

Introduction to Reading Louis Althusser

Marx did not “say everything,” not only because he did not have the time, but because to “say everything” makes no sense for a scientist: only a religion can pretend to “say everything.” On the contrary, a scientific theory, by definition, always has *something else* to say, since it exists only in order to discover, in the very solution of problems, as many, if not more, problems than it resolves.

- *Louis Althusser*

This introduction to Althusser is intended for study group members who might be encountering him for the first time, or the first time in a long time. I hope it helps you jump start your reading by sketching some basics. It is itself a *reading* of Althusser, in the Althusserian sense to be outlined below. So, I should state my protocols as a reader. I’m not reading him the way a philosopher or a scholar of philosophy might, but, as an activist in the movements for peace, social justice, and democracy. The question I ask is not, “What does this mean?”, or even, “How does this work?”, but rather, “What can we do with this?”, or better, “What can we now build more successfully because these tools will help?” So I have a pragmatic agenda - very American. My selection of themes and my comments reflect it.

Althusser¹ was a French Communist philosopher whose major works were published in the mid and late 1960s. It’s important to stress his Communist Party membership, which was central to his purpose and to the way his work evolved. His project was political: he opposed the rightward turn of the PCF toward what became Eurocommunism in the 1970s. Because he was a philosopher, not a politician, his “*interventions*” were in philosophy, rather than, say, forming a faction within the Party.² He intervened against the philosophical interpretation of Marx which Party officials used to rationalize their rightward direction, clarifying the relationship of the mature Marx of *Capital* to the young Marx of the *1844 Manuscripts*; analyzing Marx’s complicated relationship to Hegel; and defending the claim that Marx inaugurated the science of history, in the same sense that Thales inaugurated the science of mathematics, Galileo and Newton the science of physics, Lavoisier that of chemistry, Darwin and Mendel of biology, and Freud the science of psychology.³

To intervene coherently, Althusser developed philosophical tools which make it possible to draw non-subjective, non-arbitrary “*lines of demarcation*” within any body of thought. He introduced the idea of *reading* as a noun: a method of interrogating texts based on explicit protocols; and produced original and highly rigorous scientific concepts which make it possible to think *scientificity* itself. As a consequence he enabled for the first time a non-subjective, non-arbitrary history of ideas, with fruitful implications far beyond his immediate purpose within the Party.

His goal was to produce Marx’s philosophy. That is, clarify and systematize the philosophy Marx never had time or tools to write. Looking back on his career, he wrote, “We tried to make the works of Marxism, Marxism itself, and, in the final analysis, the work of Marx himself, *readable and thinkable*. Which means that, previously, it scarcely was...”⁴ It was a labor of both reconstitution and criticism: a reclaiming and a going-beyond. Where *produce* means: perform the theoretical labor necessary to generate a specific kind of useful product, one which is itself theory.

His interest for non-activists is in: 1) the technical practice of reading which he produced; 2) the theoretically rigorous history of ideas he enables; 3) the scientific definition of science he developed; 4) his analyses of the histories of concrete sciences and their transformations; and 5) his hyper-rigorous readings in the history of philosophy. His interest for Marxists is in: 1) his systematic re-conceptualization of ideas which Marx produced without in every instance producing their concepts in rigorous form; 2) his exploration of the “limits” of Marx’s thought, which also means its limitations; and 3) his attempts to overcome the most urgent of these. His interest for activists is in the *usefulness* of the tools he produced. You can utilize Althusser’s analytical tools to decide whether your coalition against police violence should ally with the Democratic Party, or not. I don’t think it would make sense to use Derrida’s concepts in the same way.

Althusser’s work falls reasonably into three periods defined by his own emphases and conclusions; the status of his philosophical tools as he refined them; the philosophical conjuncture in France; and the political conjuncture in France. I’ll sketch them briefly, labeling them, 1) Theoreticism; 2) Ideology; and 3) Marx in His Limits. I’ll outline the key concepts he produced, or borrowed and transformed, as they evolved in each period; and try to quickly note something of the results. This primer isn’t intended to be comprehensive: just an outline within which you can situate particular texts. You should be able to pick up any of his works in English and understand its context. In closing I’ll suggest some practical questions which Althusser’s tools are well-adapted to answer.

I've appended three short pieces re secondary issues which interest me: Althusser, Kuhn and Foucault; Althusser and Spinoza; and the way Althusser was misread in the English-speaking countries for a very long time.

Althusser's First Period: Theoreticism

Althusser became famous in France with the publication in 1965 of his two major volumes, *For Marx* and *Reading Capital*. His vigorous polemical demonstration of a sharp line of division between the young Marx and the mature Marx had little practical effect within the Party, so in that sense, probably the main one from his point of view, his project was a failure. Within the broader intellectual culture, his work generated intense excitement for its theory of reading and its promise of better understanding the sciences in their histories. But perhaps his biggest immediate impact was on the widening circles of young Marxist students and intellectuals who were outside and to the left of the Party, especially those influenced by developments in China.⁵ These non-Party intellectuals received Althusser's two books with enthusiasm: they demonstrated that it was possible to re-think Marxism with great freedom, originality, and critical passion, while remaining politically committed to the project of revolutionary socialism.

The concepts I'll outline are: Problematic; Epistemological Break; Science; Overdetermination; Conjuncture; Mode of Production; Social Formation; the Materialist Dialectic; Structure-in-Dominance; Process Without a Subject; Differential Historical Time; Determination in the Last Instance; Symptomatic Reading; and Theory. Then I'll briefly note some of the conclusions Althusser was able to demonstrate. Because I'm reading as an *activist*, I'll comment on what I believe the contemporary usefulness of these ideas to be.

“Problematic” is a noun, not a description. The concept was produced by Althusser's friend Jacques Martin⁶. A Problematic is a system of interrelated concepts existing in a hierarchical relationship revolving around a dominant concept that assigns the others their specific meaning and effectivity within the system. Think of Freud's conceptual universe: Displacement, Condensation, Repression, Transference: these concepts are made possible and are assigned their effectivity by the central concept of The Unconscious, without which they couldn't exist. Althusser suggests that all systematic bodies of thought conform to this pattern. He calls the determining concept “the theoretical object”, or just “the object”, and demonstrates the systematicity of the theoretical “space” thus defined, where “space” is a metaphor intended to make it easier to “see” these relationships.

If you're familiar with Thomas Kuhn's term "Paradigm" this may seem familiar to you. The difference is that Kuhn's Paradigm exists inside the heads of individual subjects: it's a description of the way they think about things. Althusser's Problematic exists nowhere: it's visible only in its effects, which are the logical relationships between the concepts it necessitates and makes possible, and also those it necessarily excludes. It's the system of logical implications of the concepts themselves, in their interrelationships. It doesn't matter whether individuals are aware of thinking within Problematics: they'll be forced to think within them whether they recognize that or not. You can word this in a very radical way by saying that the Problematic will produce the individuals who think it: if Niels Bohr had never existed someone else would have produced the principle of complementarity, because it's implied by and necessary to the problematic of quantum physics. Paradigm is subjective; Problematic is objective. Paradigm is immediately visible, and so available, inside the heads of the people who think it; like the Unconscious, the Problematic exists only in its effects, requiring a symptomatic analysis to make it visible. Paradigm is a description; Problematic is a concept.

Problematic is an *abstract* concept - an isolation of logical phenomena found concretely only in complex articulations. In the thought of real individuals, multiple problematics coexist, interrelate, overlap, interpenetrate, and there's a specific articulation between these elements which can be teased out and made visible through a process of theoretical labor - a "symptomatic reading". In *Capital*, Marx thinks primarily within the Marxist problematic, but there are inescapable presences of the Hegelian and Feurbachian problematics: there's an inevitable tension between them.⁷ Disentangling the problematics within which people think is part of the job of readers who read as Althusserians.

Here's what's so useful about this concept. It enables objective, robustly analyzable distinctions between bodies of ideas. It makes these distinctions visible, along with their sometimes surprising relationships. Where most of Althusser's examples are from the history of science or philosophy, here's one from life. AA conceptualizes alcoholism as spiritual dysfunction, a moral issue, in which the alcoholic is not in a right relationship with her higher power. Addiction science conceptualizes it as a medical issue, a type of physical brain damage causing neurotransmitters to fail. AA's is an idealist problematic about God; science's is a materialist problematic about brain chemistry. They're incompatible conceptualizations, which strict AA members acknowledge when they insist that medication is not allowed in the program. The Problematic enables you to draw clear, logically rigorous lines of

demarcation like that one between and within bodies of thought. Here's an example which might be a surprise to Marxists. Marx held two incompatible theories of history simultaneously, showing no awareness of that fact. Sometimes he described history as the teleological self-development of the productive forces; other times as class struggle.⁸ These incompatible theories have incompatible implications. One of them implies a fatalism⁹, the other can be a basis for activist political strategy. This tension is unresolved through the history of Marxism.¹⁰

“Epistemological Break” is a concept which the philosopher and historian of science Gaston Bachelard produced to think demonstrable discontinuities in the histories of sciences, for example the abrupt transition from Newtonian to Einsteinian physics, in opposition to ideologies of continuous scientific progress such as positivism. Because Bachelard lacked the concept of the Problematic, his descriptions of these discontinuities are less precise than Althusser's, and, he tended to focus on one particular type of discontinuity in which the successor theory subsumes its predecessor, for example the way Euclidian geometry became a subset of later non-Euclidian geometries.¹¹ Althusser transformed the concept into something which is both more general and more specific. More general because he encompasses theories which are destroyed and thrown away by the break, for example, the way the concept of “phlogiston” is eliminated by the concept of “oxygen” and the periodic table; more specific because he insists that the break is between the *ideological pre-history* of a science and its constitution as a science per se. Here's an example using Freud. When Freud surveys the literature in the first chapter of *The Interpretation of Dreams*, he demonstrates that the multiple theorizations preceding him are not only inconclusive but mutually incompatible: somatic disturbances, fragmentary memories of the previous day, gastric accidents, etc. He shows that these theorizations all treat dreams as phenomena of consciousness, and that this doesn't work, leading to what Althusser would describe as a closed theoretical space incapable of producing new knowledges. Freud's epistemological break is his production of a new concept, The Unconscious, which becomes the object of the new science he inaugurates.

The break which Althusser especially wants to demonstrate is between Marx's early philosophical works and the mature science of *Capital*. His purpose is to show that the philosophical categories of the *1844 Manuscripts* aren't Marxist at all, but are rigorously and systematically pre-Marxist, specifically Feuerbachian plus an “injection” of Hegel's idealist dialectic necessary to make them appear historical. He makes the sensible argument that the status of these manuscripts is obvious given that Marx abandoned them as failures, locked them in a trunk, and never looked at them again. But he importantly devotes a series of increasingly detailed

analytical texts to fully explicating the exact relationships of the problematics operative within them and the sequence of radically discontinuous steps Marx took in leaving them behind.

Althusser's thinking about Marx's break evolved considerably over the history of his work. In this first period, he saw it as a single event, which he situated precisely in 1845 in the "Theses on Feuerbach" and *The German Ideology*. The "Theses" say goodbye to Feuerbach with his ideological problematic of The Essence of Man, Alienation, Species Being and the rest; *The German Ideology* inaugurates the Marxist scientific problematic of Mode of Production, Productive Forces, Relations of Production, and so on; in Marx from that moment on there's neither Feuerbach, nor Hegel. Over time, Althusser's views evolved self-critically. By 1966-7 he saw the break not as an *event* but as a *process*, and he produced meticulously detailed readings demonstrating that while Marx *inaugurated* the break in 1845, Hegelian and Feuerbachian elements remain in Marx's thought to the end, including a contradictory and tense interrelationship in *Capital*. By 1978 he was even more critical, arguing that the expository structure of *Capital* itself is idealist, and that it contains Feuerbachian categories hiding behind other names¹². For the later Althusser, this self-antagonistic impurity is inevitable in *any* text: no text is ever pristine, no thought ever free from the problematics inherited from its own past. The break never ends, and, crucially, it's possible to backslide from post-break scientific positions to pre-break ideological ones which are always operative and never extinct. This is not the view he defends in this first period. Here, the break is sudden, clean, and done.

So what's a "**Science**", then? Althusser following Bachelard rejects positivist, empiricist and common-sensical conflation of science with the apparatus of experimentation and other practices which validate scientific theories, as he also rejects naive definitions of science as simple induction/generalization from observation. Science is a type of discourse in which concepts at a high level of rigor interact in a "field"¹³ which makes them possible and which they simultaneously define. It's the rigorous systematicity of the conceptual field structured around an appropriate theoretical object. It's characterized by the production of new knowledges, where *knowledge* is distinguished from mere intuition or whathaveyou as the product of a process of theoretical labor. Althusser sees that as the spiral form of circularity, not as tautology. Science is a system of concepts capable of producing knowledges which make possible new sciences which are systems of concepts which make possible new knowledges. Science is the systematicity of its concepts.

A type of discourse: discourse without a subject. Authors as individualized consciousnesses which “know” things do not exist in scientific discourse. Scientificality depends on this. Scientificality is constituted specifically as supra-personal objectivity independent of the foibles of individual perception or other subjective contingencies. The criterion of reproducibility of scientific experiments is one example: an experiment must be designed to make the individual experimenter disappear. That’s part of what makes it scientific.

