palgrave advances in continental political thought

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More than a quarter of a century after Louis Althusser’s heyday, one wonders how this rather troubled French professor managed to create such a buzz with the publication of only two books – *Reading Capital* and *For Marx*. The first was written in collaboration with students, and the other was a compilation of essays. In *The Future Lasts Forever*, his posthumous memoir that claims not to be one, it is often difficult to distinguish fact from fantasy. Althusser (*alte Haüser*, ‘old house’ in Alsatian dialect) tells us that he knew very little of either the history of philosophy or Marx, and that he never quite managed to understand Freud (‘He remains a closed book to me’) despite the regular use of psychoanalytical concepts in his work. He also claims that he often learned by hearsay from what friends mentioned in conversations or from reading papers written by his students, a remark that will certainly strike a chord with many academics.

Althusser had the twin fantasies of solitude and mastery. He saw himself as being ‘alone against the world’ intellectually, because philosophers must lead a lonely life if they are to break with existing consensus, and also alone politically, because not even the party went along with his anti-humanism, so it seemed. His desire to be the ‘master’s master’ was equally strong. It appears in petty details, as when he brags that compared to him the greatest chefs are unimaginative or that de Gaulle once asked him for a light in a chance encounter in the street and then invited him for dinner to talk about his work and political experience. Or when he describes himself as a regular womaniser, claiming to have cheated continually on his first love interest and lifelong partner Hélène Ryman – whom, tragically, he killed – while demanding her approval of his mistresses. It also appears in his efforts to position himself in
the place of the ‘subject supposed to know’. This is particularly noticeable in
his ‘return to Marx’ through a ‘symptomatic reading’ of his texts – one that
‘divulges the undivulged event in the text it reads, and in the same movement
relates it to a different text, present as a necessary absence in the first’ (Althusser
and Balibar, 1970, p. 28). This reading, he says, enabled him to detect ‘the
places where Marx’s discourse is merely the unsaid of his silence’ (1970, p.
143), to restore to Marx ‘what he required: coherence and intelligibility’, and
to master ‘his own thought better than he had done’ (1993, pp. 221–2).

Despite his reputation for being generous with students, he was somewhat
unkind to those who challenged him. Rancière’s contribution to Reading
Capital, together with the contributions of Establet and Macherey, were
dropped from the second edition of 1968 – the one used for the English
translation – allegedly to abridge and improve the book. Only the texts by
Althusser and Balibar remained. Rancière (1974) had criticised Althusser for
his politically paralysing theoreticism (philosophy as the ‘theory of theoretical
practice’), his ambiguous position toward the student movement in 1968
and his unwillingness to break with the French Communist Party (PCF).
Althusser had joined the PCF in 1948 and remained within it despite his
disagreements. He voiced these without ever exceeding the limits of its
tolerance and so never risked expulsion (Althusser, 1993, p. 197). Membership
gave him a certain real-world aura, a semblance of practical action through a
deflected link to the working class, not to mention the prestige of being the
leading party intellectual at a time when the PCF was a reference point for
French intellectuals.

However, there is a more convoluted explanation of his refusal to break
with the party. Althusser had been a prisoner of war in a German camp. He
thought of ways of escaping, but never dared to implement them, partly
due to his avoidance of physical danger and because he believed that his
having found the perfect means of escape was sufficient reward. Indeed, his
acts of daring were committed under the protection of the camp, and for
someone who vindicated the primacy of struggle, he was happy to respond to
practical problems with theoretical solutions. Althusser describes his regular
internments in psychiatric hospitals – where he spent almost 15 years of
his adult life – and his living quarters at the École Normale Supérieure in
similar terms: they provided him with a protective embrace. Connecting these
experiences – in the camp, the hospital, the École, and the party – one can
begin to understand his self-referential claim that ‘how to escape the circle
while remaining within it’ was the core of all philosophical, military and
political problems (1993, pp. 108–9, 319).

