode of existence in the forms of *dispositif* of the *topique*.⁵⁰ Philosophy thinks in relation to itself, its specific past, but at the same time it thinks its relation, its 'conditionality' with society; it thinks about its stakes, but also its political effects within the existing social relations, measuring them up against the future horizon of communism. In his late phase, Althusser produced a dialectical jewel that again confirms his constant and critical return to Hegel.

Philosophy, according to Althusser, does not exist somewhere *outside* the world or *above* the world, in an ivory tower, from whence it travels forth into the heavenly kingdom of ideas. Philosophy affirms the existence of a series of practices – economic, political, scientific, artistic – external to philosophy. It is not that philosophy cannot act or reflect upon them, but that it does *not produce* them.⁵¹ Philosophy fights its own struggles and it does not intervene directly in other, non-philosophical practices. Most frequently, the philosophical effects are delayed, following up on major ruptures, or perhaps even being displaced. This makes it even more difficult to judge the direct effects of thought. According to Althusser, to establish an opposition between 'taking up a position' as materialist and 'taking distance' as idealist is too simplistic. Since many idealist philosophies and vulgar materialism assume a very strong and critical position *vis-à-vis* other orientations, this cannot be a sufficient criterion of demarcation. This is why Althusser insists on defining philosophical practice in this ambiguous and open manner.

Certainly Althusser, like Marx before him, was aware of the material force of ideas. There are historical periods where philosophy can have direct political effects, but this is not a reason to ascribe to philosophy a role of making revolution. It is not philosophy that transforms the world, but the masses. Depending on different conjunctures and the emergence of new political forms, the movement of the masses produces different political alliances.⁵² However, these masses are not isolated from ideas; furthermore, in the revolutionary conditions, they also invent new ideas, propelling the new encounter of thought and politics. This encounter clarifies what Althusser means when he calls for philosophy to stay at a distance, preventing it from becoming a self-sufficient and self-legitimising discourse of a philosopher-king.

This is also one theoretical point that brings Althusser in proximity to Badiou: philosophy becomes philosophy only at a distance from the (capitalist or socialist) state. Marxism itself was not immune to becoming an academic and state-philosophy, as history clearly showed. Dogmatic Marxism was at the centre of all actually-existing state-socialisms, which instead of rethinking ways of dissolving the state-apparatus and experimenting with new economic forms, instead swiftly entered into the service of reproducing the socialist state. Dogmatic Marxism became a state-philosophy imprisoned within existing ideological coordinates, in forms of humanistic palaver, or the expert language of technocrats. Althusser's insistence on the distance of philosophy from the state means that he is diametrically opposed to suturing philosophy directly with the political. He had attempted to develop a conception of politics that would differ from the state, but which at the same time would not relegate the question of the state to a secondary phenomenon.⁵³ At the same time, it is clear that Althusser does not take the autonomy of philosophy for granted, but throws it into the arena of political and theoretical struggles. Although finding an adequate thematisation of the relation between politics and philosophy in Althusser is a difficult task, we can nevertheless pinpoint at least two moments that are still pertinent today. First, he posits the *overdetermining* character of politics; and second, he locates the specific *space of philosophical intervention*.⁵⁴ He argues

that philosophy intervenes in theoretical ideologies, the field between the 'scientific' and the 'ideological'. Philosophy can be located at the burning, or symptomatic, points of both fields, where there appear ruptures, regressions, contradictions and deviations of spontaneous and other ideologies that permeate the scientific field.

In this respect, Pupovac's thesis that the triangle *philosophy-politics-science* remained crucial throughout Althusser's enterprise is an important reminder.⁵⁵ To simplify the argument, we could say that understanding this triangle enables us to tease out the manner in which combative philosophical practice intervenes in the scientific and ideological field, by demonstrating forcefully the primacy of rupture, which indirectly brings it into relationship with revolutionary political practice. On various occasions Althusser highlighted the specificity of these fields, dealing with different 'matters' and with their own 'objects' and laws'. Nevertheless, he also attempts to posit and take into the account their inter-relationship. Admittedly, he was never able to provide a single or satisfactory explanation of these inter-relationships. Rather, he oscillates between different approaches, which are developed by the different readings of Althusser today. I would like to extract three fundamental readings of the triangle: historicist; conjunctural; and philosopher.

