

# Politically or Symptomatically? Reading (in) Althusser<sup>1</sup>

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## **Abstract:**

This paper addresses Althusser's theory of symptomatic reading following its first and almost unique presentation in his first contribution to *Reading Capital*. Through a reconstruction of some of its most important theoretical references, namely Freud's unconscious and Spinoza's structural causality, I argue that reading Althusser politically necessary is to read Althusser symptomatically. In Althusser's own theoretical elaboration, the symptomatic reading of Marx's texts and the political reading of a given conjuncture, shares a common conceptual ground. They are both understood from the idea of a "topological" articulation of different instances, and the idea of a "double inscription" of the text. As in symptomatic reading, the field of visibility in a given political conjuncture must always be related and explained by the "structure of structures" that overdetermines all visibility and invisibility. The article argues that to read politically is necessarily to read symptomatically and conversely.

**Keywords:** symptomatic reading, conjuncture, structural causality, topology, double inscription

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“J’oserais soutenir que c’est depuis Marx que nous devrions commencer de soupçonner ce que, du moins dans la théorie, *lire* et donc écrire *vent dire*”<sup>2</sup>

As it is well known, Louis Althusser introduces the concept of “symptomatic reading” in his first contribution to *Reading Capital*: “From *Capital* to Marx’s Philosophy,” a “first” contribution which is actually the last one to be written: it is in fact the text with which Althusser attempts to introduce and give a sort of internal coherence to the five different contributions and authors who took part in this collective project. If Althusser succeeds in this purpose is something quite uncertain, and despite of his effort, this introductory text constitutes by far a new theoretical perspective on Althusser’s own work rather than an actual “introduction” or “presentation” of the structure and contents of this originally published two volumes work. In this sense, the question of knowing which is the kind of *unity* that gives *Reading Capital* its internal coherence (beyond the general framework defined by the title: to read Karl Marx’s *Capital*),<sup>3</sup> seems less clear than one might suppose, and this same fact should draw attention to an even more important subject: the question of knowing if *Reading Capital* is a “book” like any other is far from evident. The very first paragraph from Althusser’s opening text suggests what it might be one of the reasons for this problem, as he underlines the unfinished nature of each contribution:

We could, of course, have gone over them at our leisure, corrected them one against the other, reduced the margin of variation between them, unified their terminology, their hypotheses and their conclusions to the best of our ability, and set out their contents in the systematic framework of a single discourse — in other words, we could have tried to

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<sup>2</sup> “I dare maintain that only since Marx have we had to begin to suspect what, in theory at least, *reading* and hence writing *means* (*vent dire*).” Louis Althusser et al., *Reading Capital. The Complete Edition*, trans. by Ben Brewster and David Fernbach (London and New York: Verso, 2015), 14 [hereafter RC].

<sup>3</sup> A general framework into which not every contribution perfectly fits. Jacques Rancière’s text, as we know, deals to a great extent with Marx’s *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*.

make a *finished* work out of them. But rather than pretending they are what they should have been, we prefer to present them for what they are: precisely, incomplete texts, the mere beginnings of a *reading*.<sup>4</sup>

Connecting explicitly the idea of “commencement” with that of reading, and framing this exercise in an unfinished work, the idea of reading itself must necessarily be understood as the constant “recommencement” of an “interminable analysis,” the rigorous task of beginning to read which is always inscribed in an indefinite process, an “unfinished history”. Of course, the reading in question is not any kind of reading. As Althusser himself clears this out: “We read *Capital* as philosophers [*en philosophes*].”<sup>5</sup> To read *Capital* under the element of philosophy is to pose the question of the *specific difference* of *Capital*, not only the specific difference of its “*relation to its object*” (and therefore, the specific difference both of this relation and of this object themselves), but also of the type of discourse, the specific nature of *Capital*’s discourse.

It is interesting to note that Althusser presents these preliminary remarks right after “confessing” the “offense” for which he and his collaborators were responsible. “As there is no such thing as an innocent reading, we must say what reading we are guilty of.”<sup>6</sup> As we just saw, they are guilty of reading *Capital* “*en philosophes*”. Through this confession, then, Althusser tightly relates this specific kind of reading with the concept of symptomatic reading, to such a degree that it would be perfectly legitimate

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4 RC, 11.

5 *Ibid.*, 12. The original French says: “Nous avons lu *Le Capital* en philosophes” (see Louis Althusser et al., *Lire Le Capital*, Paris: PUF, 1996, 4). Since the sentence is not exactly “as philosophers” (*comme philosophes*), it would not be wrong to read this assertion as: “we read *Capital* under the modality of philosophy,” or even as “under the element of philosophy” (to use a Hegelian term that Althusser quite appreciated). It is important to underline this nuance, because the English translation may give the idea of the process of reading (and the reading “as” philosophers), as a subjective work, as something that has to do with the specific philosophical “conscience,” which would distinguish it from the conscience of the economist, the historian or the logician. It is not a matter of perspective or a different point of view. Quite the opposite, it is under the element of the economy (“lire *Le Capital* en économiste”), under the element of history (“lire *Le Capital* en historien”), and under the element of logic (“lire *Le Capital* en logicien”), which it would be also possible to read *Capital*, regardless of the particularities of the consciousness of the economist, the historian and the logician. See *ibid.*, 12 (page 5 in the French edition).

6 *Ibid.*, 12.

to identify one kind of reading with the other. Thereby, reading *Capital* under the element of philosophy is to read *Capital* symptomatically. Such a statement inevitably opens a wide range of questions, among them, and first of all, the question: is every “philosophical” reading a symptomatic reading? (and inversely, is every symptomatic reading “philosophical”?). This question essentially entails another one not less important: what does philosophy become if this is the concept of its specific way of reading? In other words, to which concept of philosophy—if there is *a* concept—corresponds the theory of symptomatic reading? And more precisely, what concept of philosophy underlies or results from the identification between “philosophical” and symptomatic reading?

But at the same time, all these questions must be thought taking into account another crucial feature in Althusser’s entire work. As we know very well, Althusser always claimed for an inherently *political* conception of philosophy, to an extent that Alain Badiou has described it as the “central enigma” of the whole of Althusser’s theoretical work, an enigma that Badiou with good reason designates as the “undecidability” between philosophy and politics<sup>7</sup>. As Althusser himself asserted in his 1968 intervention at the Hegel’s seminar directed by Jean Hyppolite at the *Collège de France*, philosophy is in last instance political<sup>8</sup> (and one might ask here if we should apply to this “last instance” the same paradoxical assertion Althusser famously outlined in “Contradiction and Overdetermination”: “From the first moment to the last, the lonely hour of the ‘last instance’ never comes.”)<sup>9</sup> Of course, Althusser has repeatedly defended this position in several other texts, through a variety of other

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7 Alain Badiou, “Qu’est-ce que Louis Althusser entend par philosophie ?” in Sylvain Lazarus (dir.), *Politique et philosophie dans l’œuvre de Louis Althusser* (Paris: PUF, 1993), 30. In a review of this book, Bruno Karsenti also underlined this same enigmatic feature of Althusser’s thought: “‘En quel sens Althusser fait-il de la philosophie ?’ est une question indissolublement politique, non simplement en ce qu’elle désigne une pensée originale de la politique mais surtout en ce qu’elle porte la philosophie à se penser autrement, sous l’angle de son rapport difficile à la politique”. Bruno Karsenti, “A propos de *Politique et philosophie dans l’œuvre de Louis Althusser*,” available at <https://www.multitudes.net/A-propos-de-Politique-et/>.

8 “La philosophie est en effet, en dernière instance, *politique*.” Louis Althusser, “Sur le rapport de Marx à Hegel,” in *Lénine et la philosophie, suivi de Marx et Lénine devant Hegel* (Paris : François Maspero, 1972), 55.

9 Louis Althusser, “Contradiction and Overdetermination,” in *For Marx*, translated by Ben Brewster (London and New York: Verso, 2005) 113 [hereafter *FM*].

formulations, such as the definition of philosophy as “class struggle in theory” or theoretical practice as a political intervention, what he also called “partisanship in philosophy [*prise de partie en philosophie*].”