In between depressions, Althusser flourished as a writer, teacher and
polemicist. He was part of a remarkable group of postwar thinkers – many
of them marked by structuralism – that included Gaston Bachelard, Roland
Barthes, Georges Canguilhem, Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Jean
Hyppolite, Roman Jakobson, Jacques Lacan and Claude Lévi-Strauss, to
mention just a few. He also taught a host of scholars like Étienne Balibar, Roger Establet, Pierre Macherey, Jacques-Alain Miller and Jacques Rancière. The connection between them was not simply a question of timing – ‘the 1950s’ or ‘the 1960s’ – but also of shared themes and a willingness to engage in disciplinary crossings.

Althusser’s work in this respect was exemplary. He believed that just as Lacan had called for a ‘return to Freud’ and had broken with psychologism, his own return to Marx had contributed to a renewal of historical materialism by announcing a break with the prevalent Marxist orthodoxies built on economism, historicism, and humanism. To do so, he drew on history and politics, from philosophy (above all Spinoza, but also Machiavelli, Rousseau and Bachelard) and psychoanalysis (Freud and Lacan), effectively opening up Marxism to the debates of the times.

In the eyes of his followers, who were fascinated by his conceptual wizardry, Althusser was the master theorist, and his writings enjoyed a semi-canonical status. His style played a part. It was seemingly less concerned with proving complex points than with seducing readers by presenting his arguments as if they were self-evident conclusions. Althusser takes great pains to create this impression, confiding that he owes part of his academic success to two maxims of Jean Guitton, one of his teachers at the lycée. These were to be as clear as possible when writing, and to present arguments on any subject coherently and convincingly in order to make them appear as a priori and purely deductive (Althusser, 1993, pp. 93–4).

Yet Althusser’s style also had irritating traits replicated by many of his followers. With the passing of Althusserianism, there was a sense of linguistic relief among readers who had been punished mercilessly – and long enough – by its abuse of italics and inverted commas, the predilection for capitalised terms, and the obscure nomenclature made more bearable only by Ben Brewster’s glossary in Reading Capital and For Marx. This notwithstanding, the combination of assertive prose, discursive crossings and communist militancy paid off. By the late 1960s, the name Althusser had become synonymous with cutting-edge philosophy among young Marxist intellectuals in France, the UK and Latin America. The early work of Nicos Poulantzas (1973) extended Althusserian categories into Marxist accounts of class, politics and the state. Marta Harnecker (1969), a former student of Althusser’s, returned to Latin America to publish a manual of Althusserianism that, despite its annoying ‘taxonomic excesses’ – as Ralph Miliband once said of the work of Poulantzas – managed to sell well over 150,000 copies and is still in print. In the UK, Barry Hindess and Paul Hirst became his most celebrated advocates until they began to question his theoreticism in the mid-1970s. Ernesto Laclau’s (1977) creative use of the notion of ‘determination in the last instance’ sought to undermine economism and class reductionism in Marxist discussions of politics, ideology and populism. Like Althusser, he did not escape the metaphysical trappings
of ‘the last instance’, but his critique of essentialism fired the opening salvos for what was later to be known as post-Marxism.

Althusserianism, however, was less a system than work in progress. It emerged through the publication of a dozen or so articles – the most influential between 1960 and 1969 – that were shaped by very public controversies with Paul Lewis and E.P. Thompson. Althusser made it clear in various prefaces and in Essays in Self-Criticism that he had changed his position on many issues. In a letter to the English translator of For Marx he expressed his fears that readers will be misguided ‘if they were allowed to believe that the author of texts that appeared one by one between 1960 and 1965 has remained in the position of these old articles whereas time has not ceased to pass’ (1969, p. 258). But even if he reformulated ‘his’ Marx as he went along, one can identify Althusserianism in the reasoning behind the critiques of humanism, historicism, economism and ideology. In what follows, I will look in some detail at his efforts to vindicate the scientific status of Marxism, to distinguish the Marxist dialectic and totality from the Hegelian ones, and to counteract the mechanicism of the Second International through the thesis of ‘determination in the last instance’ by the economy.