As its name already implies, the *historicist reading* provides a temporal classification of Althusser's thought. An emblematic analysis of Althusser can be found in Gregory Elliott's major work *Althusser: Detour of Theory*⁵⁶ and his foreword to *Machiavelli and Us*,⁵⁷ where he classifies Althusser's thought into three periods: first comes the stage of *theoreticism*, where Althusser asserts the primacy of science and refers to philosophy as 'theory of theoretical practice', as a general mediator among fields; a second stage of *politicism*, with the primacy of politics ('philosophy as revolutionary weapon'); and the last stage of *aleatorism*, where he assigns primacy to philosophy. This answer undoubtedly provides us with a general overview of Althusser's thought, but it does not help us to reconstruct the triangle of the new materialism. It seems that this interpretation simply ends up privileging one pole or another of the triangle in each of its respective phases: science, politics and philosophy.

The second reading is *conjunctural*, and has recently been developed by Goshgarian and, earlier, by Balibar. Goshgarian is particularly interested in specific continuities and discontinuities in the relationship between politics and philosophy. In his introductions to recent English translations of Althusser, Goshgarian observes that the role of philosophy oscillates in Althusser. He begins by assigning philosophy a role of mediator between politics and science; in Althusser's words, '*philosophy represents class struggle in theory*'.⁵⁸ On the one hand, Marxist philosophy should be in the service of the people, mobilising and receiving correct ideas from the masses, and then in turn representing the proletarian struggle in theory. On the other hand, the scientific is also represented in politics by philosophy; by detecting crucial points and understanding the conjuncture, it helps to formulate the correct lines for guiding political action. From this, it follows that the role of philosophy is to mediate class interests between scientific discoveries and political transformations.

The last reading can be called *philosophist*. This can be undertaken either via the early Althusser, conceiving philosophy as a 'theory of theoretical practices', which in fact grants philosophy an overall perspective from which to judge other practices;⁵⁹ or else via the 'aleatory' reading of the late Althusser, purifying Althusser's thought of its relation to Marx.

Of these three readings, the conjunctural one is most closely related to the attempt to read the *Theses* in a way that responds to the call for a new materialism. Pierre Macherey perhaps

quite justly remained critical towards this definition of philosophy as a mere mediator inherently linked to the model of representation.⁶⁰ The critical reservation of Macherey is understandable not only because of the Spinozist orientation, but also in that it rightfully warns of the danger of falling back into a 'reflection'-theory. However, I would argue that the conjunctural reading has the benefit of highlighting two general directions that can be taken in defining Althusser's philosophy and new materialism: either we define 'philosophy as party',⁶¹ which gives directives to science and politics, or we understand 'philosophy as a machine for class translation' of discourses and practices.⁶²

From oscillating philosophy to overdetermined philosophy?

Althusser's oscillation between these various definitions of philosophy can be read as a failure to provide a more refined and complex position. In a more positive sense, the place of philosophy in the aforementioned triangle is crucial in order to understand the internal fractures of Althusser's work, and moreover to follow displacements and aspect-shifts within the triangle. Badiou has argued that Althusser remained a philosopher all through his work;⁶³ but is it possible – despite the oscillations – to discern some fundamental feature of the philosophical orientation of his enterprise? The 'undercurrent' flowing from his work is not only its 'interventionist' and 'combative' nature. This dimension of the 'Note sur les *Thèses*' should be taken seriously: philosophy needs to remain at a distance from both fields, politics and science, but it should continue to intervene in them indirectly and produce varied effects, including non-philosophical ones. This claim is again very close to that of the mediating role of philosophy. If philosophy is conditioned by the conjuncture, then it can be argued that it 'normally' intervenes in the existing theoretical ideologies. When the social circumstances become revolutionary, however, philosophy might produce more than merely intra-philosophical effects, bringing it into close relation with the masses.

