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Nick Hardy

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Theory From the Conjuncture: Althusser's Aleatory Materialism and Machiavelli's *dispositif*

Nick Hardy

Abstract

Over time Althusserian theory has come to define, Balibar (1994) argues, two distinct types of theoretical object: the first are large *structural totalities* (such as the capitalist mode of production), the second are *conjunctures* (specific concrete circumstances). However, a problem is created by this separation because it forces the theorist to follow one or the other of two distinct lines of philosophical inquiry. This begs the question as to whether this separation can be overcome; and, if so, how? This paper develops the argument that Althusser's concept of *aleatory materialism* can be used as a bridge between structural totalities and conjunctures. An outline of aleatory materialism is first developed, before then being used to interrogate examples of both structural and conjunctural arguments. Althusser's (1982/2006) and Balibar's (1968/2006) accounts of the failed Italian, but successful British, establishment of a capitalist mode of production are used to establish *structural* examples of aleatory change. Following this is an analysis of Althusser's assessment of Machiavelli and his development of the two concepts of *conjuncture* and *dispositif*. The paper concludes by arguing aleatory materialism enables the conceptualisation of a non-reductionist materialism that holds: (a) social and natural ontology is *sui generis*; (b) structures are immanent and require constant renewal; (c) social theory/philosophy must abstractly break structures into their component parts; and (d) that the Althusserian formulation of politics as 'struggle' is key to producing social change.

Keywords: Aleatory materialism, Althusser, Balibar, conjuncture, *dispositif*, dispositive, events, Machiavelli, mode of production, retroaction, structure.

Introduction

In *Philosophy and the Spontaneous Philosophy of the Scientists* (1967/1990: 103), Louis Althusser briefly outlines what he understands a *conjuncture* to be. It is not until his discussion in *Machiavelli and Us* (1976/1999) that he again covers the concept of

conjunctures in any depth. In *Philosophy...*, Althusser argues that philosophy exists alongside science as one of the two elements that constitute *theory*. Theory always finds itself present as one element in a combination of three forces—political, ideological, and theoretical—which exist in a tension that Althusser terms a *conjuncture*. For Althusser, philosophy holds a position of prime importance because it constitutes the site of intellectual struggle and is the necessary precursor to political (i.e. class) struggle. Yet philosophy does not possess in itself any inherently ‘truthful’ knowledge about the particular conjuncture of which it is part:

To limit ourselves to the essential, the domain of theory embraces the whole of science and the whole of philosophy. Philosophy itself is therefore part of the conjuncture in which it intervenes: it exists within this conjuncture, is exists within the ‘Whole’ [i.e. the political, ideological, and theoretical]. It follows that philosophy cannot entertain an external, purely speculative relation, a relation of pure knowledge to the conjuncture, because it *takes part in this ensemble* (ibid.: 104).

In other words, there is no ‘view from nowhere’ from which philosophy is able to situate itself, considering events with its dispassionate gaze. For Althusser philosophy always “exists within [the] conjuncture,” i.e. it is always formed within, conditioned by, and mediated through the particular political, ideological, and theoretical forces that constitute its historical circumstance. *Conjunctures*, therefore, place significant constraints upon both the concrete *and* the abstract possibilities contained within them.

Despite this, philosophy remains the only means for generating non-ideological inquiries into concrete circumstances. As Balibar argues, *theory* (the aforementioned combination of philosophy and science) not only “...break[s] with the dominant ideology, but also act[s] upon ideology...” (1994: 176). Theory, therefore, is understood to be not only a non-ideological argument set against a prevalent ideology (such as Marx accomplished in his critique of political economy), but is also a means of destabilising that ideology.¹ Theory is not an ‘alternative’ system of thought, it is a form of attack. But is ideology the only object open to attack? It would seem not.

¹ There appears a *prima facie* similarity here to Foucault’s “polyvalence of discourses” (1976/1990: 100).