What I would like to underline here through these very schematic definitions, is the quite paradoxical and literally overdetermined value and significance that Althusser assigns to the labor of reading: inseparable from symptomatic reading on the one hand, and indistinguishable from politics on the other. Obviously what is also at stake here is the very concept of philosophy, its nature or its status. Our aim in what follows, is to put forth the mutual implication of symptomatic reading and political reading in Althusser’s own theoretical work. To read Althusser *politically*—to take up again the title of the conference—is at the same time and by the same theoretical reasons, to read his writings *symptomatically*. It is our belief that if after *Reading Capital* Althusser never speaks explicitly again of symptomatic reading, it is mainly because he continues *practicing* symptomatic reading (which is not to say that he completely abandons the task of theorizing it, as we shall see in what follows).

Let us go back to Althusser’s first contribution to *Reading Capital*. As stated earlier, in the very first pages Althusser famously asserted: “there is no such thing as an innocent reading,”<sup>10</sup> meaning by that that every reading is a “guilty” reading. Guilt and innocence, of course, are religious or juridical categories that Althusser puts forth precisely to denounce the “religious myth” of reading, this is, reading as the exercise of a subject facing an “open book,” an absolutely conscious practice which runs uninterrupted through a continuous line of thought and takes the text of his reading as a perfectly given object. In other words, the religious myth of reading is a “spontaneous” ideology of reading that conceives the text in the transparency of its pure and simple presence.

Despite the fact that there is no reference to symptomatic reading in *For Marx* (also published in 1965), Althusser explains that all of the different articles that compose this major work were intended to carry out a symptomatic reading of Marx’s theory. In *For Marx*, Althusser says:

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10 RC, 12.

I merely proposed a ‘*symptomatic*’ reading of the works of Marx and of Marxism, one with another, i.e., the progressive and systematic production of a reflection of the problematic on its objects such as to make them *visible*, and the illumination, the production of the deepest lying problematic which will allow us to *see* what could otherwise only have existed allusively or practically.<sup>11</sup>

The question of reading is at the core of *For Marx*’s different articles, and we might even find more or less implicitly sketched out the theory of symptomatic reading. As Althusser explains towards the very end of the preface, the “irreducible specificity” of Marxist theory, “cannot be *read* directly in Marx’s writings.”<sup>12</sup> In order to reach a proper definition of this specificity we must carry on “a complete prior critique” of Marx’s texts and his concepts, a critique that is only possible through an “application of Marxist theory to Marx himself.”<sup>13</sup> As Etienne Balibar has correctly pointed out, “to play off Marx against Marx” is a strategy that “lies at the heart of the so-called ‘symptomatic reading’ of *Capital* and other classical texts.”<sup>14</sup>

This same exercise, which Althusser describes as a “circle” (a figure which refers us to the idea of “recommencement” and to the unfinished, or even to the “unfinishable” nature of this process),<sup>15</sup> is a precondition for the development of Marxist philosophy. By this clarification, it is worth noting, Althusser already offers an important feature of the irreducible specificity of Marxist theory, namely, being “*capable of accounting*

11 *Ibid.*, 31.

12 *FM*, 38.

13 *Ibid.*

14 Etienne Balibar, “The Non-Contemporaneity of Althusser,” in E. Ann Kaplan and Michael Sprinker (eds.), *The Althusserian Legacy* (London and New York: Verso, 1993), 8.

15 As it is well known, Althusser repeatedly refers to the figure of the circle (and even to the “circle of circles”) as the figure that perfectly describes the speculative logic of Hegel’s philosophy. But the circle or the “circularity” here must be thought not as a close and centered one, but as an open circle with no center, as it were. As Robert Paul Resch has correctly observed: “unlike the hermeneutic circle that it otherwise resembles, the scientific circle described by Althusser is open at any moment to a critical evaluation of its results, an evaluation whose possibility is conditional on the objective existence of the text as a social product and historical materialism as a scientific problematic.” In this sense, “Althusser’s symptomatic reading is circular but not vicious,” concludes the author. Robert Paul Resch, *Althusser and the Renewal of Marxist Social Theory* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1992), 178.

*for itself*, by taking itself as its own object. Marxism is the only philosophy that theoretically faces up to this test.”<sup>16</sup> It is at this point where Althusser brings back again the importance of a “critical” reading of Marx’s texts, a kind of reading that is opposed to what he calls here an “immediate reading” (what we just called a “spontaneous” reading):

All this critical effort is indispensable, not only to a reading of Marx which is not just an immediate reading, deceived either by the false transparency of his youthful ideological conceptions, or by the perhaps still more dangerous false transparency of the apparently familiar concepts of the works of the break. This work which is essential to a *reading* of Marx is, in the strict sense, simultaneously the work of theoretical elaboration of Marxist philosophy.<sup>17</sup>

According to this statement, symptomatic reading shifts radically in its meaning and value, and it gains an absolutely decisive place in Althusser’s whole theoretical project. Symptomatic reading, as practiced in *For Marx*, as well as in *Reading Capital*, is nothing more and nothing less than the very work of elaboration and development of Marxist theory. The theory of symptomatic reading is not only the theory that “alone makes possible an authentic reading of Marx’s writings,” but more crucially, “this theory is in fact simply Marxist philosophy itself,”<sup>18</sup> says Althusser.

What, then, is ultimately symptomatic reading? Or how does it work? After these general definitions, we must turn our attention to how Althusser characterizes symptomatic reading in *Reading Capital*, the only place where he explicitly addresses this concept. It is through a reading of Marx, and studying what Marx actually does while reading, that we are able to grasp a “new theory of *reading*.” “When we read Marx, we immediately find a *reader* who *reads* to us, and out loud.”<sup>19</sup> This new theory of reading that we learn only by reading Marx reading, this is, by reading Marx as a reader of political economy, history and philosophy, is according to Althusser a “double reading,” a reading in two levels—as we shall discuss

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<sup>16</sup> FM, 39.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> RC, 16.

below—which radically breaks with the religious myth of reading, a break which is inseparable from the epistemological break in Marx’s own work. “To break with the religious myth of reading: with Marx this theoretical necessity took precisely the form of a rupture with the Hegelian conception of the whole as a ‘spiritual’ totality, to be precise, as an *expressive* totality.”<sup>20</sup> Oddly enough, we are only able to know this new theory of reading through the new practice of reading carried out by Marx in his study of the classical economic text. It is through Marx’s reading of this text that we *see* how symptomatic reading works.

At this point, and in general terms, we might say that symptomatic reading consists in bringing into light, in rendering visible what remains invisible in the text of the classical economists:

Marx makes us *see* blanks in the text of classical economics’ answer [to the question of labor’s value, for instance]; but that is merely to make us see what the classical text itself says while not saying it, does not say while saying it. Hence it is not Marx who says what the classical text does not say, it is not Marx who intervenes to impose from without on the classical text a discourse which reveals its silence — *it is the classical text itself which tells us that it is silent: its silence is its own words.*<sup>21</sup>

The labor of symptomatic reading does not reveal some “hidden” or “profound” meaning that the elements of the text would already contain, and which it would be only possible to discover through the reader’s personal capacity to interpret correctly this meaning. As Althusser explains in a somewhat puzzling passage:

What classical political economy does not see, is not what it does not see, it is *what it sees*; it is not what it lacks, on the contrary, it is *what it does not lack*; it is not what it misses, on the contrary, it is *what it does not miss*. The oversight, then, is not to see what one sees, the oversight no longer concerns the object, but *the sight* itself. The oversight is an oversight that concerns *vision*: non-vision is therefore inside vision, it

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<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.



is a form of vision and hence has a necessary relationship with vision.<sup>22</sup>

The invisibilities and the lacks of a text are not to be turned visible or fulfilled from an “outside” of the text, or from the reader’s “inner” subjectivity. They are to be inscribed and explained by their relationship to the specific *problematic* that articulates both visibility and invisibility, the fullness and the emptiness of the text. This is the reason why symptomatic reading has nothing to do with hermeneutics, which always remains an accomplice of some sort of theoretical humanism. For hermeneutics, the text assumes the position of a cause, whilst for symptomatic reading, according to Althusser, the text must be considered as a product or as a result of a process of production (the production of knowledge). In this sense, hermeneutics is always humanist insofar as it takes as a source or as an “origin” the subjective intention of the author of the text, whilst for Althusser, symptomatic reading has no interest in the internal jurisdiction of the author’s psyche. As Robert Paul Resch has put it:

The identity of the ‘latent’ structure of the text, its problematic, is not constituted by its ‘manifest’ content, the specific propositions that the text asserts, or even by the intentions of its author; it is constituted, Althusser argues, by the principles of meaning that condition the production of text and the problems that it is the function of the text to resolve. What a problematic makes visible, however, it also makes invisible by a system of exclusions perpetuated and sanctioned by the existence and peculiar structure of the latent structure itself. Thus a symptomatic reading reveals the unconscious infrastructure of a text by investigating what it does not, or rather cannot, say as well as what it actually does say. Both presence and absence are interpreted by Althusser as overdetermined and unevenly developed effects of contradictions articulated on each other within the infrastructure of the text.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>23</sup> Robert Paul Resch, *Althusser and the Renewal of Marxist Social Theory*, op. cit., 177.