**the epistemological break and overdetermination**

Althusser’s reading of Marx is governed by the hypothesis of an ‘epistemological break’ or discontinuity in Marx’s intellectual development. The motif comes from Bachelard (1947), who speaks of the epistemological obstacles faced by science, and he borrows it ‘to designate the mutation in the theoretical problematic contemporary with the foundation of a scientific discipline’ (Althusser, 1969, ‘Today’, p. 32). One could also link it to Kuhn, who characterises scientific revolutions by a shift from one paradigm to another and by the incommensurability of those paradigms. The force of an epistemological break is that it ‘establishes a science by detaching it from the ideology of its past and by revealing this past as ideological’ (Althusser, 1969, ‘On the Materialist Dialectic’, p. 168). Althusser uses it to distinguish the work of the early, pre-scientific Marx, from the mature Marx of dialectical and historical materialism.

His basic premise is that while all beginnings are necessary and contingent, they do not prefigure what is to come: ‘Marx did not choose to be born to the thought German history had concentrated in its university education, nor to think its ideological world. He grew up in this world, in it he learned to live and move, with it he “settled accounts”, from it he liberated himself’ (Althusser, 1969, ‘On the Young Marx’, p. 64). This espousal of a purely contingent link between genesis and consequences reverberates in Foucault’s Nietzschean invocation of genealogy to criticise the myth of origins, that is, the belief in an absolute beginning from which one might deduce the present. It also prefigures Poulantzas’ claim that the class origin of an agent does not
determine its class position in a political conjuncture. The ‘beginning’ of Marx refers to the period of his early works that culminates with the Paris Manuscripts of 1844, when his writing was still caught up in the humanist problematic of the theory of alienation. The latter is troublesome because of its concurrent anthropological assumptions of a universal essence of man, which presupposes an original uncontaminated human nature that can and should be restored. One might add that this betrays an eschatological view, for liberation conceived as the reinstatement of an alienated essence entails the telos of a fully reconciled society.

The turning point comes with the writing of *The German Ideology* in 1845, in which Marx and Engels claim to have settled their erstwhile philosophical conscience. This text triggers the break with humanist ideology that would eventually lead to the theory of exploitation whose mature form is *Capital*. New concepts appear after the break (mode of production, productive forces, relations of production, infrastructure–superstructure) as Marx gradually founds the science of history (Althusser, 1976, ‘Reply to John Lewis’, p. 66). The passage from alienation to exploitation induces Marx to replace the ideological postulates of subject and essence with a theoretical anti-humanism that gives rise to a materialism of *praxis* (Althusser, 1969, ‘Marxism and Humanism’, p. 229). This ‘retreat from ideology towards reality’, as Althusser calls it, led to Marxism ‘at the price of a prodigious break with his origins, a heroic struggle against the illusions he had inherited from the Germany in which he was born’ (Althusser, 1969, ‘On the Young Marx’, pp. 81, 84). This reality is nothing other than the discovery of the science of history (historical materialism) and the development of a non-ideological philosophy, dialectical materialism or ‘Theory’ as such. An Althusserian would thus say that while Marx was always Marx, before the break he was a non- or pre-Marxist Marx.

Althusser claims that the critique of humanism was necessary to counteract the theoretical confusions generated by the widespread use of the term after the Twentieth Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in 1956 (Althusser, 1969, ‘To My English Readers’, pp. 9–12). Some invoked it, thinking that recasting communism as humanism would wash the ugliness of the cult of personality and the barbarism of Stalinism away, forgetting the implications of humanist ideology. History, as he famously put it, is a ‘process without a subject’. The real target, however, was Hegel, or rather the effects of Hegel, on what passes as Marxist thought. Althusser set himself the task of extricating Marxism from the economism that had reduced ‘the dialectic of history to the dialectic generating the successive *modes of production*’ (Althusser, 1969, ‘Contradiction and Overdetermination’, p. 108). He did so through an ingenious deconstruction of the Hegelian dialectic. This involves an initial reversal of a binary opposition (speculative versus materialist dialectic) in order to identify the traits held in reserve by the subordinate term (the complexity of materialism). Then comes a displacement of the opposition into a new terrain (Marxism) whereby Althusser keeps the old name (dialectic) but grafts onto
it a new meaning that renders it ‘overdetermined’ – a term ‘borrowed from another discipline’. In describing the Marxist dialectic as ‘overdetermined in its principle’, he is drawing on Freud and building bridges between Marxism and psychoanalysis.