Althusserian theory came to define, Balibar argues, two distinct types of theoretical object: the first are large *structural totalities* (such as the capitalist mode of production), the second are *conjunctions* (specific concrete circumstances) (Balibar 1994: 166). The problem lies in that Althusser—and a large number of those following him—maintained this theoretical separation between totalities and conjunctions (ibid.). This begs the question, then, as to whether this separation can be overcome; and, if so, how?

This article contends that one of the last theoretical projects begun by Althusser—viz. *aleatory materialism*—represents a major breakthrough for both Althusser's thought specifically and materialist thought more generally. The significance of aleatory materialism is that it enables a *non-deterministic* concept of historical and social change. Unfinished by Althusser at the time of his death and published posthumously, aleatory materialism begins as an ill-defined concept that requires substantial theoretical development. However, while this forms an impediment to its immediate application and use, the conceptual underdevelopment of aleatory materialism also opens up possibilities for it to be expanded as a means of explaining *both* structural totalities *and* concrete conjunctions.

In Althusser's formulation of structural totalities, he extends Marx's rejection of Hegel's concept of society as being a "single totality" (1965/2005: 102), replete with its morphing and unfolding as it teleologically rediscovers knowledge about itself. Instead, Althusser conceives of society being a "complex whole" of various structures that interlink and interrelate, or a "structure in domination" (ibid.). When articulated as a whole, therefore, these structures act upon each other giving a particular form and shape to a society. For example, a feudal set of productive relations creates a very different form of society (to families, to education, to commerce, to government, etc.) than industrial capital productive relations.

Within a society, each of these structures is separate and distinct from the other; indeed, for Althusser, many structures maintain *antagonistic relations* vis-à-vis one another. Some of the most severe of these antagonisms are inherent in structured relations at their moment of genesis (e.g. in capitalism this antagonism is between capital and labour). Where these severe antagonisms occur, Althusser terms them 'contradictions' (1965/2005). It is the instability contained in these contradictions that leads to the

strongest possibilities for social transformation. It is also the unpredictability of these antagonisms that make them aleatory.

Alternatively, aleatory materialism can also be used to explain specific conditions, i.e. *localised conjunctures*. By investigating how social structures and relations of force (such as the political, ideological, and theoretical forces outlined earlier) form, crystallise, and then endure, aleatory materialism enables the possibility to theorise how conjunctures (dis)allow other structures to form around them. This includes analysing how particular social relations may come to be a dominant form, exerting a ‘freezing’ influence over possible change. In an argument very similar to the one concerning larger social structures, it is only through the destabilisation of crystallised relations that social change occurs. The problem with these two accounts is that each would appear to cause the other: larger structures produce smaller conjunctions, or smaller conjunctions produce larger structures. Worse still, it would appear that human subjects do nothing more than exist in an eternal waiting room, hoping for a structural antagonism to destabilise relations and society to change.

The argument in this article begins with an outline of Althusser's argument for aleatory materialism. This conceptual overview is then used to re-examine Althusser's and Balibar's (1968/2006) highly detailed account of the historical changes that occurred in the transition from feudalism to capitalism. Included alongside this is a discussion of Althusser's (1976/1999) analysis of the work of Niccolò Machiavelli—especially Machiavelli's use of what Althusser terms a ‘dispositive’. The article concludes by bringing together these different strands of aleatory materialism and developing an argument for how it might be used as a theoretical resource for critiquing social relations at the meta- and micro-levels.

What is Aleatory Materialism?

Althusser's argument for aleatory materialism was posthumously published in a work titled *The Underground Current of the Materialism of the Encounter* (1982/2006: hereafter *UCME*). In it, Althusser rejects historical and philosophical accounts that view history as containing either a supra-historical transcendental subject (be it God or ‘Man’) or a *telos* that underpins/directs the movements of history toward a pre-determined End. History occurs instead, Althusser argues, as chance encounters between different elements

that may, sometimes, ‘take hold’ and create new natural and social structures.