If in a first moment the purpose of Althusser is to show how Marx's practice of reading can teach us what symptomatic reading is, in his second contribution to *Reading Capital*, "The object of *Capital*," Althusser moves on to carry on a symptomatic reading of Marx's text himself. This shift alone must call into our attention the fact that the theory of symptomatic reading seems to be much more an invention fully attributable to Althusser than something actually traceable in Marx's own writings. To say it otherwise, we might consider that the theory of symptomatic reading itself must *pose* the hypothesis of a theory of reading already present, in a "practical state," as it were, in Marx's own writings. In any case, it is at this point where Althusser brings back again symptomatic reading and offers a sort of definition of it. In chapter three, "The Merits of Classical Economics," Althusser deals with the problem of the essential difference between Marx and classical economists, and more precisely with the hypothesis of the "continuity of object" between one and others, a hypothesis upheld equally by his critics as well as by some of his supporters. Althusser's argument is that:

This hypothetical *continuity of object* from classical economics to Marx...emerges silently again and again in Marx's own explicit discourse, or rather it emerges from a certain silence of Marx's which unintentionally doubles his explicit discourse. At certain moments, in certain symptomatic points, this silence emerges as such in the discourse and forces it against its will to produce real theoretical lapses, in brief blank flashes, invisible in the light of the proof...All that a simple literal reading sees (...) is the continuity of the text.

Althusser asserts that a symptomatic reading becomes something theoretically urgent and necessary. The condition of possibility is not to read literally, or in other words, to read what the discontinuities and the silences of the text speak from themselves. He continues:

A '*symptomatic*' reading is necessary to make these lacunae perceptible, and to identify behind the spoken words the discourse of the silence, which, emerging in the verbal discourse, induces these blanks in it, blanks which are failures in its rigour, or the outer limits of its effort: its

absence, once these limits are reached, but in a space which it has *opened*.<sup>24</sup>

Even if Althusser makes explicit that it is thanks to Marx that we get to have an idea of what reading really means (as the quotation that I have chose as an epigraph shows), there are of course two other fundamental references in Althusser's own theoretical elaboration of symptomatic reading. The first one is Freud, the first actual "reader" of the symptom, we could say, who plays of course a major part in the theoretical production of the theory of symptomatic reading. The second one, which may appear at first glance less obvious, is Spinoza. We might say that it is through the combination of these two main theoretical references that the relationship between political and symptomatic reading shows its common conceptual ground.<sup>25</sup>

Let us take a quick glance at these two references. A year before the publishing of *Reading Capital*, in his 1964 article "Freud and Lacan," Althusser had already defined the discovery of Freud, the specificity of the object of psychoanalysis, as "the unconscious and its effects."<sup>26</sup> His engagement with psychoanalysis had begun some years earlier though. In 1963 he wrote a short article, "Philosophie et sciences humaines", where he commends the work of Lacan, and where he already projects the

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24 RC, 231-232. See also pages 294-295. The distinction between the linear continuity of the text in a "literal reading" and the non-linear discontinuity of the text in symptomatic reading (which is, of course, also a distinction concerning different concepts of historical time), certainly is indebted to Michel Foucault's work, which is praised in several passages of *Reading Capital*. And far from any phenomenological connotation, it is also from Foucault's work that the idea of the inherent relationship between the visible and the invisible seems to draw its inspiration. See RC, 25, 45-46, 250-251.

25 In a recent article, Robyn Marasco has argued that another way of thinking symptomatic reading is to conceive its "guiltiness" as a *debt*, insofar as "all reading has a debt. Every reading owes itself to its object and to inherited concepts and theoretical traditions. But not every reader knows what a debt is" (and we might add: not every reader knows who he or she is indebted to, not every reader is fully aware or has "full conscience" of his or her theoretical debts). Marasco makes a very good point underlining Althusser's debt to Gramsci, specifically regarding the practice of reading, and more precisely, of "political reading." See Robyn Marasco, "Althusser's Gramscian Debt. On Reading Out Loud," *Rethinking Marxism* 31(3) (2019): 340-362 (342 for the quotation).

26 Louis Althusser, "Freud and Lacan", in *Lenin and Philosophy and other essays*, trans. by Ben Brewster (London and New York: Monthly Review Press, 2001), 207.

encounter and necessary dialogue between Marx and Freud.<sup>27</sup> This was developed in his two conferences given in his 1963-1964 seminar on “Lacan and psychoanalysis” at the *École Normale Supérieure*.<sup>28</sup> In these writings, the question of symptomatic reading does not seem to be an issue. This is not the case with the different articles putting together *For Marx*. There we find recurrently concepts such as “displacement,” “condensation,” or “overdetermination” already at work — something that confirms that all of his effort in *For Marx* is a “putting into practice” of a symptomatic reading of Marx. It is in his 1964 article, “Freud and Lacan,” where we find, however, a more or less explicit development of the theoretical basis of symptomatic reading (at least regarding its psychoanalytic source). With Lacan’s “return to Freud,” Althusser writes, “we were introduced to the paradox, formally familiar to linguistics, of a double yet single discourse, unconscious yet verbal, having for its double field only a single field, with no beyond except in itself: the field of the ‘Signifying Chain.’” Thus, Saussure’s structural linguistics, as re-read by Lacan, allowed “the understanding of the process of the unconscious as well as that of the verbal discourse of the subject and of their inter-relationship, i.e. of their identical relation and nonrelation in other words, of their reduplication and dislocation (*décalage*)”<sup>29</sup>. This idea of a double yet single discourse, paradoxical as it is, will be central to elaborate the theory of symptomatic reading. It refers to the Freudian idea of the “double inscription” in the topological articulation of the psychic apparatus (a “double inscription” that Althusser also finds at work in Marx own writings inasmuch as there is also a topological articulation in Marx’s theory)<sup>30</sup>. This means, roughly speaking, that every discourse, every meaning, each significant content, is inscribed (*Niederschrift*) two times or

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27 Just after mentioning Lacan, Althusser explains in a footnote: “Marx a fondé sa théorie sur le rejet du mythe de l’« *Homo aconomicus* ». Freud a fondé sa théorie sur le rejet du mythe de l’« *Homo psychologicus* ». Lacan a vu et compris la rupture libératrice de Freud”. Louis Althusser, “Philosophie et sciences humaines,” in *Solitude de Machiavel* (Paris: PUF, 1998), 53 (note 18).

28 Louis Althusser, *Psychanalyse et sciences humaines. Deux conférences* (Paris: Librairie Générale Française/IMEC, 1996).

29 Louis Althusser, “Freud and Lacan,” in *op. cit.*, 208.

30 See, among others, Louis Althusser, “Le marxisme aujourd’hui,” in *Solitude de Machiavel, op. cit.*, 303-304. Also Louis Althusser, “Sur Marx et Freud,” in *Écrits sur la psychanalyse. Freud et Lacan* (Paris: Stock/IMEC, 1993), 222-245.

at two levels: in consciousness and in the unconscious.<sup>31</sup> One of the major challenges of the hypothesis of the unconscious is to think together, simultaneously, the radical split between these two orders, and their inseparable unity, their necessary connection in terms of their operation. As Jean Laplanche has explained (in an article written with Serge Leclaire which exerts a profound influence in Althusser's own approach to Freud's theory), "*Le but de Freud est avant tout de fonder l'indépendance et la cohésion des deux systems.*"<sup>32</sup> This is exactly what Althusser refers to when he speaks of a single field with no beyond, this is, with no "transcendence," no "profoundness," in which a "deeper" meaning should be searched for, an idea that is in no way contradicted by the existence of these "two systems." This very argument is what demarcates Lacan's perspective (with which Althusser agrees at this point) from other idealist interpretations of Freud's hypothesis. Althusser strictly underlines:

Philosophico-idealist interpretations of the unconscious as a second consciousness, of the unconscious as bad faith (Sartre), of the unconscious as the cankerous survival of a non-current structure or non-sense (Merleau-Ponty), all the interpretations of the unconscious as a biologico-archetypal 'id' (Jung) became what they were: not the beginnings of a theory but null 'theories', ideological misunderstandings.<sup>33</sup>

This same idea, if we read carefully, must call our attention to another fundamental theoretical reference in Althusser's work, that of Spinoza's. If we go back to the first paragraphs of *Reading Capital*, we find that notwithstanding Althusser's assertions concerning both Marx's and

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31 In the third of his "Three Notes on the Theory of Discourses," Althusser maintains that the very condition of a discourse is this double structure or double inscription: "pour être des discours, ces discours doivent comporter à l'intérieur d'eux-mêmes une 'double articulation,' ou une existence 'à double étage' de leurs éléments. Double articulation comparable à celle que les linguistes ont mise en évidence à propos de la langue... On doit pouvoir faire partout ce recensement et faire apparaître l'existence de ce double étage comme constituant tout discours comme discours." Louis Althusser, "Trois notes sur la théorie des discours," in *Écrits sur la psychanalyse. Freud et Lacan* (Paris: Stock/IMEC, 1993), 167-168.