Althusser’s reasoning proceeds from the premise that the distinction between Marx and Hegel’s dialectic has been obscured by the interpretation of the metaphor of inversion used by Marx. In the ‘Afterword’ to the second edition of *Capital*, Marx states: ‘With [Hegel, the dialectic] is standing on its head. It must be turned right side up again, if you would discover the rational kernel within the mystical shell’ (Althusser, 1969, ‘Contradiction and Overdetermination’, p. 89). Commentators have stressed the topos of the inversion, claiming that Marx corrected Hegel by putting the dialectic on its materialist feet. This argument, Althusser says, is correct but also misleading, as ‘a philosophy inverted in this way cannot be regarded as anything more than the philosophy reversed’ (Althusser, 1969, ‘On the Young Marx’, p. 73).

In Althusser’s reading, the ‘rational kernel’ has not one but two mystical wrappings. One is the external speculative system, which is removed through the celebrated inversion. The other refers to the very structure of the dialectic, for Althusser argues that the simplicity of the Hegelian contradiction leads Hegel to conceive totality as the manifestation of a single internal principle, or, to put it differently, to derive all discrete phenomena from that principle (Althusser, 1969, p. 102). Marx, he says, gains access to the rational kernel of the dialectic through the removal of this second mystical shell in ‘an operation which transforms what it extracts’ (Althusser, 1969, ‘Contradiction and Overdetermination’, p. 93). Here we must quote Althusser at length:

The simplicity of the Hegelian contradiction is made possible only by the simplicity of the *internal principle* that constitutes the essence of any historical period. If it is possible, in principle, to reduce the totality, the infinite diversity, of a historically given society (Greece, Rome, the Holy Roman Empire, England, and so on) to a *simple internal principle, this very simplicity can be reflected in the contradiction to which it thereby acquires a right ... the reduction of all the elements that make up the concrete life of a historical epoch ... to one principle of internal unity, is only possible on the *absolute condition* of taking the whole concrete life of a people for the externalization-alienation ... of an *internal spiritual principle* ... I think we can now see how the ‘mystical shell’ affects and contaminates the ‘kernel’ – for the *simplicity of Hegelian contradiction is never more than a reflection of the simplicity of its internal principle of a people, that is, not its material reality but its most abstract ideology*. It is also why Hegel could represent Universal History from the Ancient Orient to the present day as ‘dialectical’, that is, moved by the simple play of a principle of *simple* contradiction. (Althusser, 1969, p. 103)
Economism, Althusser says, replicates the Hegelian argument by conceiving the superstructures as manifestations of the underlying economic nucleus. It reduces the dialectic to the play of a simple principle. That is why the mere abandonment of Hegel’s speculative system leaves the central problem of the dialectic untouched. One can embrace materialism and still interpret historical processes as if they were the direct effect of a single contradiction – in this case, the contradiction between forces and relations of production – that operates as the founding locus of the totality and as the explanation of its transformations. In peeling off the mystical wrapping of the dialectic, he says, Marx will have to supplement the inversion of Hegel with a transformation of the very structure of the contradiction. The key to this transformation is the notion of ‘overdetermination’, which Althusser introduces through the metaphor of the ‘weakest link’, used by Lenin in his essay on imperialism.