Science is contrasted with ideology throughout Althusser’s work. In this first period, science and ideology are counterposed pretty much as absolutes: independent of each other in their purity, after and before the break. Probably the most important distinction for the earlier Althusser is that ideologies lack objects, the “theoretical objects” which provide the unity of scientific problematics; he drops this later.¹⁴ The latter Althusser sees a permanent intermingling of science and ideology, where sciences are always under siege by their own ideological prehistories.

Indeed, Althusser’s project exists because of this. Marx founded the science of history. Yet Marx’s science is under ideological siege, not from without, by the anti-Marxist cold warriors one would expect, but from within, by philosophers and party officials who evoke Marx’s name and legacy while substituting Marx’s ideological prehistory for the mature science Marx founded. In his middle and later periods Althusser says: this always happens. His examples from the histories of concrete sciences illustrate and underscore his demonstration. This is the crux of what many of his concepts are designed to achieve: a definition of science which is itself scientific.

“Overdetermination” is Freud’s concept for thinking causality complexly. Neurotic symptoms are the results of multiple determinations: they’re overdetermined. Althusser borrows the concept to identify what he underscores as a fundamental distinction between idealist and materialist dialectics. In Hegel, contradiction is simple: a binary opposition between two poles, of which all other phenomena of the whole containing the contradiction are merely emanations, or expressions, or consequences. In Marxism, concrete contradictions are not binary, but are multiply determined local regions of the global totalities to which they belong.

A simple but I think useful example. Where a left-leaning Hegelian might understand capitalism characterized by a binary antagonism between capitalists and proletarians, Marxists insist that multiple intermediate and secondary social strata are necessary to the analysis. Peasants, landowners, intellectuals, managerial

professionals, small business owners, the very large number of unemployed or semi-employed, all play significant roles in political dynamics: for example the role of homeless former soldiers and lumpen proletarians as street troops for the Fascist movements between the wars. These strata overdetermine the main antagonism between the two primary forces. Histories and social phenomena - ideologies, cultures, the state, and so on - add to the complexity.¹⁵ “What can this mean but that the apparently simple contradiction is *always overdetermined*?”¹⁶ Overdetermination was always present in the work of the classic Marxists without the concept being explicitly produced.¹⁷

“Conjuncture” is a key concept of Lenin’s¹⁸, through which one thinks the complexity of a current situation, whether in politics or theory. Similarly to the Problematic, a Conjuncture is an ensemble of relationships within a structure of dominance, where one element determines the others. For Lenin, all political strategy should be based on a “concrete analysis of the concrete situation”. Althusser insists that all philosophy should be thought of as conjunctural: interventions within specific circumstances. One of his most interesting middle period texts, “The Philosophical Conjuncture and Marxist Theoretical Research”, is an analysis of the philosophical conjuncture in France in 1966, sketching the relationships between and relative strengths of Existentialism, “sedimentary” survivals of French Medieval scholasticism, spiritualism, critical rationalism descending from Descartes, rationalist empiricism, the official Marxism of the Party, the Marxism of Sartre, and so on, concluding with a “situation” of his own project within this field - and a plea for allies. His readings in the history of philosophy attempt something similar. In its strongest form, these analyses imply that the text is engendered by the conjuncture, similar to the way Althusser sometimes says, or verges on saying, that the individual human subjects who produce the texts are themselves produced as thinking subjects by the Problematic. In this sense, the dyad Problematic/Conjuncture is the same logic at different levels of abstraction. Problematic is abstract, Conjuncture is concrete: the overdetermined articulation of multiple Problematics at a particular moment of their evolution in time.

“Mode of Production” is the mature Marx’s scientific object. Informally you can think of it as the set of relationships within which stuff gets made. A blacksmith who manufactures iron nails in medieval France produces within a different mode of production from a proletarian who manufactures iron nails in a factory in contemporary France. Same product, different relationship to the means of production, different labor processes, different relationship to the exchange of the product, different relationship to the surplus value realized when the product is

exchanged. Formally, Mode of Production is the unity between productive forces and relations of production, where this unity forms the “economic base” of Marx’s famous base/superstructure metaphor.¹⁹ The unity is complex, binding together multiple elements such as labor processes, objects of labor, instruments of labor, agents of labor processes, means of production, and so on in a hierarchical ensemble determined by the means of production. Mode of Production is an *abstract* concept; modes of production aren’t found in reality in pure states, but always in complexly articulated combinations with other modes of production.

Mode of Production makes it possible to think history scientifically. Its secondary concepts - social formation, exploitation, social surplus, class, class struggle and so on - enable scientific analysis of historical change. If history interests you, check out Perry Anderson’s *Passages from Antiquity to Feudalism*,²⁰ which uses these concepts brilliantly to show how the destruction of the Roman Empire and the slave mode of production happened in different ways in different parts of Europe and the Mediterranean, resulting in regional divisions which persist to this day.

“Social Formation” is the mature Marx’s *concrete* concept for thinking the complexly structured articulation within which Modes of Production are found in reality. You can think of it informally as a specific society in real history: the contemporary French “social formation” is today’s nation of France. But note that Marx rejected “society” as a non-concept, an ideological not a scientific term.²¹ Formally a Social Formation is a hierarchically-structured complex in which at least two but frequently more Modes of Production coexist, in the relationship we’re familiar with in which one Mode of Production dominates the others. Sometimes these are historical survivals such as landed property or small-scale artisanal production within social formations dominated by capitalism; other times they may be new modes of production emerging, such as the capitalist mode of production developing within feudal social formations.²² The basis of Marxist historiography is the “anatomy”, I think Marx used that term, of social formations and their evolutions. The basis for Marxist political *strategy* is the concrete analysis of the current conjuncture of the social formation.

“The Materialist Dialectic” is *not* Hegel’s idealist dialectic inverted. In Hegel, the dialectic is the logic of a simple binary contradiction whose evolution is internally conditioned, that is, whose outcome is teleologically present in its origin. Althusser argues that Marx’s famous figure of “inverting” the Hegelian dialectic is ambiguous and inadequate, for if taken literally it would leave intact the simple binary contradiction, the teleology, and the end which is already inscribed in its origin.²³ He demonstrates that the *materialist* dialectic operative although not

conceptualized in mature Marxism, is different, based on complexly articulated nexuses of contradictions whose overdetermination results in “ruptural unities” that are “explosively conditioned”. You can think of dialectics in Marx as something like tectonics in geology: pressures mount from contrary directions until the weak point - the most overdetermined point of intersection of forces - suddenly breaks. That’s my analogy, not Althusser’s; and we know from Althusser to be suspicious of metaphors and analogies as indexes of nonexistent concepts. But, they help you to “see” the idea - another metaphor - so there you go.

More: in Marx this dialectic which is not the function of an end is always *tendential*, meaning, existing in overdetermined relationships with simultaneous counter-tendencies which have the capability of holding back, or undoing, or defeating the tendency under consideration. You know this from *Capital: the law of the tendency of the rate of profit to fall*. All “laws” in *Capital* are tendential.²⁴ Althusser describes this as “a dialectic of the tendency”²⁵. Althusser’s Marxism rejects the Second International, with its invariant succession of world-historical modes of production conceived on the model of and with the logic of Hegel’s successive epochs of the world spirit - a teleology in which the eventual victory of socialism is inevitable. For Althusser, it’s always possible to lose.

“Structure-in-Dominance” has been seen in operation several times above. Althusser conceptualized totalities as hierarchical unities united by and determined by the element dominating the hierarchy. It’s unclear to me whether Althusser viewed this as part of the ontological structure of reality, or as somehow built in to the structures of conceptual thinking, or as merely a handy conceptual tool. Doesn’t matter. This logic is operative throughout his work.

Note that “dominance” is frequently²⁶ tendential. As with all tendencies, the dominant tendency within structure-in-dominance has counter-tendencies working against it. These relationships can change: welcome to the revolution.

This logic is especially useful because it enables analysis of the conjuncture in a rigorous way. Here’s an example which I find interesting. In *The Meaning of the Second World War*,²⁷ Ernest Mandel analyses the war as “a combination of five different conflicts” overlapping in time and space, evolving semi-independently, creating an unstable and contradictory unity which reacts on each of the constituents while giving the war as a whole its dynamic. Here’s his list:

1. An inter-imperialist war for world hegemony won by the United States.

2. A war of self-defense won by the Soviet Union against the imperialist attempt to destroy it.
3. A war of national liberation by the Chinese people against imperialism which *changed its character* as it developed, turning into an anti-capitalist revolution as it matured.
4. A war of national liberation by other Asian peoples, one of which - the Vietnamese - changed character similarly to the Chinese experience during the course of its evolution.
5. A war of national liberation by the occupied countries of Europe, which grew into anti-capitalist revolutions in Yugoslavia and Albania; civil war in Greece and northern Italy; while remaining under bourgeois control in France, Norway, etc.

In Mandel's analysis, the dominant conflict within this unity changed from one time period to the next. Obviously, #3 began first and lasted longest. From 1939-45, #1 dominated; in 1945-6, #5; 1947-9, #3; etc. A conjunctural analysis at any of those moments would show a different constellation of dominance among the elements as a whole. This analytical framework demonstrates more concretely than conventional histories the social dynamics as well as the temporal rhythms which were in part the outcome of those dynamics.

Large movement coalitions are structures-in-dominance. I'm thinking right now of the big antiwar coalitions which organized monster demonstrations in San Francisco in 1991. The leaderships were dominated by the traditional far-left sectarian groups who provided the staff and resources; but their successes were determined by the crucial leaven of seasoned nonaffiliated activists who oversaw the millions of day to day things that had to be done. Domination/determination: ask me and I'll explain how the group I belonged to at the time doubled its branch by orienting to this structure in an intelligent way.²⁸

For Althusser, "Intersectional Feminism" is an impossibility. An Althusserian critique would say, the "intersectional" attempt to think complexity - multiple determinations - is fruitful and correct. But, it's false to assert as Intersectional Feminism does that these determinants are co-equal in weight and consequence. Althusserians insist that one of these dominates the others, so that for Socialist Feminists class is ultimately more important than race or gender.²⁹

Althusser contrasts structure-in-dominance, which he identifies as the Marxist materialist conception of totality, with the Hegelian idealist "expressive totality", each part of which reflects the simple binary contradiction informing the whole.³⁰

“Process Without a Subject” is Althusser’s way of thinking how logics of complexity impel change without anyone consciously guiding them. Think of my example of Niels Bohr, complementarity, and the problematic of quantum physics. Complementarity is implied by the logic of that problematic, but, no person had thought it yet. You can reasonably understand Bohr as the result of that necessity, where someone else could and would have substituted for Bohr if he hadn’t gotten to it first. Collective understanding of the problematic evolved: a concept was added to it which had previously been missing. Does it really matter which human individual had the thought?

The important implication is that history happens without a subject, whether the productive forces, “Man”, or the Idea; and without a goal, whether Communism, the Second Coming, or the self-realization of the Idea. Historical change is a result of the overdetermination of the whole in its conflictual unity, like the tectonic plates of my earlier analogy, intersecting to create ruptural movement at the weakest or most stressed points of intersection. This is part of what Althusser calls “structural causality”. History happens because the unity is unstable, creating a new unstable unity as its outcome.³¹ There’s no forward or progressive *direction* implied: things might even go backward - there are counter-revolutions in history, there are civilizations which disappeared from history. There’s no guarantee, no succession of grand historical epochs leading inexorably to Communism as its teleological inevitability. It’s entirely possible to lose. It all depends on the balance of forces - and, perhaps ironically for Althusserians, on the decisions people make.³²

How does this square with Marx’s insistence that “men make their own history”? A democratic formula expressing political self-determination. Althusser explains it this way: “In my opinion: men (plural), in the concrete sense, are necessarily subjects (plural) *in* history, because they act *in* history as subjects (plural). But there is no Subject (singular) *of* history.”³³ This means two things. Human beings in their subjectivity are formed by their social contexts, which are historical: the way they think is part of that. And, history itself isn’t thinking anything.³⁴

This matters in practice because those who define the proletariat as the subject of history will as a result focus their effort on creating class consciousness. There’s nothing wrong with class consciousness! The point is that exclusive focus on consciousness leaves you with a basically pedagogical model where someone - the Party, the experts, the authors of utopian systems, Georg Lukacs - educates the workers until they know what’s good for them. Marx’s politics are antithetical to

that: the liberation of the workers will be accomplished by the workers themselves. Where individuals' consciousness evolves and matures via the experience of the struggle itself. Meanwhile that pedagogical model simultaneously ignores the essentially unconscious nature of ideology, which is the real crux of things.

“Differential Historical Time” is your basic mouthful. Althusser produced this concept to think the way the different elements of a social formation evolve at their own tempos. Law, the state apparatus, ideology, culture, technology all have their own histories.

Think about conventional distinctions between historical periods. The Renaissance followed the Dark Ages. But that didn't happen over a single night, and it didn't happen in a way where each part of every social whole entered the Renaissance in lock step with the others. Think of the rebirth of Roman law beginning as early as the 12th century, then of the long lag of art and culture until their sudden rapid advance centuries later. Althusser's point is that elements of social wholes change at their own speeds, within their own relative autonomies.