32 Jean Laplanche et Serge Leclaire, "L'inconscient. Une étude psychanalytique," *Les Temps Modernes*, no 183 (1961): 95-96. Althusser mentions this article in his first conference from his ENS seminar "Lacan and psychoanalysis". See Louis Althusser, *Psychanalyse et sciences humaines*, op. cit., 38.

33 Louis Althusser, "Freud and Lacan," in op. cit., 208.

Freud's contributions to elaborate the theory of symptomatic reading, he recognizes Spinoza as "the first person ever to have posed the problem of *reading*, and in consequence, of *writing*."<sup>34</sup> Most likely, Althusser is thinking here in chapter 7 of the *Theological-Political Treatise*, "Of the Interpretation of Scripture," whose general purpose, it could be said, is to explain the causes of superstition and therefore a way to eradicate it. As Warren Montag has argued in a study devoted to the problem of interpretation in Spinoza and Althusser, superstition "is based on a rejection of nature, of what is, in favor of what is above, beyond or behind it, that is, in favor of what is not." In a sense analogous to Lacan's position regarding the unconscious (or Althusser's reading of his position), Spinoza "sought to combat superstition by eliminating the supernatural and the transcendental."<sup>35</sup> In this sense, miracles, beliefs, revelations, and every other mythical (i.e. "supernatural") story, must be explained "from Scripture alone, just as knowledge of Nature must be sought from Nature itself."<sup>36</sup> This is precisely the materialist and immanent conception of knowledge, of the process of production of knowledge that Althusser will make his own in *For Marx* and *Reading Capital*. As Montag points out: "Like nature, a text is entirely coincident with its actual existence, it is a surface without depth, without a reservoir of hermeneutic potential."<sup>37</sup> We find here again the idea that classical hermeneutics is always engaged with some sort of theoretical humanism, insofar as it cannot but refer to some kind of "beyond", to some deeper level of meaning of the text, an "idealism of the text" which inevitably must refer to some form of subjectivity: be that of the reader (the philosopher or the priest), or that of the author.

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34 RC, 14. The complete statement reads as follows: "The first person ever to have posed the problem of reading, and in consequence, of writing, was Spinoza, and he was also the first in the world to have proposed both a theory of history and a philosophy of the opacity of the immediate" (14-15).

35 Warren Montag, "Spinoza and Althusser Against Hermeneutics: Interpretation or Intervention?" in Kaplan and Sprinker (eds.), *op. cit.*, 52-53.

36 Baruch Spinoza, *Complete Works*, translated by Samuel Shirley, edited by Michael L. Morgan (Cambridge: Hackett Publishing, 2002), 457. This idea of referring to "Scripture alone" actually constitutes a sort of "motto" of the *Theological-Political Treatise*. In the preface, for example, Spinoza announces: "I show in what way Scripture must be interpreted, and how all our understanding of Scripture and of matters spiritual must be sought from Scripture alone, and not from the sort of knowledge that derives from the natural light of reason" (392). And further on, in chapter 7: "all knowledge of Scripture must be sought from Scripture alone" (458).

37 Warren Montag, "Spinoza and Althusser Against Hermeneutics..." in *op. cit.*, 53.

Following Spinoza's argument, the result of this "moral vision of the world" or this "normative anthropology," as André Tosel has correctly said,<sup>38</sup> cannot be other than superstition or domination (i.e. ideology or subjection): "In the same way that superstition adds to nature the anthropomorphic projections that are nowhere to be found in it, so superstition adds to Scripture profound mysteries to justify the despotism that it upholds."<sup>39</sup>

It is interesting to note here that when in the famous chapter on Spinoza of his *Elements of Self-Criticism*, written in 1972, Althusser made explicit his Spinozism, his "detour" through Spinoza, the terms in which Althusser expresses this affiliation are exactly the terms with which he described symptomatic reading in the first paragraphs of *Reading Capital*: there's no such thing as an innocent reading, every reading is guilty. Let us recall this well-known passage, "If we never were structuralists, we can now confess why: why we seemed to be, even though we were not... We were guilty of an equally powerful and compromising passion: *we were Spinozists*."<sup>40</sup> This confession of guilt not only confirms the fact that Althusser has not abandoned this basic conception of reading, but also should make us think about what other elements articulate this particular Spinozism (specifically in relation to symptomatic reading),<sup>41</sup> that may justify Althusser's statement on Spinoza as the first to have posed the problem of reading. Other than the epistemological distinction between the "real object" and the "object of knowledge" which is largely developed in *For Marx* and *Reading Capital*, and the identification of Spinoza's "first kind of knowledge" with the Lacanian "imaginary," which allows

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38 André Tosel, *Spinoza ou le crépuscule de la servitude. Essai sur le Traité Théologico-Politique* (Paris: Aubier Montaigne, 1984), 48. See in general chapter 2, "Superstition and reading."

39 Warren Montag, "Spinoza and Althusser Against Hermeneutics..." in *op. cit.*, 53. "The rejection of the Scripture as it is and as it can be read by anyone necessitates the production of a supertextual meaning (analogous to the supernatural meaning added to the world by the mechanisms of superstition) available only to the initiated and guarded over by the institutions of ecclesiastical authority" (55).

40 Louis Althusser, "Elements of Self-Criticism," in *Essays in Self-Criticism*, trans. by Grahame Lock (London: NLB, 1976), 132. We have slightly modified the translation.

41 For a general presentation of Althusser's Spinozism, see chapters 4 and 5 in Knox Peden, *Spinoza Contra Phenomenology. French Rationalism from Cavailles to Deleuze* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2014), 127-190.

Althusser to affirm that in Spinoza we find the first theory of ideology,<sup>42</sup> we might find traces of a rather “hermeneutical” lesson from Spinoza, an “anti-humanist hermeneutics,” as it were, which is only revealed by a note to the first typed version of his 1964 article on “Freud and Lacan.” In this unpublished draft, Althusser thought to include an epigraph from Spinoza’s *Political Treatise*, in its original Latin version: “*non ridere, non lugere, neque detestari, sed intelligere.*”<sup>43</sup> Taken from the first chapter, the complete sentence reads as follows: “I have taken great care not to deride, bewail, or execrate human actions, but to understand them.”<sup>44</sup> Again, this must be taken in a way entirely different from classical hermeneutics, a tradition that has always relied on the idealistic distinction introduced by Dilthey between the “explanation” of natural sciences and the “understanding” of human sciences (a distinction that Althusser repeatedly rejected)<sup>45</sup>. As

42 Louis Althusser, “Elements of Self-Criticism,” in *op. cit.*, 135.

43 See the editor’s notes in Louis Althusser, “Freud and Lacan”, in *op. cit.*, 49 (note “a” from page 26).

44 Baruch Spinoza, *Complete Works*, *op. cit.*, 681. It is worth noting that Nietzsche will critically recover this statement in aphorism 333 (“The meaning of knowing”) of his *Gay Science*. See Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. by Walter Kaufmann (New York: Random House, 1974), 261-262.