Lenin invokes this metaphor to explain why the revolution could take place in Russia, the most backward country of Europe, instead of where the orthodox interpretations of Marx had predicted – advanced capitalist nations. A chain, says Lenin, is as strong as its weakest link. In the system of imperialist states of the time, Russia represented the weakest point because of ‘the accumulation and exacerbation of all the historical contradictions then possible in a single state’ (Althusser, 1969, ‘Contradiction and Overdetermination’, p. 96). Althusser cites contradictions of a feudal system at the dawn of the twentieth century, of colonial exploitation and wars of aggression, of large-scale capitalist exploitation in major cities, of class struggles between exploiters and exploited but also within the ruling classes, and so on. In Russia, the imperialist chain could be broken on account of the accumulation of contradictions that provided the conditions for a socialist revolution. This, he says, indicates that, contrary to the caricature painted by economism, the capital–labour contradiction never acts on its own: an accumulation of circumstances is needed to activate it. Another extensive quote is warranted:

Marxist revolutionary experience shows that, if the general contradiction ... is sufficient to define the situation when revolution is the ‘task of the day’, it cannot on its own simple, direct power induce a ‘revolutionary situation’ ... If this contradiction is to become ‘active’ in the strongest sense, to become a ruptural principle, there must be an accumulation of ‘circumstances’ and ‘currents’ so that whatever their origin and sense ..., they ‘fuse’ into a ruptural unity ... The ‘contradiction’ is inseparable from the total structure of the social body in which it is found, inseparable from its formal conditions of existence, and even from the instances it governs; it is radically affected by them, determining, but also determined in one and the same movement, and determined by the various levels and instances of the social formation it animates; it might be called overdetermined in its principle. (Althusser, 1969, pp. 99, 101)
The Hegelian contradiction is never overdetermined. Therein lies the difference between Hegel and Marx and between economism and Althusser’s reading of Marx. The contradiction between forces and relations of productions cannot explain historical change on its own. It only acquires ruptural force through its overdetermination by contradictions arising in different levels of the social formation. Instead of a direct causal link between base and superstructure, which conceives of politics and ideology as epiphenomena or by-products of the economy, the superstructures acquire their own specificity and effectiveness in the historical process, to the extent that changes in the base do not automatically modify the superstructures (Althusser, 1969, pp. 111, 115). The latter are part of the conditions of existence of the economic level, if only because labour legislation intervenes to organise the process of production (Althusser and Balibar, 1970, p. 178). The superstructures always already contaminate the base.

Althusser supplements the critique of the solitary causal determination of the economic base by invoking a letter that Engels wrote to Bloch in 1890, stating that their followers had exaggerated the role of the economy in the explanation of extra-economic phenomena. Moreover, to say that the contradiction is always overdetermined undermines the principle of necessity of orthodox Marxism and its belief in the inescapable laws of history. The Russian exception loses its exceptional character or, as Althusser put it, ‘the exception thus discovers in itself the rule’, for the general contradiction can be overdetermined in the direction of a historical break or of a historical inhibition (Althusser and Balibar, 1970, pp. 104, 106). This claim about the undecidability of historical events is Althusser’s way of saying that contingency is lodged in the heart of the Marxian dialectic. The economy is determinant, but only in the last instance, to which he adds: ‘From the first moment to the last, the lonely hour of the “last instance” never comes’ (Althusser and Balibar, 1970, p. 113).

If the emphasis falls on the final part of this phrase, ‘the lonely hour of the “last instance” never comes’, we have a powerful critique of economism, but also an abandonment of the Marxist or mature Marx. This is something that Althusser was unlikely to consider as it would have compromised his position in the PCF. Yet if one underlines the beginning, ‘the lonely hour of the “last instance” never comes’, then what is lost is the mechanistic interpretation of Marxist orthodoxy and its belief in the solo work of the economy. The latter retains a place of honour while politics and ideology cease to be its epiphenomena. The thesis of ‘the last instance’ thus provided breathing space for those who were suspicious of economism but were not yet prepared to break with historical materialism or to contemplate the possibility of post-Marxism.