Ben Brewster's glossary to *Reading Capital* detangles this:

“Time (temps). Hegelian theories of history see time as the mode of existence (Dasein) of the concept (Begriff). There is therefore a unique linear time in which the totality of historical possibilities unfolds. Empiricist theories of history as a chronology of ‘events’ accept the same conception of time by default. This simple unilinear time can then be divided into ‘events’ (short-term phenomena) and ‘structures’ (long-term phenomena), or periodized in evolutionist fashion into self-contemporaneous ‘modes of production’, the static or ‘synchronic’ analysis of which has a dynamic or ‘diachronic’ development in time into another mode of production. This dynamics or diachrony is then history. For Althusser and Balibar, on the contrary, there is no simple unilinear time in which the development of the social formation unfolds: each level of the social formation and each element in each level has a different temporality, and the totality is constituted by the articulation together of the dislocations between these temporalities. It is thus never possible to construct a self-contemporaneity of the structure, or essential section. Historical time is always complex and multi-linear. The synchrony of the social formation, or of one of its levels or elements, is the concept of its structure, i.e., of its dislocation and articulation into the totality. It therefore includes both ‘static’ and ‘dynamic’ elements (tendencies). The term diachrony can only be applied to the concept of the

phase of transition. History itself is not a temporality, but an epistemological category designating the object of a certain science, historical materialism.”³⁵

This is a similar idea to what Braudel and the Annales Group described as historical “durée”, operating over long, medium, and short temporalities; and is pretty much what Trotsky termed “combined and uneven development”. All these authors are seeking the same thing: a conception of historical temporality grasped in its fundamental unevenness. Think of Mandel’s analysis of the Second World War which I quoted above. Durée, uneven development, combined and uneven development are all descriptions; differential historical time is the concept.

“Determination in the Last Instance” is Althusser’s non-reductive way of thinking the role that “the economy” plays in the complex articulation of social structures. In Marx’s famous base/superstructure metaphor, the elements of the superstructure - the state, law, ideology, and so on - have their own histories which are relatively autonomous. Within the structured totality of a concrete social formation, one element dominates the others: Althusser somewhere suggests that in feudal social formations the dominant element was religion. The element that dominates is determined - in the last instance - by the economy.

“In the last instance”: he means indirectly, in the long run, over time. Where a vulgar materialist - Michael Moore, say - will argue that political decisions are determined by direct economic interests - somebody wants a pipeline, there will therefore be a war - Althusser insists that politics, like culture or ideology or the other superstructural elements, has its own history. You can’t *reduce* it to the economy or any other determinism.³⁶ “From the first moment to the last, the lonely hour of the ‘last instance’ never comes.”³⁷

A **“Symptomatic Reading”** constructs the problematics operating within a text, dragging them to visibility by demonstrating their effects. For Althusser, the text is not simple, not a false ideological “unity”, but a conflictual unity of constitutive problematics. It’s necessary to work on a text to make its latent relationships manifest, as by analogy dream analysis for Freud. Althusser frequently speaks of “setting the text to work against itself”; “making the text speak”; identifying its “silences”, “empty places”, conflicts and self-contradictions: the antagonisms that “haunt” a text. One of Althusser’s most beautiful passages poses the question: What does it mean to read?:

“However paradoxical it may seem, I venture to suggest that our age threatens one day to appear in the history of human culture as marked by the most

dramatic and difficult trial of all, the discovery of and training in the meaning of the ‘simplest’ acts of existence: seeing, listening, speaking, reading – the acts which relate men to their works, and to those works thrown in their faces, their ‘absences of works’. And contrary to all today’s reigning appearances, we do not owe these staggering knowledges to psychology, which is built on the absence of a concept of them, but to a few men: Marx, Nietzsche and Freud.”³⁸

His answer is that critical reading requires protocols. The answers you get depend on the questions you ask: what questions will you ask? Althusser reads *Capital* not as an economist might, or a sociologist or historian, but as a philosopher, asking, What is Marx’s theoretical object, and, What is the text’s relation to that object?

What symptoms does one look for when reading symptomatically? Here are three:

Metaphor is frequently an index of the lack of a concept. The author’s trying to define something, but instead is forced to describe it poetically: because the concept’s missing. Marx uses the famous base/superstructure topographical metaphor; Althusser frequently uses spatial metaphors; I used the analogy with tectonics earlier. Marx lacks the concept he’s trying to think; what about Althusser and me? I’ll leave you the question. It’s not necessarily *illegitimate* to write metaphorically: there’s no reason not to illustrate with literary devices which help to make meaning comprehensible. But, interrogate the metaphors to determine their status. Are they substituting for absent concepts?

Elision - Althusser sometimes calls this “slide” [*glissement*] - can indicate that the author is actually trying to think something different than the thing she thinks she’s trying to think. If she says, “I’m going to examine X”, but instead discusses Y, you need to use your symptomatic reading to suss the problematics determining her text to understand why that happened. In *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific*, Engels frequently talks about empiricism when he says he’s talking about materialism.³⁹ What’s up with that?

Absences, or silences. Logically you’d expect to find something which you don’t. Marx’s concept of Social Formation is entirely absent from *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific*, where Mode of Production has a different meaning than in *Capital*: more or less the same as the epochs of the world spirit in Hegel. *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific* is informed by the neo-Hegelian problematic of Marx’s Preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, where the motor of history is the self-unfolding of a simple binary contradiction between the forces of production and the relations of production, from which the revolutionary bursting forth of the

forces of production from their “fetters” causes the birth of a succeeding mode of production which was already incipient inside the contradiction itself.

The notion of *a reading* as a noun may be Althusser’s most widely known contribution, although Althusser’s role in developing it might not be so generally remembered. Nowadays everybody knows what *a reading* is: it’s part of general intellectual culture. Althusser and his circle were largely responsible.⁴⁰

Finally, **“Theory”** - capital-T - is the theory of practice in general, while “philosophy” in this first period is the theory of theoretical practice, or, if you like, the science of the sciences, a regional subset of Theory. These related but I think sometimes elided concepts define a privileged ground from which the scientificity of theories can be determined. At this time in Althusser’s evolution there’s a triumphalism orbiting these concepts: a palpable sense of, “This is it! We found it!”, which Althusser would soon reject. In self-critically taking stock of the results of this first phase, Althusser criticized this formula as “positivist” and “theoreticist”, producing in the next period a very different concept of “philosophy”.

The results in 1965 were immediate and explosive. Although Althusser began to revise almost right away, many were lasting.

In my opinion the most important is his extensive and passionate demonstration of Marx’s stature as founder of the science of history. He shows that sciences are ordered discourses with specific types of objects, and that Marx’s historical materialism is one of these, an epochal development analogous to those of Thales or Galileo/Newton. He demonstrates a break between the pre-scientific Marx of the *1844 Manuscripts* and the scientific Marx of *Capital*. The problematic of the *1844 Manuscripts* is militantly Feuerbachian with an “injection” of Hegel. The mature Marx is free from Feuerbachianism and Hegelianism; at this time, Althusser argued that aside from its ambiguous first chapter, *Capital* is entirely Hegel-free. In this period he understands the break as an event with a sharply discontinuous ideological before and scientific after.

Certainly the most *contentious* result was Althusser’s polemical slogan, “Marxism is not a Humanism.” This is a perfectly benign idea: it simply means, “Marx isn’t Feuerbach”. “Humanism” means Feuerbach’s anthropological ideology of *The Essence of Man, Alienation, Species Being*, and so on. The point would have been more clear if the slogan were, “Marxism is not an anthropology” - but I suppose that would have lacked the polemical juice. Althusser’s “theoretical anti-humanism” became an immediate flashpoint for opposition, from the official Party

philosophers who rightly identified Marx's humanism of 1844 as the cornerstone of their rightward turn, to outraged members of the intellectual public who misunderstood it as defense of Stalinism. Because it *sounds*, after all, like "Marxists don't like people."

So let's nail this down. For Althusser, *theoretical humanism* is Feuerbach's problematic of "human nature", the essence of Man, which despite its declaration of materialism is a spiritualist idealism centered on moral consciousness. "Man is that exceptional being whose attributes are the Universal, Reason, Consciousness (rational, moral, and religious) and Love."⁴¹ Because these attributes are eternal, there can be no reasonable theory of history in Feuerbach; this is why Marx in the *1844 Manuscripts* was forced to "inject" the Hegelian idealist dialectic into the Feuerbachian anthropology in the ultimately failed and abandoned attempt to historicize it. Marx tried it, mucked around with it for a hundred pages, realized it was a dead-end, tossed the manuscript into a trunk and pushed the reset button. Marx's epistemological break leaves all this behind, when he began in 1845 to think instead in terms of the modes of production of material life. This is neither a rejection of human beings nor a defense of Stalinism: it's a rejection as un-Marxist of the ideological prehistory through which Marx travelled on his road to becoming himself.

Also contentious was Althusser's complementary slogan, "Marxism is not a historicism." This must have seemed jarring at the time granted that Marxism is all about history - Gramsci called it "an absolute historicism".⁴² Althusser defines "historicism" as the evolutionist conception of time as linear and undifferentiated, "even", contrasting with Lenin's insistence on the unevenness of all processes. Althusser's concept of differential historical time captures the uneven temporal evolution of the various elements of a social formation, which Historicism makes invisible.

Althusser's relentless demotion of subjectivity and the subject is important, and, I think worth emphasizing, not unique to him at the time. Foucault, Derrida and much of contemporary French intellectual culture were trying to conceptualize anti-subjectivity in different ways. Again this isn't because they didn't value people. It's because the traditional emphasis since the Enlightenment on processes of individual cognition obscured⁴³ the kinds of questions that are the most interesting. It isn't, What was Napoleon thinking at the Battle of Waterloo? It's, How is it possible that a man like Napoleon was empowered at all? Consider it: millions of French peasants had to agree to fight for him; hundreds of thousands of workers had to agree to manufacture arms and ammunition. Why didn't they all say no?

Less prominent but important for understanding Althusser's project is his critique of Structuralism as a neo-Hegelian ideology. While Althusser frequently wrote of structures and their elements, he drew a sharp line of demarcation between his use of the term and the then-popular uses in the intellectual France of his day.

Althusser dissected Structuralism as Hegelian in its conception of totality, where each element of the whole reflects or contains the whole in its essence. However, as Warren Montag emphasizes, "Althusser's analysis of his own theoretical conjuncture and the important if not dominant role of structuralism within it did not take the form of a coherent text or group of texts."⁴⁴ Instead, his critique of Structuralism is scattered in passages and asides throughout his writings.

Lastly⁴⁵, this period is defined by the capital-T idea of Theory as privileged ground which Althusser shortly rejected as theoreticist. Events pushed him and his circle to different emphases almost immediately.

Although Althusser failed to influence the course of the PCF, he did produce a daring and *useful* theoretical reconceptualization of the political strategy of the Third International.⁴⁶ What will the effects of that be in the long run?

Althusser's Second Period: Ideology

From 1966-76 ish, Althusser self-critically re-examined these conclusions. I think there were several drivers. Critical responses to his books; evolution of the political conjuncture inside the PCF; and, if I understand this, the increasing influence of his student-colleagues, especially Macherey, all contributed. But the two main impulses were the maturation of Althusser's own philosophical tools, which he applied to himself; and the shock of the failed revolution of May '68, which led him to engage in a sustained way with the inadequacies of Marx's theories of ideology and the state. The results were a self-critical shift in emphasis and a re-formulation of some of Marx's key concepts, which Althusser came to criticize as either incomplete or just plain wrong.

It's important to stress that Althusser published little of what he wrote in these years. Some of his manuscripts were circulated among his colleagues and friends. But the French intellectual public were unable to encounter them until their posthumous publication in the 1990s; while English readers are just now receiving them. This created a significant distortion which minimized the significance of Althusser's self-criticism while failing to appreciate the full context of what he did

publish. For example, his very famous essay of this period, “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses”, one of his best-known works, turns out to be two excerpts from a full-length book, *On the Reproduction of Capitalism*, published at last in English in 2014. This was not known at the time.⁴⁷ Today there are multiple texts from this period collected in book form in English: *The Humanist Controversy*, *On The Reproduction of Capitalism*, *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, and *Philosophy and the Spontaneous Philosophy of the Scientists*. But, something less than half of this material was published during Althusser’s lifetime.

New or transformed concepts in this period are: Ideology; the Materiality of Ideology; Interpellation; the State; Ideological State Apparatus; and Philosophy.

“**Ideology**” in Marx is a product of consciousness, an idea he inherited from the Enlightenment.⁴⁸ For him, ideology consists naturally of *ideas*, which have a relationship to the *real*, where that relationship can be distorted, or inverted, or otherwise made false, in the more or less instrumental service of class interests.⁴⁹ In his first period Althusser followed Marx in defining ideology as a system of mental representations endowed with a social function. He counterposed ideology to science as the prehistory and post history respectively of epistemological breaks, defining it in this sense as discourse without an object.⁵⁰ Yet he simultaneously considered ideology in terms that were not so much about ideas as more directly material: a “lived” rather than theorized relation between people and the world,⁵¹ focused more on behavior than thought.

Althusser now rejects ideology as consciousness altogether. He argues that *ideas* and *ideology* aren’t the same thing. Ideology is a type of social practice. It’s what people *do*: their habits and customs, what Althusser calls “their concrete comportment”⁵², whether self-consciously considered or, more likely, not. Indeed: the materiality of ritual, of practice, itself largely determines what people think. “Kneel down, move your lips in prayer, *and you will believe*,” says Pascal.⁵³ Ideology is no longer a system of ideas, but a system of social *practices* which *produce* ideas.