“*Non ridere, non lugere, neque detestari, sed intelligere!*” says Spinoza as simply and sublimely as is his wont. Yet in the last analysis, what else is this *intelligere* than the form in which we come to feel the other three at once? One result of the different and mutually opposed desires to laugh, lament, and curse?” Despite Nietzsche’s objections, a year before the first edition of *Gay Science* (1882), Nietzsche writes in a letter to Franz Overbeck: “I am really amazed, really delighted! I have a *precursor* and what a precursor! I hardly knew Spinoza: my desire of him *now* was an ‘act of instinct.’ Not only the fact that his overall tendency is the same as mine — to make knowledge the *most powerful passion* — I find myself again in five main points of his doctrine, this most abnormal and solitary thinker is closest to me precisely in *these* things: he denies free will —; purposiveness —; the moral world order —; the nonegoistical —; evil —; when, of course, the differences are enormous, these lie more in the differences of time, culture, and science. In summa: my loneliness, which, as in very high mountains, often, often left me breathless and made my blood gush forth, is now at least a twosomeness. — Strange!” See Nietzsche’s letter to Franz Overbeck from July 30, 1881, available at: <http://www.thenietzschechannel.com/correspondence/eng/nlett-1881.htm>. Deleuze will address this affinity between Spinoza and Nietzsche several times in Gilles Deleuze, *Spinoza: Philosophie pratique* (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 2003). The letter to Overbeck is commented towards the very end (see page 173).

45 See, for example, in “The Humanist Controversy” from 1967, “Without going back to the Kantian Distinction between Nature and Freedom, which still commands Phenomenology and finally even haunts its own rejection in the Heideggerian problematic of Being and *Dasein*, let us consider the form in which this spiritualist heritage has been taken up by the philosophy of the ‘sciences of Man.’ It appears in *propria persona* in the great idealist Distinction between the Sciences of Nature and the Sciences of Man. For example, it is manifest in Dilthey’s theory of the difference between explanation (the Natural Sciences) and comprehension (the Sciences of Man).” Louis Althusser, “The Humanist Controversy,” in *The Humanist Controversy and Other Essays*, translated by G.M. Goshgarian (London and New York: Verso, 2003), 281.



adopted (and adapted) by Althusser, this lesson from Spinoza has not so much to do with interpretation but with the production of knowledge from the “raw material” of the text itself.<sup>46</sup> In other words, Spinoza’s “*intelligere*” must take place from the “Scripture alone.”

Another note from “Freud and Lacan,” this time from the published version of this article, gives us another hint of which is the place and the significance of Spinoza as the first philosopher who has raised the problem of reading. When Althusser speaks of the unconscious and its “effects” as the specific object of psychoanalysis he explains these effects in terms of structural causality, this is as “the continuing presence of the cause in its effects.”<sup>47</sup> As we shall see, this marginal remark leads to our main argument, namely, the necessary link that binds together symptomatic reading and political reading, or more precisely, the same conceptual articulation which is at the base both of the symptomatic reading of any theoretical text and of the materialistic analysis of any given political conjuncture.

Before directly tackling this problem, I would first like to draw attention to two elements of what I have said up to this point. First, it is worthy to note that both in “Freud and Lacan” as well as in *Reading Capital*, Althusser speaks of “Marx, Nietzsche and Freud” as these “fatherless children” who were born unexpectedly in the nineteenth century and became the “solitary” thinkers that Western Reason could not but try to condemn and bury.<sup>48</sup> If we consider that not only Spinoza is also named

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46 In Robert J.C. Young’s words: “The symptomatic reading that Althusser finds in Marx, that seeks the unstated question for the offered answer, therefore involves not interpretation but the production of new knowledge from a reading that identifies an invisible gap in the text.” Therefore, “to read to the letter is to find that the letter appears to be missing, not in place.” This is why “Marx’s new method of reading therefore is not just another form of reading, an alternative hermeneutic, it is a new kind of reading that breaks with the history of reading for the Logos in order to read the text of history in all its precariousness and rupture, to read history in terms of its disjunctive delays, to read a text by recognizing its ‘internal dislocation,’ *décalage*”. Robert J.C. Young, “Rereading Symptomatic Reading,” in Nick Nesbitt (ed.), *The Concept in Crisis. Reading Capital Today* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2017), 40.

47 See the full note: “If this term ‘effect’ is examined in the context of a classical theory of causality, it reveals a conception of the continuing presence of the cause in its effects (cf. Spinoza)”. Louis Althusser, “Freud and Lacan”, in *op. cit.*, 199 (note 8).

48 See in “Freud and Lacan”: “To my knowledge, the nineteenth century saw the birth of two or three children that were not expected: Marx, Nietzsche and Freud. ‘Natural’ children, in the sense that

here, but a whole tradition of “readers” which includes Althusser’s old “masters,” Gaston Bachelard and Jean Cavallès, as well as some of his contemporaries, including Georges Canguilhem and Michel Foucault,<sup>49</sup> one would be tempted to *read* in these first paragraphs of *Reading Capital*, a primitive outline of the underground current of the materialism of the encounter, as Althusser would later propose in the series of posthumous texts from the 1980s (which have been wrongly associated with a puzzling novelty of the “late Althusser”).<sup>50</sup> This, of course, is a hypothesis that would need much further elaboration, something that I cannot undertake here. Suffice to say that in “The Underground Current of the Materialism of the Encounter,” written in 1982, as well as in his interviews with Fernanda Navarro, Althusser repeatedly speaks of “silences,” “denial,” and “repression” of this underground current. “To free the materialism of the encounter from this repression; to discover, if possible, its implications for both philosophy and materialism; and to ascertain its hidden effects wherever they are silently at work — such is the task that I have set myself here,”<sup>51</sup> Althusser declares. We might say that “The Underground Current...” is nothing more than the exercise—hasty and incomplete, if you will—of a symptomatic reading of the entire history of philosophy, an exercise which combines indistinctly Heidegger’s “destruction” of the history of metaphysics, and Derrida’s deconstruction of the metaphysics of presence.

The second element connects directly with this last point. This is the extremely revealing fact (rarely commented, if *ever*) that more or less

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nature offends customs, principles, morality and good breeding: nature is the rule violated, the unmarried mother, hence the absence of a legal father. Western Reason makes a fatherless child pay heavily. Marx, Nietzsche and Freud had to foot the often terrible bill of survival: a price compounded of exclusion, condemnation, insult, poverty, hunger and death, or madness.” *Ibid.*, 181-182. And in *Reading Capital*: “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.” RC, 13-14.

49 See the footnote in *ibid.*, 14.

50 We cannot deal with this problem here, which has been largely discussed. Among others, we refer to Emilio de Ipola, *Althusser. The Infinite Farwell*, trans. by Gavin Arnall (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018), and Vittorio Morfino, *Plural Temporality. Transindividuality and the Aleatory Between Spinoza and Althusser* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2014).

51 Louis Althusser, “The Underground Current of the Materialism of the Encounter”, in *Philosophy of the Encounter. Later Writings 1978-87*, trans. by G.M. Goshgarian (London and New York: Verso, 2006), 168.

at the same time that Althusser was wondering, “*what is it to read?*”<sup>52</sup> Jacques Derrida was asking himself the question “*what is writing?*”<sup>53</sup> Despite the extraordinary proximity between one question and the other, it must be said that putting the emphasis on reading rather than writing may say something about a “logocentric” prejudice that still haunts Althusser’s position, even if he immediately specifies that the question of reading necessarily entails the question of writing (and conversely, Derrida also recognizes that the question of writing calls for a whole new understanding of reading). If we also have to leave this second element aside here (it demands a very long detour that we are not able to do in this context), let us retain at least that there is a common thread that makes possible this difference itself. Without question, this common thread consists in the place that both Althusser and Derrida assign to Freud and psychoanalysis in their respective developments on reading and writing. In both we find the idea of the “double inscription” or the “double mark,” taken from the Freudian hypothesis of the spatial relation organizing the psychic apparatus (“*la topique*”), which rises the problem of a writing and a reading that must always be *double* as well. Structurally double, as it were. In a footnote of “The double session” in *Dissemination*, in which Derrida seems to discuss indirectly with Althusser (in a moment where Derrida questions the relevance of the metaphysical concept of “last instance”), he states: “To take this double inscription of concepts into account is to practice a *double science*, a bifid, *dissymmetrical* writing.”<sup>54</sup> Even if symptomatic reading may differ from this dissymmetrical writing, in that the former is dominated by a quest to produce new knowledge whilst the latter is dominated by the uncontrollable movement of dissemination, it is nonetheless true that for Althusser, “reading must become double, a form of dislocation, hence duplicitous, enforcing delay, inserting temporality, historicity into the transparent immediacy of conventional

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52 RC, 13.