Althusser reiterates the ubiquitous reference to the last instance in his depiction of the Marxist totality as a ‘structure in dominance’. Unlike the Hegelian expressive totality, that ‘presupposes in principle that the whole in
question be reducible to an *inner essence*, of which the elements of the whole are then no more than the phenomenal forms of expression’ (Althusser and Balibar, 1970, p. 187), Marx proposes a totality that is as complex as his dialectic. It is a structured whole containing distinct, unevenly developed, relatively autonomous and dislocated instances or levels that include the economic structure – forces and relations of production – and the legal-political and ideological superstructures. Following Mao, Althusser contends that ‘in real history determination in the last instance by the economy is exercised precisely in the permutations of the principal role between the economy, politics, theory, etc.’ (Althusser, 1969, ‘On the Materialist Dialectic’, p. 213). But he also maintains that in order to escape relativism we must accept that the various levels ‘coexist within this complex structural unity, articulated with one another according to specific determinations, fixed in the last instance by the level or instance of the economy’ (Althusser and Balibar, 1970, pp. 99, 97). The Marxist whole is a ‘structure in dominance’, an articulation of instances whose play is governed by the economic level.

This notion of totality brings forth a critique of linear causality and the ‘absent cause’ inspired by Spinoza, for whom ‘a cause is taken to be anything which explains the existence or qualities of the effect’ (Hampshire, 1978, p. 3). Spinoza maintains that the substance is *causa sui*, a cause of itself, one whose ‘essence involves existence and whose nature cannot be conceived unless existing’ (Spinoza, 1963, *Ethics*, Def. I). A substance is composed of infinite attributes, ‘each expressing the reality of being of the substance’ (*Ethics*, Prop. IX). This infinite (unbound) and eternal (timeless) self-creating totality is logically prior to its parts (*Ethics*, Prop. I), and it exists or may be conceived through its modifications (*Ethics*, Def. V, Axiom I). Similarly, for Althusser the structure ‘is not an essence outside the economic phenomena which comes and alters their aspects, forms and relations and which is effective on them as an absent cause, absent because it is outside them’. Instead, it is ‘a cause immanent in its effects in the Spinozist sense of the term, that the whole existence of the structure consists of its effects, in short, that the structure ... is nothing outside its effects’ (Althusser and Balibar, 1970, pp. 188–9). So Althusser uses the idea of the primacy of the whole over its parts and the determination of the latter by the former to enunciate the thesis of the structure in dominance, and he takes the existence of the substance through its modifications as the basis to account for the immanence of the structure in its effects. Both provide the ground for claiming that subjects, political or otherwise, are nothing but effects of the structure. For Althusser, ‘the structure of the relations of production determines the places and functions occupied and adopted by the agents of production, who are never anything more than the occupants of these places, insofar as they are the “supports” (Träger) of these functions’ (Althusser and Balibar, 1970, p. 180). Subjects are therefore conceived as bearers or supports produced and reproduced by the structures.
The accomplishments of Althusser – renewing Marxist discourse by disentangling Marx from Hegel and by combating economism – did not shield him from criticism. The analytic status of the epistemological break, for example, is debatable. For Althusser, the distance between the two ‘problematics’ – alienation and exploitation, ideology and science – is so radical that they become incommensurable, to the extent that the mature or Marxist Marx detaches himself altogether from the thoughts entertained by his former self. This effort to discard everything deemed pre-scientific in order to deliver a distilled Marx who is above metaphysical suspicion is tactically convenient but also simplistic. It rests on the tacit assumption of change without remainder. The Jacobins also wished to make tabula rasa of the past, even changing the calendar to enshrine 1789 as year zero. They failed because the very idea of revolution as a rupture without residues was flawed. The persistence of superstition or non-republican ideologies was not a sign of an imperfect revolution but of the exorbitant demand that it should have produced an absolute new beginning, a relation of pure exteriority with the past. Similarly, the presumption that the break would render an anti-humanist Marx immune to all teleo-eschatology is questionable when one recalls the thesis of a communist end of history, something Althusser only acknowledged 20 years later (Althusser, 1993, p. 224). Derrida put it very well: all ruptures are inevitably reinscribed in an old fabric that we must pull apart endlessly; this endlessness is not accidental but systematic and essential (Derrida, 1981, pp. 24, 1993, p. 195).