Two further courses could allow for a more adequate conceptualisation of philosophy within Althusser's triangle in order to avoid the criticism of representation advanced by Macherey. The first course would tie philosophy closely to the concept of 'overdetermination' and examine the relation between politics and philosophy (eleventh thesis), while the second would posit philosophy in terms of Marx's concept of *verwandelte Formen*;⁶⁴ that is, it would see philosophical forms as 'transformed' ideological forms, thus supplementing the triangle with the additional field of ideology, which examines the relation between science and politics. Philosophy would then be an activity articulating two fields (science and politics) in a process of working through ideology, constantly transforming ideological forms within and between the fields of the scientific and the political. Moreover, remembering that one field overdetermines the other helps to clarify the instable conjuncture of Marxist philosophy that relates to and evaluates the temporary effects of events and discoveries within these fields. The concept of 'overdetermined causality' is Althusser's most important theoretical contribution, by means of which he reworks the Marxist topography.⁶⁵ The complex causality and 'double determination' of social instances (not only politics by economy, and vice versa, but a certain conception of the 'decentred centre' that is at work in both) can provide a provisional tool for rethinking the relationship between philosophy, politics and science. Much more than suturing philosophy with politics, what is peculiar to Althusser's project is, rather, a continuing persistence of the specific place of philosophy and its engaged nature. Althusser does indeed subscribe to the

view that politics determines Marxist philosophy, but he continues to maintain that it is the role of philosophy to detect displaced contradictions and articulate crucial points between science and politics. Philosophy also brings the future dimension into and through politics, meditating the unanticipated. This is the place where politics and philosophy start entering a productive partnership. When philosophy speaks from the horizon of the future society, communism, it becomes an equal 'partner', a friend in the mission of changing the world. In close 'cooperation' with historical analysis, philosophy thinks the change-in-process and acts on it. If Althusser can correctly be criticised for reproducing the division of academic labour,⁶⁶ he nevertheless also responds to this aristocratic challenge with his text 'Philosophy as revolutionary weapon'.⁶⁷ Philosophy must not remain indifferent (like science), but has to learn with and from the masses.⁶⁸ The thesis that rests on the Spinozian and Kantian maxim that 'anyone can think' actually shows what an important role Althusser attributed to philosophy in the transformation of the world, which in turn crucially marks his peculiar reading of and return to the eleventh thesis. Thus, the real change will occur only, when it is accompanied with a change in thinking about the world; in other words the new practice of philosophy things the change in the world, and in this way acts on it, executing that change practically and theoretically.

Althusser's second answer regarding the conception of philosophy stems directly from his 'Note sur les *Thèses*' and offers another intriguing conceptualisation via 'transformed forms' that relate the field of science to ideology. Following the early Althusser and Macherey, philosophical interventions are inscribed in the field of theoretical ideologies, that is, the field between the 'ideological' and the 'scientific'.⁶⁹ Philosophy's task is to rethink the relationship between science, politics and ideology, which is constantly undermined, restructured and overdetermined. In his 'Note sur les *Thèses*', the first step Althusser takes is to demonstrate the ideological conditionality of all fields (science, philosophy, but also politics); while in the second step he sketches possible ways of breaking with ideology, or of how these fields can be (self-)constituted. Scientific discoveries (science), demarcation-lines (philosophy) and revolution (politics) all imply processes of rupture within those fields. In this text, Althusser does not explain precisely how philosophy and ideology work between those fields, but only gives a hint with the concept of *verwandelte Formen* – transformed forms, which demonstrate a specific relation of ideology to other fields.⁷⁰ His suggestion is to define philosophy as a transformed form of ideology; philosophy thus works on the ideological forms as structurally necessary parts of reality. Is philosophy, then, as well as mediating between different fields, also naming ruptures in those same fields, and then being conditioned by them?⁷¹ Althusser perhaps only briefly suggested a direction that could overcome the conception of philosophy as (self-)mediation. The other more political suggestion lies in his insistence on ideas becoming material forces in society – but then why would simply thinking politics, separated from philosophy, not be valid for future critical explorations on the role of philosophy?⁷²