53 Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. by Gayatri Spivak (Baltimore and London: The John Hopkins University Press, 1997), 28. Of course, Derrida questions the very formulation of every question posed as “what is...?”, insofar as it supposes or requires the question of the origin. But in general terms, there is no doubt that one of the main common threads of *Grammatology* and of *Writing and Difference*, is an interrogation of the very nature of what we understand by “writing”. Let us recall that the first part of *Grammatology* was first published in numbers 223 and 224 of *Critique* in 1966.

54 Jacques Derrida, “The double session” in *Dissemination*, translated by Barbara Johnson (London: The Athlon Press, 1981), 208 (note 25).

reading.” In other words, “reading must become differential, doubled up, and take the form of *décalage*, unwedging, staggering, shifting, of displacement, slippage, difference of phase, become out of step, enforce a time-lag, all of which must necessarily prompt a form of ‘double reading.’”<sup>55</sup> In another important text from Derrida, “Freud and the scene of writing,” we also find the idea that this double reading does not admit any beyond or any transcendence, following the same argument that Althusser used to explain Freud’s discovery in terms of a “double yet single discourse.” Allow me to quote at length one of its crucial passages:

The conscious text is thus not a transcription, because there is no text *present elsewhere* as an unconscious one to be transposed or transported. For the value of presence can also dangerously affect the concept of the unconscious. There is then no unconscious truth to be rediscovered by virtue of having been written elsewhere. There is no text written and present elsewhere which would then be subjected, without being changed in the process, to an operation and a temporalization (the latter belonging to consciousness if we follow Freud literally) which would be external to it, floating on its surface. There is no present text in general, and there is not even a past present text, a text which is past as having been present. The text is not conceivable in an originary or modified form of presence. (...) Since the transition to consciousness is not a derivative or repetitive writing, a transcription duplicating an unconscious writing, it occurs in an original manner and, in its very secondariness, is originary and irreducible.<sup>56</sup>

Of course, Derrida has its own very elaborate explanation for the impossibility of any “presence” of the text, the impossibility of dealing with any written text that may be read in its pure “presence,” it is the

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<sup>55</sup> Robert J.C. Young, “Rereading Symptomatic Reading,” in *op. cit.*, 44.

<sup>56</sup> Jacques Derrida, “Freud and the scene of writing,” in *Writing and Difference*, translated by Alan Bass (London and New York: Routledge, 2005), 265-266. Soon after, Derrida says: “Freud emphasizes this: psychic writing does not lend itself to translation because it is a single energetic system (however differentiated it may be), and because it covers the entirety of the psychical apparatus. Despite the difference of agencies, psychical writing in general is not a displacement of meanings within the limpidity of an immobile, pregiven space and the blank neutrality of discourse” (268).

notion of archi-trace (or achi-writing) which structurally makes impossible every presence as pure and full presence. We might be tempted to say that the concept of archi-writing in Derrida “overdetermines” and “underdetermines” the existence of writing itself, of every text and every presence, of every discourse and every phenomena. Again, unfortunately, we cannot develop further this discussion here, but these brief remarks should be enough to show the extent to which Althusser’s symptomatic reading shares important common threads with Derrida’s deconstruction, and it would be even possible to say that they share a common “problematic.”<sup>57</sup>

This is where we can get back on track to our main subject. Symptomatic reading, in fact, takes as its baseline the idea that reading can never be a simple operation that unfolds through one single instance. It is not, as we said, a simple hermeneutics. Contrary to what Althusser designates as the “religious myth of reading” (which can always take the form of a “positivist” or “empirical” version), Althusser holds that reading is always already a “double reading”; a reading in two levels, without common measure between them (just as the discourse of the unconscious is related to consciousness only by their “nonrelation”). To put it briefly, we might say that a first reading takes place on a “descriptive” level, this is, reading *literally* what a text says or makes visible, and what it doesn’t say and remains as a “lack” or a simple absence. But a second reading takes place when this literality of the text is related and explained by the “structure of structures” that articulates and combines in a “necessary invisible connection” what the text says and what it keeps silenced. In other words, this second reading seeks to explain the “necessity” which connects the field of the visible with the field of the invisible. “To understand this necessary and paradoxical identity of non-vision and

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57 For a different exploration of this possible encounter between Althusser’s symptomatic reading and Derrida’s deconstruction, see Samuel Solomon, “L’espacement de la lecture: Althusser, Derrida, and the Theory of Reading”, *Décálogos* 2(1) (2012): 1-25. While Solomon convincingly argues that the “radical difference” between the two levels of reading (the “double reading”, as we will see right away), produces a self-deconstruction in Althusser’s text, a movement which he correctly identifies with Derrida’s “spacing” (*espacement*) or dissemination, we cannot see why he “cannot follow Althusser when he says that the second reading has ‘nothing in common’ with the first” (19). Following precisely Althusser’s references to Freud and Spinoza, much of our argument here tries to show why this “non-relation” is not necessarily contradictory.

vision within vision itself is very exactly to pose our problem (the problem of the necessary connection which unites the visible and the invisible), and to pose it properly is to give ourselves a chance of solving it.”<sup>58</sup> Again, even if this emphasis on “vision” and “visibility” might turn on the alarms of deconstruction, Althusser is quite clear in underlying that the field of visibility of a given text is determined by the specific theoretical problematic from which that text is a product, just as the field of visibility of a given political conjuncture is determined (and overdetermined) by the aleatory encounter of multiple structural determinations of that given historical conjuncture:

The sighting is thus no longer the act of an individual subject, endowed with the faculty of ‘vision’ which he exercises either attentively or distractedly; the sighting is the act of its structural conditions, it is the relation of immanent reflection between the field of the problematic and *its* objects and *its* problems. Vision then loses the religious privileges of divine reading: it is no more than a reflection of the immanent necessity that ties an object or problem to its conditions of existence, which lie in the conditions of its production.<sup>59</sup>

The “play” between visibility and invisibility, then, is not something that requires some refinement of the human eye; it is rather a “play” determined by the own conflict or contradiction that articulates the text in itself, the several contradictions, ambiguities, or lacunae that gives the text its mere existence. As the work of the analyst, symptomatic reading must identify and try to explain those contradictions “to theorize the unrecognized conflicts that appear on the surface of the text.” To use Montag’s terms in his first book on Althusser:

Certain elements are excluded, repressed, split off, denied even as they are stated. They are those things the text cannot help but say, but which nevertheless so disturb the meaning it wishes to project that they become subject to a kind of isolation, an inner darkness of exclusion, that renders them invisible even in their visibility, surrounding them with an

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<sup>58</sup> RC, 20.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

absence, the absence of the connection to what the text wants to say and means to say. In a certain sense the entire text is constructed around the need to deny, to make invisible that which it makes visible by diverting our attention from it.<sup>60</sup>

Symptomatic reading would consist above all in analyzing the text's "defenses" and "conflicts", the resistances and contradictions that constitutes the very content (without hidden "background") of the text. To put it another way, the only "background" of the text would be *history*, the history in which it has been produced and from which it is inevitably a part.<sup>61</sup>

In the above quotation from *Reading Capital*, we find a crucial element in Althusser's argument, which elucidates this idea of history as the only "background" (an element which refers directly to what is our main purpose here). Just after saying "relation of immanent reflection," Althusser introduces a footnote clarifying that this concept of reflection actually poses a serious theoretical problem, redirecting to section 19 of his first contribution, where he proposes the concept of "society effect," this very peculiar effect which makes contemporary society not only a *result* of a specific mode of production, but at the same time (and for the same reasons, or for the same *causes*) a *society*, this is to say, a specific organization of individuals that works as a "society." To put it in his own terms:

What Marx studies in *Capital* is the mechanism which makes the result of a history's production exist *as a society*; it is therefore the mechanism which gives this product of history, that is precisely the society-product he is studying, the property of producing the '*society effect*' which makes this

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60 Warren Montag, *Louis Althusser* (New York: Palgrave, 2003), 49.