The opposition between science and ideology is equally problematic. For Althusser, ‘ideology, as a system of representations, is distinguished from science in that in it the practico-social function is more important than the theoretical function (function as knowledge)’ (Althusser, 1969, ‘Marxism and Humanism’, p. 231). Both are systems of representation, a claim that brings him close to discourse-theoretical approaches that have become popular in the social sciences. He also sees ideology as a superstructure, and therefore as an organic part of every social totality. ‘Only an ideological world outlook could have imagined societies without ideology and accepted the utopian idea of a world in which ideology ... would disappear without trace, to be replaced by science’, for ‘it is in ideology (as the locus of political struggle) that men become conscious of their place in the world and in history’; that is, ideology ‘is a matter of the lived relation between men and their world’ (Althusser, 1969, pp. 232, 233). Ideology is not a passing phenomenon and science is not the telos of revolutionary politics. Yet Althusser chooses to stress Marx’s scientific innovation, his foundation of a non-ideological philosophy or capitalised ‘Theory’ and to grant Marxist philosophy the status of sole scientific philosophy.
Why would Althusser advocate this scientific monotheism? One is tempted to dismiss it as an intervention in the politico-theoretical struggles of the time, as the work of a will to power in the field of knowledge. Marxism had to be dignified as a science, a task that Althusser radicalises by claiming that dialectical and historical materialism alone can guide us to attain true knowledge of the world and ground politics. ‘Marxism’, he says, ‘is like a “guide for action”. It can be one because it is a science, and only because of this ... [S]ciences also need a “guide”, not a false but a true guide ... [a] theoretically qualified one: dialectical materialism’ (Althusser, 1966, p. 122).

The claim about the scientific guidance of politics is baffling, as it comes closer to the spirit of positivism than to a philosophy of praxis. It inverts the Marxist primacy of practice over consciousness through the ill-conceived definition of philosophy as the ‘Theory’ of theoretical practice. This in turn insinuates a naive theory of truth that combines unveiling – Marxism shows us the reality behind illusions – and correspondence – its knowledge depicts the reality of the real. Of course, Althusser’s scientism might also spring from the desire for mastery mentioned earlier. Sorting out good interpretations of Marx from merely ideological ones is a way of affirming the correctness of his Marx as opposed to that of Lukács, Gramsci or Colletti. ‘In an epistemological and critical reading’ of Marx, he says, ‘we are simply returning to him the speech that is his own’ (Althusser, 1970, pp. 143–4). Althusser’s symptomatic reading restores the truth to Marx. Here hermeneutics is reduced to interpretation as the unveiling of a hidden text, except that the referent – the truth of Marx’s discourse – is an effect of his own reading.

Althusser’s work on ideology (1971) criticises the thesis of false consciousness and tries to fill the gap left by his earlier dismissal of subjects as mere effects – ‘bearers’ or ‘supports’ – of the structure. He reiterates that ideology represents the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence, but also invokes a Gramscian trope by saying that it is embodied in apparatuses, notably state apparatuses, and adds that ideology is a practice that transforms individuals into subjects through the mechanism of hailing or interpellation typified in the police call, ‘Hey, you there!’ Interesting as this was, the argument had a clear functionalist slant. For Althusser ideology works to secure the reproduction of capitalist class relations, which makes it difficult to think of ideologies of resistance and emancipation, or of ideological struggle as such. Class reductionism also plagued it, as the postscript added to counter the accusations of functionalism and the absence of struggle in his depiction of ideology led him to assign a class nature to all social phenomena. This prevented any possibility of conceiving either non-class ideologies or the specificity of non-class identities. The circularity of his argument was a problem, too. If ideologies transform individuals into subjects, there must be something like a pre-ideological condition, but as only subjects recognise interpellations, Althusser has to claim that we are always already subjects and therefore never outside ideology. This begs the question of how can anyone
ever manage to escape its grip – or bother to do so – in order to elaborate a scientific philosophy or engage in revolution. Moreover, he simply ignores the gap between the conditions of production and the conditions of reception of interpellations. One can hail people as fascist or sexist, but this does not mean that they will recognise themselves as such. He admits that mechanisms of recognition and misrecognition are at work in ideology, but only recognition seems to count, as misrecognition applies to real conditions of existence, not hailing. By focusing on interpellation alone, Althusser has no way of assessing the actual efficacy of the ideological constitution of subjectivity.