What does ideology *do*? I think you can reasonably say, it convinces people to carry on doing what they did the day before, largely by making alternatives invisible. This is my language, not Althusser’s, and Althusser would probably criticize it for opening the door to the functionalist-idealist interpretation he wanted to avoid. Althusser’s language is: ideology determines our “sense of what is most immediately self-evident.”⁵⁴ But I think my version is useful, so long as we qualify it by noting that people don’t deliberately and consciously produce ideology on purpose. It’s not actually produced by people at all, but as an effect of the

structures of the modes of production articulated in a social formation, which “secrete” it. It’s a necessary component of the *reproduction* of modes of production: part of their glue. Something like this: modes of production produce the ideologies which produce the ideologized subjects who are necessary to the continued existence of the modes of production.

Ideology is thus never-ending. “There will always be ideology, because ideology is the condition for the existence of individuals”⁵⁵, where “individuals” means ideologized subjects - a remark which may seem unexpected when one considers the Marxist tradition.

Here’s something interesting implied by Althusser’s quotation from Pascal: “Kneel down, move your lips in prayer, *and you will believe.*” Althusser doesn’t call this out, but here it is. *Change the ritual, and the ideas will change.* Think about an anti-war demonstration, a picket line, a rally, a strike. These are all rituals. They’re not the *usual* rituals. Participants over many many decades have emphasized that the experience of these events changes people’s consciousness. Simply *participating* in the struggle, in whatever form, *changes* people. Before Althusser we’ve always called this “learning from experience” - a function of consciousness, which we’ve thought via the pedagogical model which is our spontaneous ideology as activists. Has Althusser taught us something new and important?

“The Materiality of Ideology” is part of Althusser’s reformulation. Ideologies aren’t ideas, they’re books and speeches and sermons, institutions and rituals, habits and practices which *produce* ideas. Practices are the key. Althusser: “...the existence of the ideas in which [an individual subject] believes is material in that his ideas are his material acts inserted into material practices regulated by material rituals which are themselves defined by the material ideological apparatus from which (hardly by accident!) his ideas derive.”⁵⁶ *Institutions* are crucial for the reproduction of ideologies: they materialize and propagate the ideologies on which they’re based. A school, a church, the Pentagon: institutions and social practices materialize ideology as part of the reproduction of the social formation. Both its material conditions and its ideologies must be reproduced for a mode of production or a social formation to carry on.⁵⁷

“Interpellation” is *how* this happens. “Interpellation” means hailing: “Hey Mark!” Followed by the rituals we know well: a handshake, a smile, lunch, whatever. In its most extreme and obvious form: interpolation by cop: “Hey you! Show me your papers!” Althusser defines interpellation as the mechanism through which ideologies *produce* individual human subjects *as* ideological subjects: the

process through which individuals are taught to *internalize* ideologies and later act them out.

But it's more involved. We're all "always-already" ideological subjects. We can't not be. When an unborn child is "expected", that child's parents and the society around them immediately begin to produce that child's identity for it, through their rituals and their expectations. The child is "marked out [*assigné*] as a subject in and by the particular familial ideological configuration in which it is 'expected'"⁵⁸.

Freud conceptualized this in the theory of sexuality, which Althusser summarizes as, "the quondam subject-to-be has to 'find' its place, that is, 'become' the sexual subject (boy or girl) it already is in advance."⁵⁹ Lacan added the concept of the Mirror Stage on which Althusser leans. But Althusser adds to Freud and Lacan by insisting on the *complexity* - multiplicity - of the concrete ideologies which interpellate us, so that the ideological subject that results has a structure-in-dominance relationship to multiple ideologies:

"When religious ideology begins to function directly by interpolating the little child Louis as a subject, little Louis is already-subject - not yet religious-subject, but familial-subject. When legal ideology (later, let us suppose) begins to interpellate little Louis by talking to him about, not Mama and Papa now, or God and the Little Lord Jesus, but Justice, he was already a subject, familial, religious, scholastic, and so on. I shall skip the moral stage, aesthetic stage, and others. Finally, when, later, thanks to auto-heterobiographical circumstances of the type Popular Front, Spanish Civil War, Hitler, 1940, Defeat, captivity, encounter with a communist, and so on, political ideology (in its differential forms) begins to interpellate the now adult Louis as a subject, he has already long been, always-already been, a familial, religious, moral, scholastic and legal subject... and now, lo and behold, a political subject! This political subject begins, once back from captivity, to make the transition from traditional Catholic activism to advanced - semi-heretical - Catholic activism, then begins reading Marx, then joins the Communist Party, and so on. So life goes. Ideologies never stop interpolating subjects as subjects, never stop 'recruiting' individuals who are always-already subjects. The play of ideologies is superposed, criss-crossed, contradicts itself on the same subject: the same individual always-already (several times) subject. Let him figure things out, if he can..."⁶⁰

Wikipedia summarizes Althusser's intent this way: "Individual subjects are presented principally as produced by social forces, rather than acting as powerful independent agents with self-produced identities."⁶¹ He continues the radically

anti-subjective themes of his earlier work, only now he adds a theory of how ideological subjects become what they are. Not only do individuals not make history, science, or whathaveyou - these are all social products, not individual ones - but individuals ourselves are products of histories, sciences, and whathaveyous that existed before we did and shaped us before we could possibly have shaped them. The situation is “always-already”. And so these nexuses of ideologies make us “go” - to work in the morning.

In my opinion, many of Althusser’s formulations of these arguments are hasty, incomplete, and idealist. If we take literally the idea that ideologies hail people, then all we’ve done is shift the subject from humans to ideologies. Althusser’s writing in these texts switches unpredictably from concepts to figures to allusions to illustrations: symptoms not just of incompleteness but of epistemological obstacles. He’s trying to think something for which he does not have the concept. Yet he’s on to something valuable. He wants to show that we all live inside ideology, there’s no escape, there’s only the partial and contradictory freedom offered by science, which can produce non-ideological knowledges, but which itself is always-already-always threatened. “So life goes.”

Althusser now departs from inherited Marxist thinking not only about Ideology, but also the State. He argues that the Marxist tradition contains merely “indications” of concepts not yet produced.⁶² Thus **“The State”** in classical Marxism is the organization of armed force in service of the ruling class; its principal function is repression of dominated classes on behalf of the class that rules. Althusser insists that, like the base/superstructure metaphor, this is a description, not a concept. He argues that this particular description is distorted, because it presents the state as a simple instrument in the service of the conscious objectives of a class which is capable of *thinking* as a *subject*: idealism of the subject married to instrumentalist pseudo-theory.⁶³ Althusser now tries to develop a concept “in the full sense” by “adding something” to the classic definition.

That something is the Ideological State Apparatuses, which Althusser differentiated from what he termed the Repressive State Apparatus with which classical Marxism was familiar. An **“Ideological State Apparatus”** is “a system of defined institutions, organizations, and the corresponding practices”⁶⁴, through which the state realizes the dominant ideology - the ideology of the ruling class. Althusser lists⁶⁵ them this way:

- 1) the Scholastic Apparatus
- 2) the Familial Apparatus

- 3) the Religious Apparatus
- 4) the Political Apparatus
- 5) the Associative Apparatus
- 6) the Information and News Apparatus
- 7) the Publishing and Distribution Apparatus
- 8) the Cultural Apparatus

Each ISA has its corresponding institutions.⁶⁶ The Scholastic Apparatus consists of schools, obviously; but perhaps less obviously the networks of research institutes, think tanks, and so on. Each ISA is a system of institutions, organizations, and their corresponding practices; a system which is not reducible to *ideas*, but consists of *ideologies* plus the material infrastructures and social practices through which ideologies are materialized, disseminated, and reproduced.⁶⁷

You'll note something interesting about the list: not all of the organizations constituting the system of an ISA belong to the government. The family, churches, news and entertainment, many schools: these institutions are "free" - free of state control - part of what "freedom" means. Althusser argues that this freedom is not germane, since for him it's the *system* of institutions which form an ISA, and that a system is not the same thing as the individuals who own its components. Indeed - Althusser doesn't say this but I think it's implied - this very independence from government control is part of what makes certain ISAs *effective*: after all, nobody in Soviet Russia *believed* Pravda. Importantly the state is now a far wider concept than merely the government, which is just one of its components.

Althusser is trying to think the role which ideology plays in reproducing the conditions of possibility of the social formation and its dominant mode of production. How is it possible that people act day in day out against their class interests? He wants to theorize this without the idealist chimera of "false consciousness". He's saying: consciousness has nothing to do with it. He's showing how these apparatuses not only disseminate and reproduce the dominant ideology, but realize that ideology in their practices. Here's a late passage which helps make this clear:

"It is a fact that social reproduction is not realized exclusively on the basis of the reproduction of labor, but, rather, presupposes the fundamental intervention of the ideological. Let us take an example: a worker who goes to his workplace has already travelled a long road through the social institutions - individual or collective - that induce him to come, voluntarily or involuntarily, and offer his services in exchange for the purchase of his labor-power: time, energy,

concentration, and so on. And although the material means of reproducing labor-power is wages, they do not suffice, as is well known. From his school years on, the worker has been ‘formed’ to conform to certain social norms that regulate behavior: punctuality, efficiency, obedience, responsibility, family love and *recognition of all forms of authority*. This formation presupposes subjection to the dominant ideology. In other words, he is a subject structurally subjected to the dominant - or non-dominant - ideology; that is to say, to a society’s hegemonic or subaltern norms and values.”⁶⁸

This concept of Ideological State Apparatuses is perhaps Althusser’s most striking and well-known intervention: it was intended to produce “effects”, and it did. Althusser succeeded in prompting militants of all convictions to take a wider view of the state than simply its repressive forces,⁶⁹ implying a correspondingly expanded view of activist political practice. It’s no longer possible to do activism competently without thinking strategically about how to talk to people as subjects of these ideological effects. Implied, I think, is a new language, a new activist vocabulary which *intervenes into* the specific ways people think. Or, perhaps better, in the ideological narratives within and by which their thinking is determined.

“Philosophy” is considerably transformed in this period. Where *Reading Capital* defined it as the theory of theoretical practice, Althusser now says it represents politics with the sciences and scientificity with the practices.⁷⁰ Strictly speaking, philosophy has no object, in the way that sciences have objects; yet it has a privileged relationship with science through which it produces categories which are necessary for sciences to overcome their inevitable epistemological obstacles. “For example, was it not in Cartesianism that a new category of causality was worked out for Galilean physics, which had run up against Aristotelian cause as an ‘epistemological obstacle?’”⁷¹ One observable characteristic of philosophy is that it “lags” behind science in this way.⁷²

I think, through these changes of emphasis Althusser was trying to understand why the French state proved to be more resilient than classical Marxism would have predicted. The state should have fallen under the absolutely massive nationwide crisis of May ’68. But, it held. How to understand its survival?⁷³

The results of this phase were also explosive, but the explosion was contained in one spot: the theory of the ISAs. This is interesting especially because the book-length context of the ISAs essay was invisible at the time. Despite this “silence”, the ISAs essay is today Althusser’s best-known and most frequently cited work.

I'll call out some less shiny results: redefinition of the break as process irreducible to the before and after of an event; rigorous, step-by-step analysis of Marx's break with Hegel and then Feuerbach and then Hegel again in his texts of 1843-45; acknowledgement and analysis of Hegelian and Feuerbachian survivals in *Capital*; criticism and abandonment of capital-T Theory as privileged ground; and subsequent redefinition of philosophy.

In my opinion the most important innovation of this period is his attempt to think ideology as materiality, independent of consciousness. But let me also stress that while I find the equivalence of ideology with ritual fruitful, to me it seems "one-sided". There are daily examples of people using *arguments* as justifications for utter nonsense. These aren't rituals so much as *discourses*, to which I find Freud's concepts directly relevant. Bill Gates and Mark Zuckerberg deserve their billions because they took the risk of dropping out of Harvard: a narrative which makes invisible their family networks and the circumstances of privilege which brought them to Harvard in the first place. Makes invisible: *represses*. Climate change deniers angrily attack the science of global warming, a proxy debate about whether capitalism really does bring the greatest benefit to the greatest number. Proxy: *displacement*. It seems to me that the *spoken* discourses of ideology frequently conform to the language of dreams: discourses of the unconscious. Althusser not only removes discourse from centrality, he devalues it altogether, suggesting an awkward duality of discourse versus practice in which discourse is in some sense less real.⁷⁴ In consequence he demotes the pedagogical model of activist practice - a good thing. Yet at the same time he closes the possibility of *intervention* into the ideological *narratives* sustaining social injustice and the looming catastrophe of runaway greenhouse effect. I believe there's strong reason not to surrender those possibilities.

But to stress: the status of many of these texts is unknown. Most of what I've called attention to was not published by Althusser. Why is that? Did he change his mind? Or, simply lack the time to finish? - as he repeatedly noted about Marx. All through this period his writing is criss-crossed with inconsistencies, self-contradictions, incomplete directions. Reading then as Althusserians: Althusser was trying to think thoughts that he lacked the concepts to think. Like Marx he produced *elements*, but that's all. I think, that remained the situation to the end of his life.

Althusser's Third Period: Marx in His Limits

In his final period, roughly 1977-87, Althusser produced a very radical reading of the absences, silences, and antagonisms within the mature Marx's mature Marxism.