Althusser begins his argument for aleatory materialism by going back to the Ancient Greeks, specifically Epicurus’ notion of atoms falling in a void (*UCME*: 168). Epicurus argued that it takes only one ‘swerve’—which Althusser terms a ‘clinamen’—for one atom to hit another and it is from this chance encounter between the two atoms, the ‘deviation from a straight trajectory’, that creates a series of subsequent random encounters that begin to form basic natural structures. Using an analogy of the formation of ice, Althusser argues that elements are continually moving and coming into contact with one another, but they only *form* into something new when they ‘take hold’, crystallising (which Althusser terms ‘prise’) into a new structure (*UCME*: 170, 191-2). And, importantly, it is only *after* crystallising that the new structures begin to produce effects (a point that will be returned to below). Furthermore, it is the semi-permanence of these structures that produces the sense of ‘continuity’ being ‘natural’ and ‘normal’.

This seemingly innocuous position allows Althusser to argue that the world is, ultimately, nothing more than the product of these ‘chance encounters’. There is no guiding thread, no force that creates the world, there is “no Meaning, neither Cause nor End nor Reason nor Unreason. The non-anteriority of Meaning is one of Epicurus’ basic theses, by virtue of which he stands opposed to both Plato and Aristotle” (*UCME* : 169). Emphasising this position is important because it firmly establishes the *link* between knowledge and the world ‘as it is’.² Althusser argues that although the world-as-it-exists is an “accomplished fact,” which may now apparently contain Reason, Meaning, Necessity and End (*ibid.*), the world was still formed though a process of chance encounters. If those chance encounters were to reoccur, most likely the world not form again the same way that it currently is—it would be very different and would therefore contain significantly different knowledge(s) that developed in regard to it. By specifying this linkage, Althusser highlights that knowledge is created from *within* the boundaries of the established world and is *not* gained from any external, enduring source. Therefore, what may

² It is important to note that Althusser is not making an *ontic fallacy*, whereby whatever an object ‘is’ then forms the knowledge held about it. If this were the case then knowledge would change in direct correlation to the changing form of the object. Althusser is instead arguing that knowledge is *produced from within* a particular set of structures.

appear to be enduring structures and ‘truths’ are just that, *appearances*. Knowledge is always linked to the chance encounters that structure the present external world.

To give another example, Althusser likens the aleatory materialist philosophy to “catching a moving train” (*UCME* : 189). The analogy illustrates how inquiries into the structure of the world (in this instance, the inquiring aleatory materialist philosopher) can only generate knowledge relative to short periods. By analysing the world the philosopher (may) come to understand only a few of the multiple events that are taking place and, even then, cannot know precisely what preceded them or what lies ahead of them (*ibid.*). With the rejection of the idea that there is one particular *beginning* (Origin) that the world is moving from—or one particular *route* (*telos*) to take or *destination* (End) at which to arrive—the world is instead a product of multiple encounters and events that continue to occur regardless of almost all other things. The world is comprised of structures and objects that are continually under pressure, forming and reforming over time. This is the aleatory materialist warning against a tendency prevalent within theory—and one which must be resisted—to ‘fill in the gaps’ between events. As Pearce (2001: 40; n.b. Althusser 1987/2006: 263) argues, it becomes quite easy for the unaware investigator to ascribe ‘causality’ to unrelated but adjacent secondary factors, thereby missing the actual chain of causation (see Althusser 1966/2012: 2-3).

However, the aleatory materialist position should not be understood to reduce all explanatory inquiry to meaningless random encounters. Even if the idea of a ‘guiding force’ (in the form of a *telos*) has been firmly rejected, analysis can still be made of the *immanent* forces that are produced from the structures that constitute present relations.³ Althusser argues that there is a four stage process to the formation of aleatory structures. First, and borrowing from Wittgenstein as well as Epicurus, Althusser argues that there must have been a period of ‘the Fall’ (*UCME* : 190). Prior to structures forming, there is an initial moment/period of flux and uncertainty, where no relations and elements have yet attained a definition. Second, ‘the encounter’ occurred where elements initially

³ This is not to imply that epistemic privilege is possible merely because the inquirer is situated within a particular set of relations. Rather, it is that crystallised structures *do* produce effects and some of them can be determined through measured and rational inquiry. This point will be developed below in Althusser’s discussion of the capitalist mode of production.

came into contact with one another (Althusser's 'clinamen'). This is the initial 'aleatory' formation of structures.