61 As Montag explains: "Every literary or philosophical text says more than it wants to say or knows that it says. At the same time, these symptoms are not expressions of some primal disorder, a transcendental principle of the negative. The contradictions that works exhibit are historically determined; to identify and explain them is to understand the history of which they are a part." *Ibid.*, 83.

result exist *as a society*, and not as a heap of sand, an anthill, a workshop or a mere collection of men.<sup>62</sup>

What is at stake here, to get straight to the point, is nothing but “*the concept of the effectivity of a structure on its elements*.”<sup>63</sup> According to Althusser, this concept is the “keystone” of all the paradoxical relations and nonrelations of the visible and the invisible, of presence and absence. Manifestly, we are not speaking about anything other than the fundamental Althusserian concept of “structural causality.” As it will become explicit in “The object of *Capital*,” the concept of structural causality resumes Marx’s “immense theoretical revolution”. The concept of the absent cause, in fact, explains both the “society effect” and the “knowledge effect,”<sup>64</sup> and it is symptomatic reading which allows us to “see” this effects *qua* effects, this is, as results of a specific “combination” (*Verbindung*) and “articulation” (*Gliederung*) of structural determinations, a combined articulation that is always contingent, necessarily contingent.

At this point it may be possible to see more clearly how symptomatic reading and political reading are implicated in a very tight theoretical relationship. In one sense, symptomatic reading is necessarily a political reading, insofar as Althusser has always considered the latter as “taking sides” in philosophy, this is to say—to return to Althusser’s terminology—, as being “guilty” (and recognizing this guiltiness) of a specific position in the philosophical battlefield (*Kampfplatz*), a “class position in *philosophy*,” as Althusser says in 1968,<sup>65</sup> from which theoretical practice is always conceived as a political intervention.<sup>66</sup> There is yet another way of thinking this necessary connection between the symptomatic and the political reading. Considering that the materialist

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62 RC, 68. Marx’s theoretical task is to explain “the mechanism by which some particular result functions precisely *as a society*, and therefore the mechanism producing the ‘*society effect*’ peculiar to the capitalist mode of production...In this perspective, *Capital* must be regarded as the theory of the mechanism of production of the *society effect* in the capitalist mode of production.” (*ibid.*, 68-69).

63 *Ibid.*, 28.

64 See *ibid.*, 69-70.

65 Louis Althusser, “Philosophy as a Revolutionary Weapon,” in *Lenin and Philosophy and other essays*, op. cit., 14.

66 Is in this perspective that the formula “drawing a dividing-line” (*tracer une ligne de démarcation*), must be understood. See Louis Althusser, “Lenin and Philosophy,” in *Lenin and Philosophy and other essays*, op. cit., 61.



analysis of a political conjuncture is conceived by Althusser also as a reading in (at least) two levels, one corresponding to the economic infrastructure, this is, the “visibility” of social relations of production (private propriety, wage labor, etc.), and the other to the ideological superstructure, this is, the “invisibility” of ideological interpellation through the multiple Ideological State Apparatuses,<sup>67</sup> the materialist reading of a given conjuncture must also deal with the problem of this non-coincidence, the “non-contemporaneity,” or the *décalage* between both levels. Following the “law of uneven development” that Althusser recovers from Mao in “On the Materialistic Dialectic,”<sup>68</sup> each level or each instance has its own rhythm of development, its own specific temporality. Even more, a materialist reading of the conjuncture must also account for the problem of overdetermination, this is, the multiple and not necessarily “visible” effects of the ideological over the economic or the political level. As Althusser liked to say, “class struggle is never crystal-clear.”<sup>69</sup> As in symptomatic reading, the field of visibility in a given political conjuncture must always be related and explained by the “structure of structures,” by the type of causality that overdetermines (and underdetermines) all visibility and invisibility, every presence and absence in their necessary but invisible relation. Following Althusser’s own definition, symptomatic reading is thus “the progressive and systematic production of a reflection of the problematic on its objects such as to make them *visible*, and the illumination, the production of the deepest-lying problematic which will allow us to *see* what could otherwise only have existed allusively or practically.”<sup>70</sup> Against an “innocent” reading that is completely innocuous

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67 We must remember here how Althusser describes Ideological State Apparatuses in his famous 1970’s article: they “present themselves to the immediate observer in the form of distinct and specialized institutions,” and that “the unity that constitutes this plurality of ISAs as a body is not immediately visible.” Other than the fact that ideology is unconscious, this partial invisibility of ISAs themselves is what allows them to work and to be effective in the reproduction of social relations of production. See Louis Althusser, “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes towards an investigation),” in *On the Reproduction of Capitalism*, trans. by G.M. Goshgarian (London and New York: Verso, 2014), 243.

68 *FM*, 200-201.

69 Louis Althusser, “Unfinished History,” in Dominique Lecourt, *Proletarian Science? The Case of Lyssenko*, translated by Ben Brewster (London: NLB, 1977), 9. The original French version of this phrase is somewhat different: “La lutte de classe ne se mène jamais dans la transparence.” See Louis Althusser, “Histoire terminée, histoire interminable,” in *Solitude de Machiavel*, *op. cit.*, 240.

70 *RC*, 31.

insofar as it produces nothing, insofar as it remains completely satisfied with the text and peacefully accepts its visible evidence, symptomatic reading is “guilty” of making things “move” in order to bring in to the light something that otherwise would have remain invisible. Symptomatic reading is guilty of producing new knowledge in the form of new concepts or “problematics,” and this production, as an intervention, has its own effects.

Among the multiple questions that I have raised so far, let me underline at least three topics to conclude this tentative exercise of *reading* Althusser’s symptomatic reading. First of all, the very conceptual foundation of symptomatic reading necessarily opens up the possibility of new symptomatic readings, not only of *Capital* or other major works in Marxist tradition, as Althusser himself suggests,<sup>71</sup> but also, of Althusser’s own symptomatic reading of *Capital*. Once again, it is Warren Montag who has correctly pointed out this idea:

If we apply to Althusser the same protocol of reading that he applied to Marx, we must understand his work as constituted by contradiction and antagonism, and it becomes intelligible on this basis alone. To read Althusser in this way is to draw lines of demarcation within his texts, thus making their conflicts visible. The question to be answered is this: What are the contradictions that haunt Althusser’s texts, the ways in which it, by virtue of its very development, diverges from itself?<sup>72</sup>

Again, we can only limit ourselves to outline this enormous task. In the limits of this brief exposition, we can only draw attention to the fact that symptomatic reading in Althusser calls for new and different symptomatic readings of Althusser himself and others<sup>73</sup>. This true “labor of reading,”

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<sup>71</sup> See for example: “If the question of Marx’s philosophy, i.e., of its differential specificity, emerges even only slightly altered and sharpened from this first reading of *Capital*, it should make other ‘readings’ possible, first other readings of *Capital*, which will give rise to new differential sharpenings, and then readings of other Marxist works.” RC, 33.

<sup>72</sup> Warren Montag, *Althusser and His Contemporaries* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2013), 12.

<sup>73</sup> Similarly, Jean-Marie Vincent has observed: “la lecture symptomale faite par Althusser appelée d’autres lectures symptomales de Marx qui, au besoin, s’interrogeront sur les limites de la lecture althussérienne pour en prolonger les effets.” Jean-Marie Vincent, “La lecture symptomale chez

as Jacques Lezra has pointed out, must also be “immediately double”: on the one hand, it must proceed to a “*defamiliarization* of concepts” that we had taken for granted and “stabilized,” and on the other hand it must proceed to a “*reinscription* of those concepts (...) in the field of their effects, as effects of their own effects.” In this way, this double labor of reading, “proposes practical filiations between the provisional analysis of contemporary conjunctures and the blindnesses of the Althusserian project with respect to his own.”<sup>74</sup>

When after reading some of Althusser’s posthumous writings Yoshihiko Ichida and François Matheron rose the question: “one, two, three, four, ten thousand Althusser?” they cleverly answered by saying “it depends.”<sup>75</sup> With this answer, they were not just paraphrasing Althusser’s own words when in his interviews with Navarro he recovered this “aleatory word” from Marx himself.<sup>76</sup> They were also giving the most accurate answer possible facing the problem of a symptomatic reading of Althusser’s own writings.

In addition, as I have proposed to understand it here, symptomatic reading may reveal itself as another possible way to accomplish what has been historically one of the most debated and complicated challenges of

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Althusser,” in Sylvain Lazarus (dir.), *Philosophie et politique dans l’œuvre de Louis Althusser*, op. cit., 72. Vincent also identifies some of the limitations of symptomatic reading as practiced by Althusser, for which he asserts: “Il y a là un point d’aveugle sur lequel il y a lieu de s’interroger en soumettant L. Althusser, à son tour, à une lecture symptomale” (74). See also Jean-Marie Vincent, “Note complémentaire à ‘La lecture symptomale chez Louis Althusser,’” available at <https://www.multitudes.net/Note-complementaire-a-la-lecture/>, where Vincent relates Althusser’s symptomatic reading with the work of Walter Benjamin, Siegfried Kracauer and Theodor Adorno.