He attempted sketches of some of what needed to be done for Marxism to overcome these limits while continuing to meaningfully evolve, focusing particularly on the definition of materialism. He published next to nothing of this work, so that contemporaries were again left with a distorted understanding of his evolution. The only English collection published in these years was *Essays in Self-Criticism*, which never made it out of hardback and was all but impossible to find - I first bought it around 2000 from a dealer of rare books. The posthumous and surprising collection *Philosophy of the Encounter* appeared in 2006. The concepts are: Philosophy; Materialism; and Aleatory Materialism.

“Philosophy”: finally, the “definitive formula”⁷⁵: philosophy is class struggle in theory - in the last instance.⁷⁶ The purpose of philosophy is to intervene into the conjuncture; its goal is to alter the relationships defining the conjuncture in a partisan way - to shift the balance of forces in both philosophy itself and in the ideologies, in part by contributing to the constitution of the dominant ideology or to ideologies challenging it.⁷⁷ All philosophers do this necessarily - “with or without their knowledge or consent” - Warren Montag.⁷⁸ Thus, philosophy’s job is not arbitrary, or at least, a Marxist’s job isn’t. Its work is to draw lines of demarcation: to define and clarify the ideological content of philosophies, including one’s own, emphasizing the basic dividing lines of scientificity versus ideology, and of materialism versus idealism. Philosophers intervene. This is Althusser’s mature conception of himself and of his project.⁷⁹

Althusser was sometimes accused by opponents of rigidity, peremptoriness, and other bad words meaning lack of humility and self-criticism. Yet he was continually reflecting, turning his theoretical tools onto himself, refining, in many cases rejecting and starting over. The evolution of his definition of philosophy over his three major periods is a striking example.⁸⁰

“Materialism” now has a different meaning for Althusser than the traditional ones. Engels and Lenin argued that philosophies are either idealist or materialist, where “idealism” in its broadest sense means that what people think is more important than the physical world they inhabit, and “materialism” means the physical world is in some sense determinant of what people think.⁸¹ In his last works Althusser rejected the duality of the idealism/materialism pair as itself an idealist position reflecting the historical dominance of idealism over materialism in the history of philosophy. He suggested instead that each of the great philosophies contains *tendencies* toward both idealism and materialism, necessarily, as an effect of the position it occupies in its war against other philosophies: that every philosophy will “occupy” its enemy’s positions, to some degree inside itself, in its specific way.⁸²

He now defines materialism as a *relationship* to the dominant idealist tendencies in all of philosophy: materialism is a rejection of all concepts of *origins* and *ends*, which are always linked and always dominated by ends: “The question of the origin of anything whatsoever is always posed as a function of the idea one has of its end.”⁸³ A philosophical tendency will be more materialist the more it rejects this specular trap, and with it all notions of either teleology or meaning.

Althusser’s purpose was, I think, to reclaim the centrality of class struggle, which he opposed to the “harmful” metaphysics of universal historical laws. “A truly materialist conception of history implies that we abandon the idea that history is ruled and dominated by laws which it is enough to know and respect in order to triumph over anti-history.”⁸⁴ A non-metaphysical, non-teleological materialism of singularity and specificity.

Lastly, “**Aleatory Materialism**” is a late Althusserian attempt to extend his rejection of geneticist and teleological conceptions by formulating a “materialism of the encounter”, in which chance plays a significant part. Because there are no universal laws of history, a degree of randomness determines how things turn out. He cites the example of the rise of the capitalist mode of production from the “encounter” between “the owners of money” and “the proletarian stripped of everything but his labor-power”: this encounter might never have happened, or, it might have happened many times without “taking-hold” and lasting. He cites the Renaissance states of the Po valley, where there were men with plentiful money, plentiful energy provided by the hydraulic power of the river, and plentiful unemployed manpower, but where capitalism nevertheless failed to happen, “for lack of an element or a suitable arrangement of the elements”, perhaps that of a domestic market capable of absorbing what might have been produced.⁸⁵ Once this taking-hold is accomplished, it becomes possible to analyze its laws - but not before.⁸⁶ A strict demotion of the idea of necessity in history.

Althusser’s elaboration of his thinking on aleatory materialism is uniquely uncharacteristic within his so-far published work, relying on a metaphysical-beautiful-story paraphrased from Epicurus. “Before the beginning of the world, an infinity of atoms were falling parallel to each other in the void.”⁸⁷ An image, a myth, a foundational fiction, an act of poetry: a figure, not a concept: not what anyone expected from Louis Althusser at the end of his career.⁸⁸

It’s difficult to draw conclusions about Althusser’s final works. In part because we’re still coming to understand them - and finding, to our surprise, that their results

were present all along, a “subterranean current”, as Althusser would say, within his own writings. I’ll highlight the implications which seem most urgent to me.

First, Althusser demonstrated that in his maturity Marx held two incompatible conceptions of history simultaneously, without being aware of that fact or of their incompatibility. On the one hand, the simple binary dialectic of the contradiction of the productive forces with the relations of production; on the other hand class struggle. Of course, we actually knew this all along in a somewhat unconscious or anyway unformulated way: Althusser was clearly hostile from the beginning to the Hegelianism of the Preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*. When he says out loud that Marx never resolved this conflict, it’s like a slap in the head: this explains the right wing and left wing interpretations of Marxism from the Second International onward.

His demonstration that Marxism lacks a comprehensive theory of the state - elements, but no theory - is more detailed and better elaborated in *On the Reproduction of Capitalism*. This seems to me to be crucial from an activist perspective. I don’t think we can have fully coherent movement strategies without it: there will always be lacunae which distort our practice. And, I think, we can probably now explain some of our own history.

But of course, Althusser’s most radical move was the demotion of the idea of necessity in history, with its concomitant emphasis on chance. At first blush, this *seems* so alien to any of the Marxisms we’ve inherited, which all try in one way or another not only to *explain* what’s happened but very importantly to *predict* what *will* happen based on rigorous analyses. Is this possible within an aleatory materialism?

Althusser did not produce a systematic, fully coherent and elaborated system. Very much the opposite. His work is full of self-corrections, changes of direction, tensions, struggles and dislocations. He insisted that absolutely everyone’s work demonstrates the same necessity - even though it may strive to give the *appearance* of systematicity or comprehensiveness. In a sense, it’s less effort to identify Althusser’s conflicts: he identifies them himself, continually.⁸⁹ We can say of Althusser what Althusser said of Marx: he most certainly did not say everything. He leaves us with many more problems than he resolves.

What can we do with this?

I emphasized at the beginning that I'd present an *activist* reading of Althusser's project. Althusser produced a body of theoretical tools: what can we *use* them for?

In my opinion they make possible two advances which have never been achieved in the history of the American left. First, understanding the specificity of the American social formation and its history. Second, mapping the ideological narratives supporting the reproduction of that formation. These two directions serve a common purpose: enabling *strategic intervention*, based on well-formulated theoretical conclusions. In a perfect world, make it possible to actually win. If we're good at it. And extremely lucky. Before the permafrost melts and capitalism turns the planet into Venus.

Here are some suggestions for discussion.

The U.S. has no center - it's not like Britain where London dominates, or France where Paris dominates.⁹⁰ In a decentered nation the size of a continent, how do we think the boundaries of the state? What are the relationships between the federal state apparatuses, the fifty state state apparatuses, and regional economic and political centers such as New York City, Chicago, St. Louis, Seattle, Atlanta, Los Angeles, and so on? What are the implications for political self-organization in relationship to these structures?

What's the specific articulation of race and class in America, nationally and regionally? How does labor organize where race and class intersect?

What's the role of the federal government in reproducing capitalism? What was its historical role in the genesis of capitalism?

What's the specific impact of Reconstruction on the articulation of race and class today? What can we learn from the Abolitionist movement? What's the history of the evolution and realignments of the two parties since the Civil War?

What are the two parties in American politics? Decentered state, continental size, winner-take-all elections. National political formations as unities of regional structures: "all politics is local". Structures in dominance with determinate articulations, where somebody decides. This is how it's possible to have Taft Republicans from Ohio versus Dewey Republicans from New York; or Goldwater versus Rockefeller versus Nixon versus Reagan versus Bush Republicans all in the same period. Where these articulations evolve and realign: Roosevelt realigned them in 1932; Nixon in 1968. The Republican Party today: the big banks, energy

industry including mining, parts of the defense establishment, parts of tech, dominated at its policy-making apex by the banks and their interests, primarily the global mobility of capital, implying profound lack of concern with accumulation of surplus value through domestic manufacture, working class purchasing power, the domestic market, and so on; dominating a culture-based electoral coalition that unites Christian evangelicals, right-wing libertarians, most of the petty bourgeoisie, and since Nixon every white person who resents the social advancement of African-Americans and other communities of color. The Democratic Party: manufacturing capital, communications, parts of high tech, parts of defense, dominated at its policy-making apex by manufacturing capital with its interest in Fordism - expanding domestic markets and consumer purchasing power, thus working class living standards to a point, plus a “social safety net” insuring the integrity of the domestic market; dominating an electoral coalition that unites for legacy historical reasons the remains of organized labor, the African-American community, the Hispanic-American community, lifestyle liberals and so on, largely in defense against the organized cultural assault from the right. In the national balance of forces the RP holds all of the material cards in an economic conjuncture dominated since the 1980s by finance capital; yet its electoral strategy, Nixon’s “southern strategy”, now contradicts demographic trends which themselves result from the growth of the world market, but which profoundly favor the DP. Even match: who’ll win? Democrats nationally, Republicans in the majority of congressional districts, for a while, until the demographic tide surges out of the SouthWest and away from the coasts and the DP can undo the RP’s massive gerrymandering. Unless the RP can shed the southern strategy as Jeb Bush and others advocate: then they take it all and keep it, based on the dominance of finance capital in the social formation. Should activist coalitions such as community movements against police violence seek alliances with the Democratic Party? [I wrote this in 2015, before Bernie and Trump emerged as the first anti-Neoliberals with national traction since 1980. How does 2016 change this sketch?]

Who were the Tories of the Revolutionary period, what became of them, who are their political descendants today?

Why do sectarian organizations produce incompetent leaderships? Why does any organization produce an incompetent leadership?

I want to redefine the word “patriotism”. Currently it means “uncritical alignment behind whatever the government says”; I want it to mean “loyalty to the best interests of the people”. A left-populist definition, not a socialist one. Suppose by magic we were to win the ideological contest over that word: now most Americans

understand “patriotism” in the way I’ve suggested. What impact would that have on the balance of ideological forces? The balance of class forces? Would the victory of a left-populist word open a space for socialist words? What about the word “socialism”? [How does this question resonate post 2016? - the moment when the word “socialism” became nationally acceptable.]

How should we think Elizabeth Warren’s reclamation of populism for the left - her left - after Reagan’s evil genius was to capture it for the right? What space would a Warren candidacy open within the dominant ideological discourse? If Warren were to succeed in taking back populism for the left - her left - would that provide an opening for our left to take it from hers? Or not? [Further: Bernie 2016.]

Liberation Theology contests the meaning of Jesus’ mission within the Latin American churches. Is there a space for something similar in the U.S.? Is there ever a space for a fight inside an ISA? Or is this a liberal illusion?

The “debate” over climate science is a displaced debate over capitalism. We should be able to win the narrowly science-y part. Can we free its terms from the displacement, to talk about its real object? Would that really be as explosive as it seems it could? The furious emotional response of the right suggests so. How would we start? - how would we organize?

Who are we talking to when we march and rally? How do we know we’re saying the right things to them? How do we know whether they’ve heard us?

Does social media provide a potentially viral means for reaching “real people” outside the left ghettos? What kinds of organizations are appropriate for our interventions to succeed? What kinds of communication strategies?

Is there a specific organizational form which corresponds to our circumstances? Do anti-hegemonial movements require organizational forms which “correspond” to their social formations?

We can begin by raising the level of theoretical sophistication of our movement cadre.

Conclusion.

Let me leave you with a question. It's at once a *theoretical* question and an *activist* question. I've chosen it as an illustration of the kinds of question which Althusser's tools are exceptionally well-adapted to answer. Is Fox News part of the state?

Mark Phillips
February 8, 2015

Appendix 1: Problematic, Paradigm, Episteme

I previously noted the differences between Althusser's concept Problematic and Kuhn's term "Paradigm". You may also have noticed a similarity to Foucault's notion of *Episteme*. Like Problematic, Episteme is non-subjective, imposing external constraints on what individuals are enabled to think. And, like Problematics, Epistemes have histories. Epistemes however are unstructured. There's no systematic hierarchy in dominance in the relationships between allowed or excluded ideas. If I understand Foucault's meaning, they're the simple abstract sums of simple abstract discursive relationships unconsciously structuring very broad historical epochs, of which Foucault names four: the Renaissance, the Classical Age, the Modern Age, and the Postmodern Age, each characterized by a constellation of simple abstract concerns - similitude for the Renaissance, difference for the Classical Age, epistemology for the Modern Age, disappearance of the subject for the Postmodern Age. While Foucault cites Nietzsche as his main source, the Episteme seems more Hegelian to me: a version of the epochs of the world spirit conceived as structuring principles underlying concrete discourses. Maybe I just made that up, I dunno. Whatever: the Episteme conceptualizes an epoch of intellectual history, while the Problematic defines a structured hierarchy of necessarily related concepts and their mutual interrelationships. Different beasts.