Where structures *are* formed, constituting the third event, Althusser terms this the 'taking hold' (or the '*prise*') (*UCME* : 191). These structures begin to amass and constitute increasing numbers of natural and social relations. Once structures form they then act as 'hooks' for other similar elements which become 'entangled' (Althusser uses water becoming slowly bonded to existing formations of ice as an example).

What one must call an *affinity* and a complementarity [*complétude*] of the elements that come into play in the encounter; their 'readiness to collide—interlock' [*accrohabilité*], in order that this encounter 'take hold', that is to say, 'take *form*', *at last give birth to Forms, and new Forms*—just as water 'takes hold' when ice is waiting there for it, or milk does when it curdles... (*UCME* : 191-2, emphasis in original)

Fourth and finally, the primacy of Being becomes paramount. The atoms/elements constitute "assignable, distinct, localisable beings endowed with such-and-such a property (depending on the time and place); in short there emerges in them a structure of Being... that assigns each of its elements its place..." (*UCME*: 192). For aleatory materialism, it is the existence *of* structures that *produces* further structures in the world at all—and if those structures were different, then the world would be different as well. In other words, if the atoms/elements were arranged in a different configuration, then the structures would be different, meaning their operation would be different, including any associated knowledge of them. The importance of this is that there is no background order 'behind' the structures themselves, there is no universal blueprint or set of specifications that all objects are designed to 'fit'. This is why the *contingency* of these structures becomes such an important philosophical position: if they change, then the world also changes. This "puts discourse on the world *for ever in second place*" (*ibid.*, emphasis in original). This means that, for aleatory materialism, the real world is separate from discursive understanding of it: the material world pre-exists discourse.

Three implications follow for any investigation using aleatory materialism. The first is that any thing or object that exists *must* have

been formed through these wider aleatory processes—nothing ‘pre-exists’ its own existence, biding its time, ‘waiting’ to come into being. Everything that has Being must have already gone through the process of an ‘encounter’ in order to come *into* Being (ibid.). Second, there are encounters or entities that are only produced as the result of multiple causes and effects, which Althusser terms a ‘series’. Not everything forms from one ‘simple’ encounter, rather there are some structures that can *only* arise out of a series of consecutive encounters: the formation of one yielded a particular result that allowed the next to form, etc., etc. (UCME: 193, 277-8). Finally, every encounter is aleatory, both in cause *and* effect. For Althusser, *effects* are conditioned by the aleatory circumstances just as the *causes* leading up to an encounter are also aleatory (ibid.).

Indeed, it is in discussing this last point that Althusser argues for the dual principles of *necessity* and *contingency* to be understood as key in the development of structures. Necessity because without certain elements an encounter could not have crystallised; contingency because chance is the prime element in bringing all of the elements together in one place at one time. If a philosopher wishes to analyse the development of a thing, then a process of *retroaction* must be employed. By working backwards from an established structure/object, is it possible to isolate and identify the particular events and encounters that must have taken place during its process of ‘becoming’ that eventually brought that structure/object into Being (UCME: 193-4). It is here that the *necessity of circumstance* is so important in the production of a structure/object.

Althusser argues that it is this process that gives the world meaning:

This shows that we are not—that we do not live—in Nothingness [*le Néant*], but that, although there is no Meaning to [NH] history (an End which transcends it, from its origins to its term), there can be meaning *in* history, since this meaning emerges from an encounter that was real, and really felicitous—or catastrophe, which is also a meaning (UCME : 194, [NH] emphasis added).

However, Althusser takes care not to imply that, once the world (which is the sum of what ‘already exists’) has established a set of structures, these structures then give permanent and definite sets of

'laws' (ibid.). While there certainly are *effects* that are generated by things/structures, there is no certainty to the *endurance* of either the thing/structure or its effects. The continuity of structures can be quickly broken. It is a mistake to understand structures as all following a trajectory that sees their effects manifest, maintain themselves, and then fade away (e.g. a comparison to birth, life, and death). Instead, Althusser argues, laws can change "at the drop of a hat, revealing the aleatory basis that sustains them, and can change without reason, this is, without an *intelligible* end" (*UCME*: 195-6, emphasis added).