Finally, while ‘determination in the last instance’ did provide some breathing space for Marxism, Althusser’s critique of economism and the ensuing resurrection of historical materialism were done at the price of misinterpreting or counterfeiting Freud’s concept of overdetermination, either intentionally or by accident (one cannot take seriously his confession that Freud ‘remains a closed book to me’). Freud speaks of overdetermination to account for the asymmetry between the dream-thoughts and the manifest content or brief text that one remembers when waking up. His explanation for this is that only the overdetermined dream-thoughts – those that ‘have been represented in the dream-thoughts many times over’ – find their way into the manifest dream (Freud, 1976, pp. 388, 389). These operate as anchoring points that centre the dream, but – and this is a decisive ‘but’ – the overdetermined dream-thoughts or nodal points have no ontological consistency: they are only identified as the result of analysis, not ex ante. Althusser, however, has already decided that the general contradiction alone can be overdetermined to trigger or block a revolutionary rupture. In doing so, he cancels out the possibility of the overdetermination of religious, racial or national oppositions. This turns ‘determination in the last instance’ into the metaphysical closure of his intellectual project, an article of faith enunciated by a PCF theoretician to comply with Communist Party orthodoxy.

This was the flip-side of Althusserianism. He eventually recanted his theoreticism, saying that it was prompted by the desire to find a compromise between his own speculative-theoretical yearnings and his obsession with real practice and contact with physical reality (Althusser, 1993, p. 215). But this fascination with practical and political life coupled with scientism and theoreticism was not without consequences for Marxism. Perhaps the most significant is that one wanders through the Althusserian landscape without ever encountering an ethics or a theory of political action. His Spinozist structural causality left agency unexplained. Class struggle, invoked repeatedly, remained buried in the unswerving defence of science and the purity of theory. The critique of theoretical humanism dismissed the problems of the essence of man at the expense of leaving the theory of exploitation without resources with which to conceptualise emancipation (Rancière, 1974). In the end, like many of his followers, he contributed not so much to the renewal of
socialist political practice as to the introduction of Marxism into the academic curriculum, where it prospered in post-Marxist and cultural studies.

Althusser’s originality is that he subjected Marxism to what Derrida calls the law of iterability: if a repetition or effort to recover something invariably incorporates something new, then every retrieval is also a form of reinstitution as it cannot leave the ‘original’ unscathed. The return to Marx through a symptomatic reading of his texts modified what it sought to retrieve. Althusser aimed to deliver us a distilled Marx, one that would show critics and vulgar emulators alike that there was no trace of economism, historicism, humanism, or a transcendental subject in his writings. In weeding out the youthful mistakes of the theory of alienation from the historical materialism of the mature Marx, Althusser was not so much clarifying Marx as inventing Althusserianism. His return to Marx thus mirrored Lacan’s return to Freud in the double sense that while both sought to restore the dignity of the source through a careful textual reading, both also reinstituted that source as they retrieved it.

further reading

Of Althusser’s works listed below, Reading Capital, For Marx and Lenin and Philosophy are the most significant. The first two develop the familiar tropes of the epistemological break and the critiques of humanism and economism, whereas the latter contains the essay on ideology. Amongst the secondary literature, the essays in Kaplan and Sprinker (1993) and Elliott (1994) cover relevant aspects of his thought in a clear and elegant manner. The polemic with Thompson (1978) raises the question of his paralysing theoreticism, as does Rancière’s (1974) critique of the gap between his theory and his politics.

references