Appendix 2: “We were Spinozists”

Although noted most emphatically, perhaps, by Perry Anderson⁹¹, Althusser himself is the source of the identification of his circle with Spinozism. “...*we were Spinozists*,” he writes in italics in chapter 4, “On Spinoza”, of his “Elements of Self-Criticism” of 1974.⁹² But, this retrospective label should hardly have come as a shock, for nine years earlier in his major work, *Reading Capital*, Althusser had already emphasized, “Spinoza’s philosophy introduced an unprecedented theoretical revolution in the history of philosophy, probably the greatest revolution of all time, insofar as we can regard Spinoza as Marx’s only direct ancestor, from a philosophical standpoint.”⁹³

What were the major themes or concepts which Althusser found useful in Spinoza? I will not claim expertise in this. Here’s a bullet list drawn from Warren Montag⁹⁴, Perry Anderson, and Althusser:

- Reading via protocol, as a break with what Althusser calls “the religious myth of reading”. Montag: “The task of interpretation, which treats Scripture, according to Spinoza, as a ‘pretext’ rather than a text, is to negate or refuse it its actual existence by claiming to have found within it an order, coherence and homogeneity of meaning and style, which, in fact, has been imposed or projected upon Scripture. Spinoza proposes (and this is undoubtedly his ‘revolution’) to take Scripture as it is, its gaps, lacunae, inconsistencies and outright contradictions of doctrine and narrative, as irreducible.”⁹⁵
- Causes that exist only in their effects. In Althusser: Structural Causality; in Freud, the Unconscious; in Spinoza, God as *causa immanens*.⁹⁶
- Process without a subject, “in which humanity is merely one part among others, determined by the same necessity that determines all that exists.”⁹⁷
- Knowledge as product of labor: for Spinoza, “the true” is “the index of itself not as presence but as product”.⁹⁸
- Rejection of the question of the Origin and the Subject which sustain theories of knowledge.⁹⁹
- Categorical distinction between objects of knowledge and real objects: in Spinoza the separation of *idea* and *ideatum*.¹⁰⁰
- The materiality of ideology, which for Spinoza is the material nature of the imaginary.¹⁰¹
- Critique of the Subject, via Spinoza’s theory of the imaginary.¹⁰²
- The permanence of Ideology. Spinoza: “Those who believe that a people, or men divided over public business, can be induced to live by reason alone, are

dreaming of the poet's golden age or a fairy-tale"; Althusser: "All human societies secret ideology as the very element and atmosphere indispensable to their historical respiration and life."¹⁰³

Althusser's summary: "The first man ever to have posed the problem of *reading*, and in consequence, of *writing*, was Spinoza, and he was also the first man in the world to have proposed both a theory of history and a philosophy of the opacity of the immediate. With him, for the first time ever, a man linked together in this way the essence of reading and the essence of history in a theory of the difference between the imaginary and the true."¹⁰⁴

Appendix 3: Reception in English: Structuralism, Humanism, Stalinism

Althusser's work was received in English in a garbled way. This wasn't the fault of the translations. I believe there were two forces at work: the theoretical conflicts within Althusser's thought itself, and the intellectual conjuncture in the English-speaking countries. There were three flash points: Structuralism, Humanism, and Stalinism.

Structuralism: Althusser was not a structuralist. He said he wasn't. The writings published in his lifetime bristle with impatient hostility toward structuralism as a spiritualist ideology centered on a neo-Hegelian expressive totality. Ben Brewster's Glossary to *Reading Capital* unambiguously labels structuralism "a fashionable ideology."¹⁰⁵ Althusser's "Forward to the Italian Edition", printed in the English editions, reads, "We believe that despite the terminological ambiguity, the profound tendency of our texts was not attached to the 'structuralist' ideology. It is our hope that the reader will be able to bear this claim in mind, to verify it and to subscribe to it."¹⁰⁶ His posthumous references are downright bitter.

Yet Althusser was received in English and remained for thirty years a "Structural Marxist." Every major scholarly work for a generation read him this way, perhaps exemplified by Ted Benton's *The Rise and Fall of Structural Marxism*, or Robert Paul Resch's *Althusser and the Renewal of Marxist Social Theory* which uses the phrase "Structural Marxism" six times on the dust jacket alone.

Althusser's terminology is partly responsible. He uses "structure" ubiquitously; he uses "combination" which sounds like "combinatory"; Balibar's essay in *Reading Capital* uses "synchrony" and "diachrony". Perhaps, though, terminological elision is a superficial explanation. Warren Montag writes, "The persistent 'misreadings' of Althusser are indexes of the theoretical conflicts that animate [his work]: many of these conflicts are based on countervailing tendencies that coexist with and in their antagonism, neutralize it."¹⁰⁷ Balibar writes in his Forward to *On the Reproduction of Capitalism*: "Like so many others, Althusser moved alternately back and forth between recognizing and repudiating structuralism, approaching it and distancing himself from it. All the structuralists, or almost all of them (Levi-Strauss is the exception), said, at one moment or another, 'I am not a structuralist', or even 'I am anything but a structuralist'."¹⁰⁸

I suspect though that the conjuncture in English into which Althusser was received was decisive. Althusser arrived as one particle within a great French-speaking wave

dominated by structuralisms, where the English-speaking countries hadn't yet encountered much less assimilated the dizzyingly rapid evolution in France from structuralism to post-structuralism to postmodernism; May '68 was only a rumor; and Barthes, Levi-Strauss, Lacan, Althusser, Foucault, and Derrida seemed like all the same crowd.

Perhaps the more interesting question is: why'd it take so long to sort this out? Montag and Balibar may have the reason.

Humanism: I've outlined the basics already. I think, Althusser to some degree created this confusion as a provocation. As I've stressed, all this contentious word means for him is: Feuerbach. It would have been more clear if the slogan had been, "Marxism is not an anthropology". As it was, Althusser's formula "theoretical anti-humanism" was received with horror and consternation in English, where to many it seemed to suggest, "Every Marxist wants the gulag!" An ideological narrative in which Althusser's opposition to the PCF's rightward turn was made as invisible as his anti-Structuralism.

Stalinism: the internal political circumstances of the French party were largely invisible outside of France, reinforcing the confusion around Althusser's critique. Much of the intense emotional animosity directed toward Althusser, for example E.P. Thompson's vituperative *The Poverty of Theory*, seems to have been fueled by this misunderstanding. I think there's a certain reductive ad hominem at play: Althusser was a Party member, therefore...

Montag writes: "From Althusser's perspective, such responses showed more clearly than any examination of his texts that he had struck a nerve, one of philosophy's 'sensitive points' that certain thinkers before him had 'touched' and that he, like them, had activated philosophy's defenses."¹⁰⁹

Nowadays these misreadings are losing their juice. Scholarly interventions by Montag, Goshgarian and others; plus translation into English of the posthumous material; plus emergence of a new generation of scholarly and activist interest in Althusser have at last produced a new conjuncture.

¹ Re the name “Althusser”. While Althusser signed the texts published under his name, they were to large degree collective works produced collaboratively by Althusser and a circle of students and friends including Pierre Macherey, Etienne Balibar, Jacques Ranciere, Roger Establet, and others. Some of these collaborators had a deep, determining influence on the direction of the shared project which bears Althusser’s name. This is obviously an unusual situation in the history of philosophy.

² And this: “I wanted to intervene in France in the French Communist Party, which I joined in 1948, in order to struggle against triumphal Stalinism and its disastrous effects on my Party’s politics. At the time, I had no choice: if I had intervened publicly in the *politics* of the Party, which refused to publish even my philosophical writings (on Marx), deemed heretical and dangerous, I would have been, at least until 1970, immediately expelled, marginalized and left powerless to influence the Party at all. So there remained only one way for me to intervene politically in the Party: by way of *pure theory* - that is, *philosophy*.” “Philosophy and Marxism”, an interview with Fernanda Navarro, published in *Philosophy of the Encounter*, Verso 2006, p.253.

³ This list is from the essay “Lenin and Philosophy”, in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, Monthly Review Press 1971, p.39.

⁴ Letter to Mauricio Malamud, 3/8/84, published in *Philosophy of the Encounter*, Verso 2006, p.209-10. The full passage is: “We tried to make the works of Marxism, Marxism itself, and, in the final analysis, the work of Marx himself, *readable and thinkable*. Which means that, previously, it scarcely was ... it contained contradictions, theoretical dead-ends, misunderstandings, and huge gaps. We held that there was a scientific kernel in Marx, a kernel of indisputable theoretical knowledge - everything that the tradition recognizes under the name of historical materialism, the most highly developed contribution to which, bequeathed us by Marx, is known as *Capital*. The biggest gap in Marxism, the work of Marx and even Lenin included, was philosophy. You know how the matter stands. Marx jotted down in pencil, on a sheet of paper, a few sentences that Engels published after his death under the title ‘Theses on Feuerbach’: they are incoherent, except that [one] *feels* a revolutionary appeal in them. But to feel is not to think. In *The German Ideology* what dominates is a form of geneticist positivism and the affirmation of the end of all philosophy. This isn’t a philosophy, then... Afterwards, we have occasional acrobatics about the inversion of Hegelian method, as well as Marx’s declaration to the effect that if he had a week, he would write twenty pages on the dialectic. If he didn’t write them, it’s not because he couldn’t find a week’s time to do it, but because he didn’t know, in the state his work was in, just what he could find to say on the subject. And we latched on to Lenin: ‘Marx’s logic is to be found in *Capital*’, but in a latent state; we tried to bring it out of this latent state.

“We did so not on a whim, but out of a profound necessity: to make it possible to read and to think Marx’s thought, we had to bring out the philosophy implicit in it, the only philosophy capable of clarifying the difficulties in this great work, *Capital* - capable, in a word, of rendering it thinkable, that is, *rational and coherent*. Turning every possible clue to advantage, then, we set out to acquire - to discover and elaborate - what was massively absent from it: Marx’s philosophy. And we fabricated for Marx, really and truly *fabricated*, the philosophy that he lacked: this rational, coherent philosophy.”

⁵ For a time in the 1960s, Althusser’s close young associates in the universities were known among their student colleges as “Les Chinoise”; there was a sense, probably not well justified, that Althusser’s group was sympathetic to Maoism.

⁶ To make his project possible, Althusser “imported” and transformed necessary concepts from outside of Marxism, when no appropriate alternatives existed within Marxism. He borrowed from Martin, Bachelard, Freud, and Lacan, emphasizing that these borrowings were not arbitrary, and not capricious. His major imports were: Problematic, Epistemological Break, and Overdetermination; while his concept of Interpellation owes a good deal to Lacan’s Mirror Stage. Re this practice, he wrote, “Without a theory of the history of theoretical formations it would be impossible to grasp and indicate the specific difference that distinguishes two different theoretical formations. I thought it possible to borrow for this purpose the concept of a ‘*problematic*’ from Jacques Martin to designate the particular unity of a theoretical formation and hence the location to be assigned to this specific difference [specifically Marxist concepts - MP], and the concept of an ‘*epistemological break*’ from Gaston Bachelard to designate the mutation in the theoretical problematic contemporary with the foundation of a scientific discipline. That one of these concepts had to be constructed and the other borrowed does not imply at all that either is arbitrary or foreign to Marx, on the contrary, it can be shown that both are present and active in Marx’s scientific thought, even if this presence is most often in the practical state. These two concepts provided me with the indispensable theoretical minimum authorizing a pertinent analysis of the process of the theoretical transformation of the Young Marx, and leading to some precise conclusions.” “Introduction: Today”, in *For Marx*, NLB 1977, p.32.

⁷ “Witness the most profound hesitations in *Capital*, in which the word, theme, notion, or even concept of alienation continues to haunt not only the theory (which is one-hundred-per-cent Feuerbachian) of fetishism, but also the theoretical opposition between dead and living labour, the domination of working conditions over the worker, and the figure of communism, that free association of ‘individuals’ who have no social relations other than freedom - alienation, and old word, an old idealist concept that can be put to any use you like (including that of making felt what is still inadequately thought) and is manifestly there to think something else: something which is unthought, and has remained so.” “Marx in His Limits”, in *Philosophy of the Encounter*, Verso 2006, p.46.

⁸ Example of the former: the Preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, in which the contradiction between the productive forces and relations of production explains all of history, and there is no mention of class struggle at all. Althusser calls it “this famous, unfortunate 1859 Preface” - *On the Reproduction of Capitalism*, Verso 214, p.214.

⁹ Specifically a fatalist evolutionism, for example the Second International’s stance toward colonial liberation movements, where the colonials were doomed to live through an inevitable stage of capitalist development.

¹⁰ Here’s an example from the history of philosophy: Feuerbach is the unacknowledged source of both Husserl’s phenomenology and Dilthey’s historicism. Cited by Warren Montag, *Althusser and His Contemporaries*, Duke University Press 2013, p.50.

¹¹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gaston_Bachelard#Epistemological_breaks:_the_discontinuity_of_scientific_progress

¹² “Fetishism”. *Capital* “becomes one-hundred-per-cent Feuerbachian in Chapter 1, Section 4.” “Marx in His Limits”, in *Philosophy of the Encounter*, Verso 2006, p.126.

¹³ Is “field” in Althusser a concept, or a metaphor pointing to the absence of a concept?

¹⁴ Ideology as thought-without-object conceptualizes ideology in an instrumentalist way as a product of false consciousness. Althusser contradicted this formula in practice in his detailed analyses of the history of philosophy: Feuerbach’s theoretical humanism is an ideology, yet it has an object: the essence of Man. Althusser clears this up by, like Freud, shifting ground to unconsciousness.