He likens these moments of "radical instability" (*UCME*: 195) to the dice in a game "thrown back on to the table unexpectedly, or the cards are dealt out again without warning" (ibid.: 196). He makes a link to the madness of Friedrich Nietzsche and Antonin Artaud as two examples of moments that redefined the very structure of their thought: their constitution as individuals was shattered and then brought back together again—albeit in a different, post-madness, form. He also alludes to the huge social changes resulting from the French Revolution and the Russian Revolution of 1917 (*UCME*: 196). During these instances, established social structures were broken apart into a mixture of separate elements with some smaller/partial structures 'breaking free';⁴ it was the recombination of these components that subsequently formed into the structures/objects that came to form revolutionary France and Russia.

As it presently stands, the discussion has been highly abstract. However, by examining the analysis offered in *Reading Capital* (Althusser & Balibar 1968/2006; hereafter *RC*) of the change from feudalism to capitalism, a more concrete account of aleatory materialism can be produced. It is to this issue that the argument now turns.

Aleatory Materialism in Structures and Conjunctions

Althusser concludes his discussion in *UCME* with an analysis of the aleatory nature of the change from feudalism to capitalism. Ultimately, it was the chance encounter, he argues, between the "owners of money" and "the proletarian, stripped of everything but labour-power" (*UCME*: 197). It was this circumstance that enabled

⁴ Althusser called these 'survivals', borrowing the phrase from Lenin (Althusser, 1965/2005: 114).

wage-labour relations to come into existence.⁵ However, the fact that this encounter ‘took hold’ [*prise*] and formed new social relations was not a pre-gone conclusion; neither were the other encounter that led to this circumstance ‘destined’ to produce it. It is quite possible, he argues, that these other preceding relations were present in other times and places but yet a *prise* moment never occurred.

Citing 1500s Italy as an example, Althusser argues that there were nearly all the elements found in a capitalist mode of production (i.e. wealth and technology, their concentration in the hands of a small elite, and a large and landless workforce). Importantly, however, there was no ‘Italy’ to speak of at the time, there were only warring ‘statelets’. The consequences of this were that there was little or no assurance or security (in a Hobbesian sense), and that there was no market of ‘Italian’ consumers large enough to support the development of large-scale production (*UCME*: 198). However, jump forward in time to England just before the Industrial Revolution, and all the necessary elements *are* together in one place at the same time—and which culminated, ultimately, in the first establishment of industrial capitalism.

By developing an analysis like this Althusser enables a valuable comparison to be made to his earlier work, with Etienne Balibar in *RC*, and his later argument in *UCME*. In *RC*, Balibar’s extended analysis of the change from the feudal mode of production (FMP) to the capitalist mode of production (CMP) provides an intriguing and valuable comparison between Althusser’s argument for a failed *prise* (Italy) and a successful *prise* (England).

The founding structures of industrial capitalism

Developing a detailed argument tracking the *transition* from feudalism to capitalism, Balibar (1968/2006: 199-308) placed special emphasis upon the *existing* social relations *from which* capitalism first emerged. He argues that social structures and social relations had *immanent* effects—i.e. existing relations continually exerted pressure(s) upon the relations that eventually formed in to the new mode of production (MoP). (This is a development of Marx’s comment that a MoP does not change without its future constituent parts already being present (1859/1983).) Althusser echoes Balibar in his later argument that an ‘accomplished fact’ cannot be used to

⁵ “Wage-labour” has significance because it is unique to the capitalist mode of production, a point that will be elaborated below.

explain its own *process* of “becoming-accomplished” (*UCME*: 199-200)—i.e. an effect or outcome cannot be its own cause (for if it did not previously exist, then it could not have been present to ‘cause’ itself). The capitalist mode of production (CMP) was neither an historical inevitability⁶ nor was it ‘waiting’ in the wings to ‘happen’.