74 Jacques Lezra, “Editor’s Preface: Labors of Reading,” *Yale French Studies* 88, “Depositions: Althusser, Balibar, Macherey, and the Labor of Reading” (1995): 2-3. This special issue edited by Lezra gathers a set of excellent contributions, including texts by Judith Butler, Pierre Macherey, Warren Montag, Andrej Warminski, Etienne Balibar, and Michael Sprinker, among others. All of them are presented as exercises of this labor of “double reading”. Lezra’s own contribution, it should be said, offers a very careful example of this exercise. See Jacques Lezra, “Spontaneous Labor,” *Yale French Studies* 88 (1995): 78-117. Given the multiple theses that the author puts into play, we cannot undertake here a discussion of this work with the attention it deserves.

75 Yoshihiko Ichida and François Matheron, “Un, deux, trois, quatre, dix mille Althusser? Considérations aléatoires sur le matérialisme aléatoire,” *Multitudes* 21(2) (2005): 177.

76 “‘It all depends’, Marx writes in a passage of the *Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* about whether the logically prior forms also come first historically. *It all depends*: an aleatory, not a dialectical phrase”. Louis Althusser, “Philosophy and Marxism”, in *Philosophy of the Encounter*, op. cit., 263.

Marxist theory, namely, the “union of theory and praxis” (a problem that haunts almost obsessively Althusser’s writings from the 1960s)<sup>77</sup>. Of course, the main example that Althusser has to offer, other than Marx himself, is Lenin’s theoretical and political practice. In an article rarely commented published in 1967 (“On theoretical work. Difficulties and resources”), Althusser goes so far as to affirm that the concept of “conjuncture,” Lenin’s major theoretical discovery, is a concept that he only got to conceive due to his political experience as a communist leader.<sup>78</sup> Conversely, this same theoretical concept is what allows him to “read” the different articulations between the different instances at stake, whose conjunction (or whose encounter) is what produces the result of a specific political conjuncture. In this sense, only thanks to this (symptomatic) reading of the conjuncture it becomes possible to intervene effectively in the political field. Althusser described Lenin’s political practice as carrying on a “wild practice” (in the sense of Freud’s “wild analysis”), “which does not provide the theoretical credentials for its operations and which raises screams from the philosophy of the ‘interpretation’ of the world, which might be called the philosophy of *denegation*.”<sup>79</sup>

The other major figure that has carried on this enormous task is Machiavelli, whose theoretical and political practice might perfectly be described as thinking the New Prince as an *analyst*, as a “reader” of the symptoms of his time, of his specific material conjuncture. In fact, this is one of Machiavelli’s most important lessons, to think not only “in” the conjuncture, but even more difficult, to think “under” the conjuncture. As Althusser explains in *Machiavelli and Us*, even if it is necessary “to think in the conjuncture,” which means “taking account of all the determinations, all the existing concrete *circumstances*, making an inventory, a detailed breakdown and comparison of them,” this exercise alone is not enough. “To think in terms of [*sous*] the category of conjuncture is not to think on

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77 See for example, the highly dogmatic text (where Althusser’s “theoreticism” reaches its highest point): Louis Althusser, “Teoría, práctica teórica y formación teórica. Ideología y lucha ideológica,” *Casa de las Américas* 34 (1966): 5-31. Still unpublished in French, this is the article that Jacques Rancière takes as the main target of his furious criticism. See also another still unpublished text in French: Louis Althusser, “The Historical Task of Marxist Philosophy,” in *The Humanist Controversy and Other Writings*, *op. cit.*, 155-220.

78 Louis Althusser, “Sur le travail théorique. Difficultés et ressources,” *La Pensée* 132 (1967), 20.

79 Louis Althusser, “Lenin and Philosophy,” in *Lenin and Philosophy and other essays*, *op. cit.*, 66.

the conjuncture, as one would reflect on a set of concrete data. To think under [*sous*] the conjuncture is quite literally to submit to the problem induced and imposed by its case.”<sup>80</sup> Thus, Machiavelli’s theoretical production work would be in this sense exemplary. Althusser describes Machiavelli’s theoretical device as follows:

The theoretical truths thus produced are produced only under the stimulus of the conjuncture; and no sooner are they produced than they are affected in their modality by their intervention in a conjuncture wholly dominated by the political problem it poses (...). The upshot is what might be called a strange *vacillation* in the traditional philosophical status of these theoretical propositions: as if they were undermined by another instance than the one that produces them — the instance of political practice.<sup>81</sup>

The encounter of symptomatic reading and political (materialistic) reading takes place in an unprecedented way in Machiavelli’s work. The very fact of putting into practice a way of thinking under the conjuncture, gives to Machiavelli’s theoretical production an exceptional and even “ambiguous” status, since he also conceives his theory having a “double inscription.” Machiavelli’s theoretical dispositive raises the question of “a dual place or space,”<sup>82</sup> that distinguishes between the scene of the text and the scene of politics, but it also acknowledges the overdetermination of the latter over the former, as well as the possibility of the former to intervene into the latter. “Machiavelli’s text delineates a topological space, and assigns the place – the *topos* – that it must occupy in this space for it to become active therein, for it to constitute a political act an element in the practical transformation of this space.”<sup>83</sup>

Finally, if our *reading* of symptomatic reading is reasonable enough, the very idea of what “politically” means (not to say what “reading”

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80 Louis Althusser, *Machiavelli and Us*, trans. by Gregory Elliot (London and New York: Verso, 1999), 18. We cannot ignore here the clear resonance between this “case” and the clinical case.

81 *Ibid.*, 20.

82 *Ibid.*, 22.

83 *Ibid.*, 24. The word “*topos*” is written in Greek characters that we are unable to reproduce here. Shortly before, Althusser says: “For Machiavelli’s text to be politically effective – that is to say, for it to be, in its own fashion, the agent of the political practice it deploys – *it must be inscribed somewhere in the space of this political practice*” (22).

means), must be completely revised. More specifically, we should ask if it would be ever possible to think “politics” or the “political” as something isolated from the symptomatic, this is, from the unconscious. Of course, there is nothing new in what I am suggesting here. From Wilhelm Reich’s Freudo-Marxism to Herbert Marcuse and most of the “Frankfurt School” research (leaving aside the work of leading figures such as Frederic Jameson or Slavoj Žižek),<sup>84</sup> the dialogue between Marxism and psychoanalysis dates back a long time. However, the specificity of Althusser’s own intervention on this subject (having been completely ignorant of the Frankfurt School’s critical theory), would consist in maintaining the difference between two different objects —ideology in Marxism and the unconscious in psychoanalysis— so as to think *from* that difference and not *beyond* or *despite* that difference, the complex articulation between both objects, in a way that, incidentally, brings him closer to Deleuze and Guattari’s approach in *Anti-Oedipus*, before any other theoretical referent.<sup>85</sup>

I would like to conclude by saying that just as it is only after Marx that we begin to have an idea of what reading means, it is thanks to Althusser that we may begin to have an idea of what a symptomatic reading is, and more importantly, *how it works*. As they share a common conceptual ground, insofar as they rest on the same theoretical basis, the theory of symptomatic reading is inseparable from a political and materialistic reading of the conjuncture. Even more, a symptomatic reading can only become a rigorous and productive work (and not a simple “interpretation”) if it takes place under the conjuncture, and conversely, a political reading of the conjuncture can only be considered “materialistic” insofar as it takes into account the effects of the different instances in play, this is, the complex intertwining of different structural determinants which may be more or less “invisible,” and which follows uneven rhythms

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84 It would be necessary to comment extensively here Jameson’s *The Political Unconscious* and Žižek’s *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, both of which are inspired but also take a critical distance from Althusser’s position. This, of course, constitutes an entire new discussion that I cannot but leave announced.

85 I am indebted here with Fabio Bruschi’s excellent study: Fabio Bruschi, “Le sujet entre inconscient et idéologie. Althusser et la tentation du freudo-marxisme,” *Meta: Research in Hermeneutics, Phenomenology, and Practical Philosophy* VI(1) (2014): 288-319.

of development, depending on heterogeneous temporalities. This might be one of the most important of Althusser's "lessons" and maybe one of the main features of "being a Marxist in philosophy."

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