Instead of a conclusion

These two different ways of defining conjectural philosophy suggest the need to displace any fixation on the eleventh thesis of Feuerbach, and instead concentrate on rethinking the encounter of the tenth and eleventh theses. This contradictory encounter should not be understood as a simple merging of revolutionary theory and practice. Rather, Althusser's encounter

should be seen as the mutual crosscutting of historical analysis and the philosophical horizon of the future that points to the partisan position within theory. Revolutionary theory is accompanied by another necessary encounter between the revolutionary politics of the masses and thought as a conjunctural analysis of the present situation. Philosophy helps to create the site of the encounter between revolutionary practice and theory.

An Althusserian-inspired orientation could then contribute to answering the question of what the idea of communism might be today. It could do so in a two-fold way: first, it would strive to examine critically what went wrong with actually-existing socialism and to affirm past revolutionary moments in order to mobilise historical resources; second, it would strive to think and invent new forms of political organisation, which demands of philosophy a form of political engagement. If philosophy remains unaware of its 'overdetermined' character, it can, even when attempting to grasp such a radical notion such as the idea of communism, end up in abstract opinion. This is the point where Althusser agrees with Lukács: 'Every "theoretical" tendency or clash of views must immediately develop an organisational arm if it is to rise above the level of pure theory or abstract opinion, that is to say, if it really intends to point the way to its own fulfilment in practice'.⁷³ The question of organisation is not simply a matter of vulgar political practice, experimenting and pragmatically calculating choices, but becomes the most abstract and simultaneously concrete point of any materialist orientation. It becomes a strategic link between revolutionary theory and practice, which guides the search for a new materialism today.

Notes

- 1 For example, G. M. Goshgarian tries to explain all of Althusser's work in the light of the theory of the encounter; see his chapter in this volume.
- 2 It seems that at the end of his interesting analysis Vargas comes to conclusion that Althusser abandoned communism and Marxism (Vargas 2008, pp. 190–2).
- 3 Althusser's concept of an epistemological break, which targets humanism, is also used to read *Capital* against Hegel. See Althusser and Balibar 1970; Althusser 1969a.
- 4 For a Žižekian reading of specific ruptures in Althusser, see Katja Kolšek's text in this volume.
- 5 In his chapter in this book Panagiotis Sotiris also favours reading both tendencies at the same time. I develop this thesis in detail elsewhere (Kim 2007).
- 6 The call is similar to Alain Badiou's way of posing the problem of materialism. In the introduction to his *Logic of Worlds*, he argues that in the situation of reigning materialisms, it is necessary to draw the demarcation line between *materialist dialectic* and *democratic materialism*.
- 7 Althusser 1969a.
- 8 See Balibar 1995. Althusser most directly refers to *Theses* in his 'Note sur les *Thèses*' (Althusser 1994b).
- 9 Marx and Engels 1975–2005 Volume 5, p. 8.
- 10 Bloch 1996, p. 285.
- 11 Debenjak 2008, p.156.
- 12 Many mainstream Marxist approaches would use the causality linked to the spatial (linear) metaphor of base and superstructure that Marx developed in his Introduction to the *Critique of Political Economy*.