Balibar argues that when investigating a MoP, a theorist must be conscious that:

...the analysis of the productive forces does not arise as a technical or geographical *preliminary*, formulating the *conditions* or bases on which a ‘social’ structure of human institutions and practices can be constructed, as an essential, but external limitation imposed on history: on the contrary, it is *inside* the definition of the social structure of a mode of production (no definition of a ‘mode of production’ can be regarded as satisfactory unless it includes a definition of the productive forces of that mode of production); it therefore completely transforms the meaning of ‘social’ (*RC*: 247, emphasis in original).

In other words, the forces and structures that ‘constitute(d)’ a MoP are found *within* that MoP itself. It becomes the task of theoretical inquiry—backed by empirical accounts—to explain the circumstances that enabled the development of the particular social relations that then formed into a particular MoP. It is a question of identifying the factors that enabled the *transition* from one MoP to another, and not to make the mistake (as even Marx did at times, Althusser argues (*UCME*: 202)) of taking the accomplished fact as being its own cause.

Within Marx’s own accounts, Althusser identifies two contradictory explanations for the emergence of the MoP (*UCME*: 197). The first explanation (and the one in which Althusser finds value) is found in Engels’ *Condition of the Working-Class in England*, in *Capital*’s chapter on ‘primitive accumulation’, and in the theory of the Asiatic MoP. The second (and less sophisticated account) is found in *Capital*’s discussion of the “essences” of capitalism, the two accounts of the FMP and the CMP, and also in Marx’s theories of the transition from FMP to CMP. For Althusser,

⁶ To argue this is a crude reductionism and a position that Althusser’s and Balibar’s accounts are at pains to avoid; at best, this argument is nothing more than a materialist reworking of Hegel’s teleological account of ‘History’.

the first account offers a precise and detailed explanation of the complex social reformations and interactions that led to the development of the CMP.

I am repeating myself, but I must: what is remarkable about the first conception [of the CMP], apart from the explicit theory of the encounter, is the idea that every mode of production comprises *elements that are independent of each other*, each resulting from its own specific history, in the absence of any organic, teleological relation between these diverse histories. This conception culminates in the theory of *primitive accumulation*... (UCME: 199, emphasis in original).

Althusser's aleatory analysis of the transition from FMP to CMP begins with his argument that the dominant *feudal* class in England were able to absorb the new landless and property-less labourers into a new form of generalised production. This was achieved through clustering individual means of production in large workshops, something that the Italian proto-bourgeoisie, described in Althusser's account above, were unable to do. Althusser's argument is that this *chance* encounter first established the set of relations that *later* formed into the much more rigid social relations of the CMP. The combination of new technology, a concentration of wealth, a workless labour force, and very large (although at that time still only 'potential') national and colonial markets, was enough for Britain to first form an industrial CMP in the late-1700s.

Balibar's analysis gives flesh to the skeletal account offered by Althusser. Balibar argues the transition from the FMP into the CMP can be understood through the "genealogy" of primitive accumulation (RC: 279, 281; see also Althusser 1966/2012: 1-2). Through charting the drastic changes in how different elements are related to one another, the transition starts to become clear. Balibar begins by turning his focus toward the growing fragmentation of the (re)productive capacities of the FMP, where adverse tension was created in two ways. The first was that the link between serfs and agriculture was broken by the land enclosure acts—most likely for landowners to farm increasing numbers of sheep for their valuable wool; the second was when the small, but still significant, class of individual petty-commodity producers started to come under the control of the proto-bourgeoisie—a situation that Balibar will later

term ‘formal subsumption’ (*UCME*: 199; *RC*: 280; Marx 1867/1990: 874-875).

For Balibar, it is both the *reformation* of existing elements (the same things changing) and the *alteration* of the structural relations which the elements have to each other in a particular way that constitutes the transition from FMP to CMP. The final sealing together of these events, he argues, came from the development of the “machine-tool.” Despite an already existing complex division of labour between workers, it was this (aleatory) element that proved decisive (*RC*: 239). Suddenly, the worker was removed from undertaking any form of (semi-)skilled labour and was, instead, only required to watch over the productive capacity of *the machine itself*.