¹⁵ “...the *Capital-Labour contradiction is never simple, but always specified by the historically concrete forms and circumstances in which it is exercised*. It is specified by the forms of the *superstructure* (the State, the dominant ideology, religion, politically organised movements, and so on); specified by the *internal and external historical situation* which determines it on the one hand as a function of the *national past* (completed or ‘relapsed’ bourgeois revolution, feudal exploitation eliminated wholly, partially or not at all, local ‘customs’ specific national *traditions*, even the ‘etiquette’ of political struggles and behaviour, etc.), and on the other as functions of the existing *world context* (what dominates it – competition of capitalist nations, or ‘imperialist internationalism’, or competition within imperialism, etc.), many of these phenomena deriving from the ‘law of uneven development’ in the Leninist sense.” “Contradiction and Overdetermination” in *For Marx*, p.106.

¹⁶ "Contradiction and Overdetermination" in *For Marx*, p.106.

¹⁷ Overdetermination is one component of Althusser's larger contribution to the 20th century's emphasis on logics of complexity. Chaos theory, systems theory, nonlinear causality, emergence: attempts at non-Aristotelian logics recognizing complexity as fundamental to knowledge. In its way, Althusser's reconceptualization of philosophical determinateness belongs to this current, along with his related concepts of structural causality and the materialist dialectic.

¹⁸ Dominant also in Machiavelli, Althusser argues.

¹⁹ Althusser returns frequently to the ambiguities and inadequacies of this metaphor, defining metaphor as a symptomatic pointer to the absence of a concept.

²⁰ Perry Anderson, *Passages From Antiquity to Feudalism*, Verso 1978.

²¹ "The term is in fact fraught with moral, religious, and legal overtones; in short it is an ideological notion that must be replaced by a scientific concept: the concept of 'social formation' (Marx, Lenin). It is not simply a matter of substituting one word for another. The concept of social formation is scientific insofar as it belongs to a *theoretical system* of concepts that has nothing whatsoever to do with the system of ideological notions to which the idealist notion of 'society' must be referred." *On the Reproduction of Capitalism*, Verso 2014, p.19.

²² "The plurality of modes of production in every social formation and the current domination of one mode of production over those that are disappearing or coming into being make it possible to account for the contradictory complexity of the empirical facts observable in every concrete social formation, but also for the contradictory tendencies that clash within it and find expression as its history (the observable real transformations in the economy, politics and ideology)." *On the Reproduction of Capitalism*, p.19-20.

²³ "...if it were really a matter merely of an inversion, a restoration of what had been upside down, it is clear that to turn an object right round changes neither its nature nor its content by virtue merely of a rotation! A man on his head is the same man when he is finally walking on his feet. And a philosophy inverted in this way cannot be regarded as anything more than the philosophy reversed except in theoretical metaphor: in fact, its structure, its problems and the meaning of these problems are still haunted by the same problematic." "On the Young Marx", in *For Marx*, p.73.

²⁴ "...the Marxist theory of the tendential fall in the rate of profit, which is in fact a *theory of the tendential rise in the class struggle*." "Marx in His Limits", in *Philosophy of the Encounter*, 123.

²⁵ "Marx in his Limits", in *Philosophy of the Encounter*, p.94.

²⁶ It's tendential when analyzing social formations. But not when analyzing problematics. The theoretical object always dominates the problematic. What about ideologies as problematics without objects?

²⁷ *The Meaning of the Second World War*, Verso 1986, p.45.

²⁸ Although I've just been pretty low-key about it, this paragraph is in fact a vanguardist analysis of movement coalitions based on the structure-in-dominance concept. Ask me. Vanguardism in Lenin's correct sense is a corollary of uneven development; the elements of the structure-in-dominance evolve unevenly.

²⁹ And would point out that this is historically demonstrable.

³⁰ This formulation is Goshgarian's, from his Introduction to *Philosophy of the Encounter*, p.xxxix. Althusser wrote that Hegel inherited the expressive totality from Leibniz.

³¹ Would this ever end, even after the definitive victory of a fully classless society? No, although I don't think Althusser ever spells out exactly what the constituents of instability would be under those circumstances.

³² The Arab Spring was defeated in Egypt because the people chose to remain passively assembled in the square. If they'd moved aggressively to take the army barracks, the airfields, the police stations, the ministries, the outcome would have been different.

³³ “Remark on the Category: ‘Process Without a Subject or Goal(s)’, in *Essays in Self-Criticism*, p.94.

³⁴ Who makes history, then? “It is the masses who make history.” *On the Reproduction of Capitalism*, p.132.

³⁵ *Reading Capital*, p.321-2.

³⁶ From Ben Brewster’s Glossary to *Reading Capital*, p.313: “The Marxist totality (q.v.) is neither a whole each of whose elements is equivalent as the phenomenon of an essence (Hegelianism), nor are some of its elements epiphenomena of any one of them (economism or mechanism); the elements are asymmetrically related but autonomous (contradictory); one of them is *dominant*. [The economic base ‘determines’ (‘in the last instance’) *which* element is to be *dominant* in a social formation (see *Lire le Capital*). L. A.]. Hence it is a structure in dominance. But the dominant element is not fixed for all time, it varies according to the overdetermination (q.v.) of the contradictions and their uneven development (q.v.). In the social formation this overdetermination is, in the last instance, determined by the economy (*déterminé en dernière instance de l’économie*). This is Althusser’s clarification of the classical Marxist assertion that the superstructure (q.v.) is relatively autonomous but the economy is determinant in the last instance. The phrase ‘in the last instance’ does not indicate that there will be some ultimate time or ever was some starting-point when the economy will be or was solely determinant, the other instances preceding it or following it: ‘the last instance never comes’, the structure is always the co-presence of all its elements and their relations of dominance and subordination it is an ‘ever-pre-given structure’ (*structure toujours-déjà-donnée*).”

³⁷ “Contradiction and Overdetermination”, in *For Marx*, p.113.

³⁸ *Reading Capital*, NLB 1977, p. 15.

³⁹ *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific*, Foreign Language Press 1975, p.21 etc.

⁴⁰ What do you find when you read symptomatically? Warren Montag: “[Marx] reads the failure of Smith’s text not in relation to a reality external to it, but in relation to itself, the failure on the part of the text to see what it itself does, to see what it itself contains, even, as Althusser puts it, to see what it itself sees without seeing that it sees it. Smith’s text has produced more than it knows, the answer to a question that it did not and cannot pose and is thus registered in the text only as a lack or a silence, which disturbs the fullness that it appears to exhibit. What is invisible to Smith’s text is then not what is not in it but precisely what is in it and defined from within, by a necessity that remains to be specified, as excluded, repressed, prohibited by a “darkness of exclusion” that is internal to the text itself, which is constituted in order not to see the objects it nevertheless exhibits. [...] The text is marked by the operation by which it excludes what it has produced and necessarily continues to contain; it is thus divided into the visible and its invisible, that which it asserts and that which is denied and disavowed in the very assertion itself.” *Althusser and His Contemporaries*, p. 82.

⁴¹ “The Humanist Controversy”, in *The Humanist Controversy and Other Writings*, Verso 2003, p.280.

⁴² Althusser’s criticism is in *Reading Capital*, p.131-2.

⁴³ Because ideology is a type of story that makes the obvious invisible.

⁴⁴ Warren Montag, *Althusser and His Contemporaries: Philosophy’s Perpetual War*, Duke University Press 2013, p.17.

⁴⁵ There’s way more of course. Critique of Empiricism as confusion of objects of knowledge with real objects, in which reality can be simply “read” by experiencing it. Theory of the autonomy of the elements of the superstructure: Marxism is not an economic determinism. Discussions of the history of the concept of causality, with his own concept of structural causality. Intervention. Theory of dislocation (*décalage*). More.

⁴⁶ Just to state for the record: in my opinion the Third International was a trainwreck from the get-go. But you can separate that historical judgement from your judgement of the usefulness of its ideas about strategy.

⁴⁷ “This text is made up of two extracts from an ongoing study.” Althusser’s note to “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses” was the only hint there might someday be more. *Lenin and Philosophy*, Monthly Review Press 1971, p. 127.

⁴⁸ “As is well known, the term ‘ideology’ was coined by Destutt de Tracy, Cabanis, and their circle.” *On the Reproduction of Capitalism*, p.171.

⁴⁹ In *The German Ideology*, a theory of recognition/misrecognition. Althusser now calls *The German Ideology* a “positivist transition” is Marx’s development. *On the Reproduction of Capitalism*, p.173.

⁵⁰ It’s not as cut and dried as I’ve made it seem. Ideology as unconsciousness is everywhere in Althusser’s first period: you couldn’t have a symptomatic reading without it. Like the materialist dialectic in Marx, it’s there but without yet being conceptualized. In his middle period, Althusser seems to have become aware of this. I think the crux of his reconsideration is that now ideology is no longer a system of ideas but of practices which produce ideas.

⁵¹ “...a system (with its own logic and rigor) of representations (images, myths, ideas or concepts, depending on the case) endowed with a historical existence and role within a given society.” *For Marx*, p.231. “Consciousness” is the relation between these relations, a definition of “consciousness” which already points toward where he would soon go: the relation is unconscious.

⁵² *On the Reproduction of Capitalism*, p.156.

⁵³ Quoted in *On the Reproduction of Capitalism*, p.186. Smile: you may feel happier: <http://www.scientificamerican.com/article/smile-it-could-make-you-happier/>.

⁵⁴ *On the Reproduction of Capitalism*, p.176.

⁵⁵ “Philosophy and Marxism”, an interview with Fernanda Navarro, in *Philosophy of the Encounter*, p.285.

⁵⁶ Same, p.186.

⁵⁷ “...the world is everything that succeeds in reproducing itself” - Goshgarian, Introduction to *Philosophy of the Encounter*, p.xlv.

⁵⁸ *On the Reproduction of Capitalism*, p.193.

⁵⁹ Same.

⁶⁰ Same, p.193-4. Note how similar this ironic autobiographical self-deprecation is to Foucault’s attempt to escape identity. “Do not ask who I am and do not ask me to remain the same: let us leave it to our bureaucrats and our police to see that our papers are in order.” *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, Harper 1972, p.17. And for fun’s sake note how similar they both are to Alfred Jarry, who took the destruction of the subject literally. And to Baudelaire. And so on.

⁶¹ [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Interpellation_\(philosophy\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Interpellation_(philosophy))

⁶² “...what is imprudently called ‘the Marxist theory of the state’ (when one should, rather, say elements of a theory of the state)...” “Marx in his Limits”, in *Philosophy of the Encounter*, p.68.

⁶³ “...presenting the state as a *mere instrument* of domination and repression in the service of *objectives*, that is, of the dominant class’s *conscious* will. This is a bourgeois, instrumentalist-idealist conception of the state reinforced by a bourgeois-idealist (humanist) conception of social classes as ‘subjects’”. *On the Reproduction of Capitalism*, Verso 2014, p. 72.

⁶⁴ *On the Reproduction of Capitalism*, Verso 2014, p.75.

⁶⁵ Same. Later he suggests another, based on Foucault: the medical ISA, p.160. On p.169, the legal ISA. The list is for capitalist social formations; it would be different for feudal or antique slave social formations.

⁶⁶ “For the scholastic ISA: the various schools and their levels, from the primary to the tertiary, the various institutes, and so on. For the religious ISA: the various churches and their specialized organizations (for example, youth organizations). For the political ISA: the parliament, the political parties, and so on. For the information and news ISA: the press (the various newspapers or newspaper groups), the [broadcast media], and a large number of publications and organizations. For the familial ISA: all the institutions that have to do with the family, including the famous associations of parents of schoolchildren, and so on. For the cultural ISA: all kinds of entertainment, sport included, as well as a series of institutions that may dovetail with what we have called the publishing ISA.” Same, p. 76.

⁶⁷ "...law' (or, rather, the *real system* that this term designates, while also masking it, since it abstracts from it: namely the law codes plus legal-moral ideology plus the police plus the courts and their magistrates plus the prisons, and so on)..." *On the Reproduction of Capitalism*, p.169.

⁶⁸ "Philosophy and Marxism", an interview with Fernanda Navarro, in *Philosophy of the Encounter*, p.283-84.

⁶⁹ As I write this, the Greek radical-left coalition Syriza has just won a historic electoral victory: its theoreticians are more than clear over the distinction between state and government. <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2015/01/phase-one/>. We can thank Althusser for this.

⁷⁰ "Philosophy represents politics in the domain of theory, or to be more precise: *with the sciences* - and, *vice versa*, philosophy represents scientificity in politics, with the classes engaged in the class struggle." "Lenin and Philosophy", in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, p.65.

⁷¹ "Lenin and Philosophy", in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, p.42.

⁷² "...all great transformations in philosophy intervene at moments in history *either* when noteworthy modifications occur in class relations and the state *or* when major events occur in the history of the sciences." *On the Reproduction of Capitalism*, p.14. See his very interesting table on the next page.

⁷³ Well: you could quite simply note that the PCF intervened to save it. Did Althusser ever say this out loud?