- 13** Macherey 2008, p. 212.
- 14** The sixth thesis famously proclaims that the human essence is only 'ensemble of social relations'.
- 15** Macherey 2008, p. 213.
- 16** See Bifo 2011.
- 17** The post-Fordist regime realises all human capacities and participates in the self-destruction of capitalism, where Feuerbach's essence of man is finally being realised. But should we not instead argue that this ideal of the self-realisation of humanity is nothing but the normalisation of man's needs and desires, a part of the ideology of 'flexible personality' (Holmes 2002) and remains very much linked to the general commodity-production and dominant individualist ideology?
- 18** Marx had addressed this issue in other places before, as in his 1843 *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, or later in 1848s *Communist Manifesto*.
- 19** Marx and Engels 1975–2005 Volume 5, p. 49.
- 20** Macherey 2008, p. 215.
- 21** Slavoj Žižek's critical remark on the troubles of French radical political philosophy (Žižek 2006, p. 55).
- 22** Contingency is clearly of crucial importance for any consideration of the origin of and transition between modes of production, but it does not suffice for more in-depth analysis of social circumstances.
- 23** In this perspective, a parallax view seems as an appropriate conceptual tool for understanding Marx's basic methodological initiative (compare with Žižek 2006). It was not simply about interpretation, but how his reading – as a theoretical strategy – traversed different 'disciplines', as it attempted to grasp the object of capital.
- 24** See for example Lukács 1971, pp. 22–3.
- 25** While there are many differences between Lukács and Althusser, at least on this point their different approaches to Marx converge on the question of understanding totality from the partisan position of the proletariat.
- 26** It is true that Marx in the *Theses on Feuerbach* did not yet speak about production, but about practice, as against the intuition or sensuousness of Feuerbach. Marx's concept of practice is an 'ensemble of social relations', which only opens a path towards production. See Balibar 2007c and Debenjak 2008, pp. 155–62, who argue correctly that the Marx of the *Theses on Feuerbach* still stood on the standpoint of practice. It is nevertheless true that his conception of praxis in this period differed from Feuerbach's notion of practice and the materialism of intuition and sensuousness. Marx's concept of praxis does not hide behind an idea of a human essence, but points to the ensemble of social relations, which was later framed in terms of production.
- 27** Marx succeeded in elaborating new concepts such as mode of production, tendency and class struggle, which meant that he broke with an ideological horizon. He began to practice a different theory, which can no longer be equated with philosophy, though at the same time Hegel remained an important reference.
- 28** See Balibar 2007c.
- 29** See Althusser 1969a, especially the chapter 'Marxism and Humanism'.
- 30** Although Althusser 2003 always stressed the critique of Stalinism as crucial for the future of Marxist theory, one has to admit that his critique of economism and humanism is rather weak.
- 31** For criticism of Heideggerian Marxists see Žižek 1999, p. 13. Undoubtedly, also Derrida's deconstruction, and some left-Heideggerians like Nancy and Blanchot attacked Marx's humanism in the time when Althusser wrote.