The machine-tool makes the organisation of production completely independent of the characteristics of human labour-power: at the same stroke, the means of labour and the labourer are completely separated and acquire different forms of development. *The previous relationship is inverted: rather than the instruments having to be adapted to the human organism, that [human] organism must adapt itself to the instrument* (ibid., emphasis added).

In sum, the concentration of the artisan/petty-commodity producers into mass workshops, the ejection of serfs/peasants from ancestral farmland, the amassing (i.e. “primitive accumulation”) of money into the ownership of a small class, and then, finally, the ability to industrially mass produce goods, were factors that *all together* enabled the *initial* construction of the CMP.

The capitalist mode of production as a crystallised structure

An important aspect of Balibar’s account is that he offers a convincing explanation for *why* the CMP was able to (in Althusser’s aleatory materialism term) ‘take hold’, to *prise*. The crucial factor here is the proto-proletarian class moved from ‘formal’ to ‘real’ subsumption. The important change, Balibar argues, comes when relations alter from the *initial* employment of labourers by the capitalist to the first time those relations were *reproduced* but also incorporated the deployment of the machine-tool (*RC*: 303).

The ‘formal’ subsumption of labourers occurred with their employment in factories after the capitalist had bought control over

the (still individualised, still crafts based) means of production.⁷ At this stage, labourers could still (even if only potentially) re-establish themselves as commodity producers if they had the funds to purchase their own means of production (RC: 303-4). For Balibar, this is one of the key points in the transition from FMP to CMP: although ownership is *already* becoming concentrated in the hands of one small group, there is still the possibility that the labourers could support themselves as individual producers.

The moment of ‘real’ subsumption occurred with the introduction of the machine-tool. The worker is suddenly created as a class and *systemically* bound to their social position in two distinct ways: (1) they have been removed from ownership of the means of production (as was the case in ‘formal’ subsumption); but now *also* they are (2) *unable to return* to craft-manufacturing. They are unable to return because the new machine-tool based manufacturing produces commodities at such extreme volume that the small hand-craft manufacturer is unable to compete (RC: 303).

Importantly, it is only when these new social relations *first successfully reproduce themselves* that Balibar argues the CMP becomes established. During formal subsumption a full CMP had not formed (for it was still crafts based petty-commodity production, not industrial) and there was always the possibility of labourers returning to their own means of production. With the technological shift that brought *industrial*, rather than crafts-based, production, this developed an initial (and largely unacknowledged) change in social relations that destroyed the possibility of crafts manufacturers owning their own means of production. When the first cycle of capital was complete (i.e. surplus-value was extracted from the new wage-labour relation between proletariat and bourgeoisie) and used to re-establish the owner/wage labourer relationship (through further capital investment), it was at *this* moment that the CMP became established as a full MoP (RC: 262-3).

Working Althusser’s aleatory materialist account into Balibar’s, this moment—when the first cycle of extracted surplus value was reinvested back into machine-tool production—was when the *prise* occurred, crystallising the new social relations into an enduring form. The crystallised social relations that ‘constitute’ the CMP, for Balibar, include not just new productive competition (machine tool vs. craft based), but also a new relation regarding the ‘individuality’ of

⁷ That is, craft-workshops containing, for instance, multiple *individually* operated spinning-wheels.

labourers. Previously, ‘to labour’ meant to individually possess certain skills and abilities (either trained, such as being a carpenter’s apprentice, or gained from experience, such as using a scythe to reap a field of barley). But with the advent of machine-tools the labourer became instead a homogenised and generalised worker, needed only to service and aid the machine itself. It was the *machine* that became the producer—no longer did workers employ machines to aid *themselves* in the act of production (RC: 252). This altered social structure actively *reconstituted* elements within it (in this case the ‘workers’ as elements) precisely because their relations to other elements had changed.

Of course, the workers themselves had not physically changed, ontologically they were exactly the same, but their constitution *as part of* a wider social structure suddenly changed their capacities and powers. This recasting of individuals signals a moment of *rupture*, a move from “production as an act, the objectivation of one or more [individual] subjects, to a concept of production without a subject, which determines certain classes as its peculiar functions” (RC: 268). For Balibar, an entire class is suddenly constituted and then cyclically reproduced through social relations. These social relations structure their possible actions, trapping the labourers in a new class relation and a new set of social forces.