⁷⁴ "This passage highlights the contradiction that continues to haunt Althusser's effort to develop a theory of ideology: even as he separates himself from any sense of ideology as a form of consciousness, as possessing an existence internal to the mind by positing it as a system of images (Spinoza's imaginary) or a kind of discourse, he nevertheless re-creates a kind of dualism. Just as in "Marxism and Humanism," the imaginary stands outside of and opposed to the real, so in the "Three Notes" discourse appears less real than practice. It produces effects, Althusser agrees, but only effects of "meaning." Practices, in contrast, produce "real" effects. Discourse is thus situated outside of reality, its effects incapable of affecting that reality, given that these effects remain internal to the realm of discourse itself: effects of meaning, linking words or "signifiers" (a term that Althusser finally rejects as inescapably caught up in a notion of language as representation)." Warren Montag, *Althusser and His Contemporaries*, p.133. Yet as Montag goes on to stress, for Althusser ideological discourse creates subjects.

⁷⁵ Letter to Fernanda Navarro, 8/4/86, in *Philosophy of the Encounter*, p.240.

⁷⁶ "This 'in the last instance' must not be forgotten, for I have never said that philosophy was purely and simply class struggle in theory. The reservation 'in the last instance' is there to indicate that there are things in philosophy besides class struggle in theory." "Philosophy and Marxism", an interview with Fernanda Navarro, in *Philosophy of the Encounter*, p.270.

⁷⁷ "Even in its most abstract form, that of the works of the great philosophers, philosophy is situated somewhere in the vicinity of the ideologies, as a kind of theoretical laboratory in which the fundamentally political problem of ideological hegemony - that is, of the constitution of the dominant ideology - is experimentally put to the test, in the abstract. The work accomplished by the most abstract philosophers does not remain a dead letter: what philosophy has received from the class struggle as a demand, it gives back to it in the form of systems of thought which then work on the ideologies in order to transform and unify them." "Philosophy and Marxism", an interview with Fernanda Navarro, in *Philosophy of the Encounter*, p.287.

⁷⁸ Warren Montag, *Althusser and His Contemporaries: Philosophy's Perpetual War*, Duke University Press 2013, p.16.

⁷⁹ "I would argue that Althusser's conception of philosophy exists not as an ideal space, free from the pressures of power and interest, where competing claims would be adjudicated by reason, but as a constellation of conflicting forces, of ideas held in place by relations of force, in which no truth triumphs except the truth armed against its adversaries, gave his analysis a necessary exactitude and rigor. The disciple of Machiavelli and Lenin could settle for nothing less than an exact inventory of forces in play and an identification of friends as well as enemies. In theoretical terms, this translates into a very careful and informed survey of philosophical works, reading them "to the letter" and noting their effects on the theoretical conjuncture of which they are a part and their effects on the relations of dominance and subordination between the ideas that constitute it." Warren Montag, *Althusser and His Contemporaries: Philosophy's Perpetual War*, Duke University Press 2013, p.17.

⁸⁰ Althusser's language in his final phase is very martial. He writes of "wars of position", "occupying enemy's positions," capturing and incorporating the enemy's concepts, and so on, a perpetual war whose outcome becomes embodied in relationships of force. "Contrary to the whole rationalist tradition, which only requires a straight, true idea in order to correct a bent, false idea, Marxism considers that ideas only have a historical existence in so far as they are taken up and incorporated in the materiality of social relations. Behind the relations between simple ideas there thus stand relations of force, which place certain ideas in power (those which can be schematically called the ruling ideology) and hold other ideas in submission (which can be called the oppressed ideology), until the relation of force is changed." ("Is it Simple to be a Marxist in Philosophy?", in *Essays in Self-Criticism*, NLB 1976, p.171.) He endorses Kant's characterization of philosophy as a battlefield - *kampffplatz*: "One of the goals of philosophy is to wage theoretical battle." ("Philosophy and Marxism", an interview with Fernanda Navarro, in *Philosophy of the Encounter*, p.268.) "It follows that if you want to change historically existing ideas, even in the apparently abstract domain called philosophy, you cannot content yourself with simply preaching the naked truth, and waiting for its anatomical obviousness to 'enlighten' minds, as our eighteenth-century ancestors used to say: you are forced, since you want to force a change in ideas, to recognize the force which is keeping them bent, by applying a counter-force capable of destroying this power and bending the stick in the opposite direction so as to put the ideas right." ("Is it Simple to be a Marxist in Philosophy?", in *Essays in Self-Criticism*, NLB 1976, p.171.) And: "yes, I did consciously confront and deal with the relation between ideas as a relation of force, and yes, I did consciously 'think in extremes' about some points which I considered important and bend the stick in the opposite direction. Not for the pleasure of provocation, but to alert my readers to the existence of this relation of forces, to provoke them in this connexion and to produce definite effects." (Same, p.172.)

⁸¹ The Soviet Academy of Sciences propagated a "monist" materialism of "universal historical laws" which Althusser considered to be "a harmful metaphysical conception which substituted 'matter' for the Hegelian 'Mind' or 'Absolute Idea'." "Philosophy and Marxism", an interview with Fernanda Navarro, in *Philosophy of the Encounter*, p. 254.

⁸² "...since there can be no philosophy that would not itself embody the very conflicts in which it seeks to intervene, insofar as philosophies attempt to master these conflicts by interiorizing them only to find themselves afflicted by what they cannot digest, Althusser's position comes very close to Hegel's. Every philosophy is the realization of a contradiction that it necessarily lacks the means to resolve." This is the reason why continual self-criticism of the style Althusser practiced is not arbitrary, but implied, or inscribed within, the nature of the project itself. "Thus, it is not enough to read others, that is, to make visible their contradictions; one must constantly attempt after the fact to grasp the conflictuality proper to one's own thought, an attempt that produces new contradictions requiring new interventions ad infinitum." The quotes are from Warren Montag, *Althusser and His Contemporaries*, Duke University Press, p.7.

⁸³ "I would therefore say that, in the philosophical tradition, the evocation of materialism is *the index of an exigency*, a sign that idealism has to be rejected - yet without breaking free, without being able to break free, of the specular pair idealism/materialism; hence it is a sign, but, *at the same time a trap*, because one does not break free of idealism simply by negating it, stating the opposite position or - I've gone on about this often enough - 'standing it on its head'. We must therefore tread the term 'materialism' with suspicion: the word does not give us the thing, and, on closer inspection, most materialisms turn out to be inverted idealisms - that is to say, are still idealisms.

"Let us go a little further: how can we characterize idealism? Obviously not simply by the existence of an external world independent of consciousness or the mind, for what do these three terms signify beyond the reference to a whole philosophical problematic?

"We can recognize idealism, I think by the fact that it is haunted by a single question which divides into two, since the principle of reason bears not only on *the origin*, but also on *the end*: indeed, the Origin always, and very naturally, refers to the End. We can go further still: in idealism, the question of the Origin is a question that arises on the basis of the question of the End. Anticipating itself, the End (the meaning of the world, the meaning of its history, the ultimate purpose of the world and history) projects itself back on to and into the question of the origin. The question of the origin of anything whatsoever is always posed as a function of the idea one has of its end. The question of 'the radical origin of things' - Leibniz - is always posed as a function of the idea one has of their Final Destination, their End, whether it is a question of the Ends of Providence or of Utopia."

Letter to Fernanda Navarro, 10/7/84, in *Philosophy of the Encounter*, p.217-18.

⁸⁴ "Philosophy and Marxism", an interview with Fernanda Navarro, in *Philosophy of the Encounter*, p.255.

⁸⁵ “The Underground Current of the Materialism of the Encounter”, in *Philosophy of the Encounter*, p.198. I would argue FWIW that the key element missing was the intervention of the state, which I believe is the decisive moment in the origin of capitalism in every social formation in history. But I’ve just used that word “origin”, so watch yourself.

⁸⁶ “What matters about this conception is less the elaboration of laws, hence of an [idealist] essence, than *the aleatory character of the ‘taking-hold’ of this encounter, which gives rise to an accomplished fact* whose laws it is possible to state.” “The Underground Current of the Materialism of the Encounter”, in *Philosophy of the Encounter*, p.197.

⁸⁷ “The Underground Current of the Materialism of the Encounter”, in *Philosophy of the Encounter*, p.168.

⁸⁸ I wonder if Interpellation is the same “beautiful myth” - like Rousseau’s noble savage.

⁸⁹ “The letter of Althusser's texts is certainly very different from the self-interpretations (including his self-criticisms) that the author himself proposed. It is reasonable to expect that other readers, who are serious and accurate but who were not part of (if not untouched by) the intellectual adventure of the author, will be in a better position to clarify “what Althusser really thought” and to discuss how his work can possibly be transformed and carried on further today. What Althusser “thought” is of course not what he “wanted to think.” It is what he actually wrote, with all the contradictions and aporias of the written text, which we may call its “unconscious”: neither a subjective key to be unraveled, not a mystical secret behind the door but an objective meaning to be produced by means of a symptomatic reading.” - Etienne Balibar, “Structural Causality”, quoted by Warren Montag, *Althusser and His Contemporaries*, Duke University Press, p.18.

⁹⁰ When Althusser writes of the Repressive State Apparatus, “This apparatus is a single, centralized corps”, he’s profoundly incorrect for the U.S. *On the Reproduction of Capitalism*, 92.

⁹¹ “Nearly all the novel concepts and accents of Althusser’s Marxism, apart from those imported from contemporary disciplines, were in fact directly drawn from Spinoza.” Perry Anderson, *Considerations on Western Marxism*, Verso 1979, p.64. Anderson’s catalog of Althusserian Spinozisms: the “general essence of production”; elimination of the philosophical problem of the guarantees of knowledge or truth; structural causality; critique of Empiricist conflation of real objects with objects of knowledge; the permanence of Ideology. His conclusion: “The systematic induction of Spinoza into historical materialism by Althusser and his pupils was intellectually the most ambitious attempt to construct a prior philosophical descent for Marx, and to develop abruptly new theoretical directions for contemporary Marxism from it.” *Considerations on Western Marxism*, p.65.

⁹² “Elements of Self-Criticism”, in *Essays in Self-Criticism*, NLB 1976, p.132.

⁹³ *Reading Capital*, 102.

⁹⁴ Warren Montag, *Louis Althusser*, Palgrave MacMillan 2003, p.45+.

⁹⁵ Montag, *Louis Althusser*, p.48.

⁹⁶ Perry Anderson, *Considerations on Western Marxism*, p.64.

⁹⁷ Warren Montag, *Althusser and His Contemporaries*, p.31.

⁹⁸ “Philosophy and Marxism”, an interview with Fernanda Navarro, in *Philosophy of the Encounter*, p.273-74.

⁹⁹ “Philosophy and Marxism”, an interview with Fernanda Navarro, in *Philosophy of the Encounter*, p.274.

¹⁰⁰ Perry Anderson, *Considerations on Western Marxism*, p.64.

¹⁰¹ Geoff Pfeifer, “Ideology, Imagination, and History: Althusser’s ‘Heretical’ Spinozism”, https://www.academia.edu/5091087/Ideology_Imagination_and_History_Althusser_s_Heretical_Spinozism_HM_2013

¹⁰² “Elements of Self-Criticism”, in *Essays in Self-Criticism*, p.136.

¹⁰³ Both quoted by Perry Anderson, *Considerations on Western Marxism*, p.65.

¹⁰⁴ *Reading Capital*, p.16. Althusser calls these Spinozist themes and references a “detour”: “Having for years banged our heads against a wall of enigmatic texts and wretched commentaries on them, we had to decide to step back and make a detour.” (“Elements of Self-Criticism”, in *Essays in Self-Criticism*, p.133.) “...we made a detour *via* Spinoza in order to improve our understanding of Marx’s philosophy.” (Same, p.134.) Specifically, he says, a detour which allowed him to identify the idealist core of the Hegelian teleological dialectic: “Thus Spinoza showed us the secret alliance between Subject and Goal which ‘mystifies’ the Hegelian dialectic.” (Same, p.135.) Macherey’s *Hegel or Spinoza?* explores this in depth.

¹⁰⁵ “Structuralism (*structuralisme*). A fashionable ideology according to which only the relations between the elements (i.e., their places) in the totality are significant, and the occupants of these places are arbitrary. The set of places and relations is the structuralist combinatory (q.v.). Structuralism also conceives of the combinatory as the synchronic structure and its temporal or historical realization, its development, as the diachrony.” *Reading Capital*, p.319.

¹⁰⁶ *Reading Capital*, p.7. The complete passage: “Despite the precautions we took to distinguish ourselves from the ‘structuralist’ ideology (we said very clearly that the ‘combination’ to be found in Marx ‘has nothing to do with a combinatory’), despite the decisive intervention of categories foreign to ‘structuralism’ (determination in the last instance, domination, overdetermination, production process, etc.), the terminology we employed was too close in many respects to the ‘structuralist’ terminology not to give rise to an ambiguity. With a very few exceptions (some very perceptive critics have made the distinction), our interpretation of Marx has generally been recognized and judged, in homage to the current fashion, as ‘structuralist’. We believe that despite the terminological ambiguity, the profound tendency of our texts was not attached to the ‘structuralist’ ideology. It is our hope that the reader will be able to bear this claim in mind, to verify it and to subscribe to it.” They thought he was lying?

¹⁰⁷ Warren Montag. *Althusser and His Contemporaries: Philosophy’s Perpetual War*, Duke University Press 2013, p.10.

¹⁰⁸ *On the Reproduction of Capitalism*, p.xvi, footnote 16.

¹⁰⁹ Warren Montag. *Althusser and His Contemporaries: Philosophy’s Perpetual War*, Duke University Press 2013, p.3-4.