- 32** Althusser discusses these limitations, especially in Althusser 2006a.
- 33** Most notably, Althusser developed this in his 'Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses' essay (in Althusser 1971a) and in his posthumously published book on reproduction (Althusser 1995a). Before Althusser, the theoretical implication for this move can be ascribed at least two important references: Lenin and Gramsci. The latter developed the first complex analysis of 'superstructure', which would rule out any mechanical causality of base-superstructure.
- 34** See Jason Read's chapter in this volume for further exploration of this thesis.
- 35** Moshe Postone undertook an extremely important project in this respect, with his analyses of the importance of the form of production-relations (commodity-production) that determine ideology (Postone 1996, pp. 272–7).
- 36** See Frieder Otto Wolf's chapter in this volume.
- 37** Marx and Engels 1975–2005 Volume 5, p.8.
- 38** See Macherey 2008.
- 39** See Balibar 2007c, pp. 40–1. It is not surprising that Marx presented a certain quandary for Hannah Arendt. The limitations of her reading of Marx are most visible especially in her third chapter of *Vita Activa* (Arendt 1958), which deals with the relation of work/*poiesis*. Habermas correctly notes that the theoretical revolution of supposedly distinguished activities had already begun with More and Machiavelli (Habermas 1973).
- 40** For a more detailed and evolutionary interpretation of *Theses*, see Debenjak 2008, p.158.
- 41** 'Die Philosophen haben die Welt nur verschieden *interpretiert*; es kömmt drauf an, sie zu *verändern*' (Marx 1969, p. 5).
- 42** See Labica 1987b.
- 43** See Ruda 2009.
- 44** This interpretation privileges Engels's editing that inserted the famous '*aber*' between sentences, as disjunction. See Labica's excellent book on the *Theses* (Labica 1987b).
- 45** Marx and Engels 1975–2005 Volume 3, p. 187; translation modified.
- 46** Balibar correctly notes that, for Marx, the world will not be transformed by education alone (Balibar 2007c, pp.17–27). It was precisely the concept of revolution that enabled him to break with the idealistic horizon of his position in the *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, where the level of interpretation was still linked to representation, and the subject of change (an idealist notion) was linked to the proletariat.
- 47** Macherey 2008, p. 227.
- 48** Althusser 1994b.
- 49** Althusser 1971a. As the interview's title suggests, Althusser is interested in the role of philosophy in the class struggle.
- 50** Althusser 1994b, p. 42.
- 51** This can be taken as a minimal definition for materialism; there is something that exists outside thought. See also Žerjav 2006, who brings Marxist theory close to some central thesis of psychoanalysis.
- 52** See Althusser 1966b; 1973.
- 53** Althusser is also against the suturing of science with politics. The consequences of this suture might well lead into Lysenkoism. See also the work of Althusser's colleague Dominique Lecourt on Lysenko (Lecourt 1976).
- 54** As Macherey 2009 lucidly argues, this conception of philosophy is at work from an early stage.
- 55** See Chapter 3 in Pupovac 2008.
- 56** Elliott 2006.

- 57** Althusser 2000.
- 58** Althusser 1984, p. 67.
- 59** Althusser 1976a.
- 60** Macherey 2009.
- 61** See Pupovac's chapter in this volume for a further discussion of this definition of philosophy.
- 62** This type of answer opens the challenge of 'pragmatism', or of how to find ideal communicative situations translating correct ideas from science to political practice.
- 63** Badiou 2008.
- 64** Močnik 2006 recently brought into discussion the concept that Marx used in Volume III of *Capital*, when he attempted to articulate the field of circulation and production, which in a general way connects the first and third volumes of *Capital*. This point was previously highlighted by Mamardashvili 1999.
- 65** See Althusser 1969a. The question of causality is crucial for any theory of history. Althusser criticised the Hegelian model of expressive totality, but most directly the model of economic base (economy), which determines superstructure (politics and ideology). Against this, Althusser develops a different causality of the 'decentred centre'. In this new horizon, the economic determination of base-superstructure is replaced by a 'double determination', which entails additional conditioning of instances in the social structure. Overdetermined causality works in heterogeneous ways forming a complex inter-relation of instances of the social structure: politics, economy, culture, law, ideology and so forth. The inter-relation is by definition only graspable through its effects, that is, retroactively. If Althusser still retains the thesis that capitalist society is 'in the last instance' determined by the economic instance, with a certain contradictory development of the forces and relations of production, then he also expands this with another determination: this structural relation is 'overdetermined' by politics.
- 66** Rancière 2011.
- 67** Althusser 1971a.
- 68** Echoes of both the third thesis on Feuerbach and an allusion to the Chinese Cultural Revolution can be found in Althusser's mode of argumentation.
- 69** See Macherey 2009.
- 70** Althusser 1994b.
- 71** Badiou's conception is different from Althusser's, but there are some points of convergence. According to Badiou 2009a, one of the tasks of philosophy is to maintain the place to think the compossibility of different truth-procedures. Philosophy is conditioned by four different truth-procedures. Althusser sketches out some of the conditions of philosophy in the text 'What is philosophy' in Althusser 1995a.
- 72** Sylvain Lazarus seems to push most fervently in this direction (see Lazarus 1996).
- 73** Lukács 1971, p. 299.