It is these structural changes that both Balibar and Althusser argue produce the ‘histories’ and meanings that are specific, discontinuous, and localised. For Balibar, each structural change creates new social relations—and contained within these combinations a specific history is developed.

We can... say that each of the elements of the combination undoubtedly has a kind of ‘history’, *but it is a history without any locatable subject*: the real subject of each component history is the *combination* on which depend the elements and their relations, i.e. it is *something which is not a subject* (RC: 250, emphasis in original).

Balibar continues:

What Marx is reflecting here is quite simply the operation I was trying to explain at the beginning... to reduce the *continuity* of history, on which is based the impossibility of sharp ‘breaks’, and

to constitute history as a science of discontinuous modes of production, as the science of variation (*RC*: 257; n.b. Pearce 2001: 40).

In Balibar's work it is important to note that he understands each combination of elements (and the resulting social relations) as *reconstituting* the elements contained within it. As there is never a period when social relations are *not* present—even, as has just been examined, during times of social transition and change—all objects and subjects (the two “elements”) are constantly part of a wider social structure that acts to ‘place’ them vis-à-vis other elements within that structure. In short, there is no “hiatus” in social relations during times of change (*RC*: 273). It is this inclusion within a wider structure and ordering that imbues elements with a number of their properties.⁸

Althusser's later aleatory materialist position is similar to Balibar's. As stated above, Althusser argued that there is no meaning *to* history (no *telos*, no End, etc.), yet there can be meaning *in* history (*UCME* : 194). When the elements of social relations (in Balibar's sense) re-form through a series of chance encounters into something new, they produce their own different history. As Althusser states, “[a] mode of production is a combination because it is a *structure* that imposes its unity on a series of elements” (*UCME* : 203). As such a *unity* the various elements within a particular set of social relations gain or lose particular properties, powers, and abilities. Part of this is the development of a ‘history’ that is *specific* to that set of relations—hence it is not possible to accurately trace ‘meanings’ back across time different time periods. Thus one cannot ever speak of ‘the working class’ outside of capitalist industrial relations: in feudalism there was no ‘working class’—the peasants were geographically distributed differently, they did not have a ‘common cause’ in the way the industrial working class might now be argued to have, etc. To cast present categories back across time/social formations is to engage in an act that Marx, Althusser, Balibar, and Foucault (Foucault

⁸ Understood in the wrong way, this would appear to be an argument that objects gain their properties solely from their relations. This is *not* being argued here: what *is* being argued is that the properties of things can include both circumstantial and inherent properties. In this way, ‘social properties’ are either *constructed and assigned* through structural relations (e.g. patriarchy or racism) or are *already existing but mediated* through structural relations (e.g. differences in life expectancy based on social class).

1975/1995: 31) have all warned against: reading the past in terms of the present.

The discussion so far has compared aspects of Althusser's analysis of 1500s Italy to Balibar's account of the emergence of the CMP. Importantly, aleatory materialism was used as a means of explaining both. What this comparison showed was that aleatory materialism can be adequately used to explain the (non-)development of social structures, up to and including a mode of production. This is an explicit rejection of explaining changes to a MoP in any (semi-)teleological manner (e.g. the crude idea that 'one MoP *must* lead to the other'); under an aleatory materialist framework the change in a MoP is the result of chance encounters (e.g. 'originally one MoP *happened* to lead to the other'). Even more importantly, Althusser's analysis shows that the complexity of the process of structural change can be brought under *theoretical analysis*. Not only this, but change can be explained without recourse to supra-historical entities (be it a *telos* or 'the subject'). The *immanence* contained in Althusser's and Balibar's arguments mean that social structures are powerful—but they are also fragile: if they lose core relations within them (such as the capital/labour relation) then structural change may well be a result.

Theorising Machiavelli's political conjunctures

So far the emphasis of this paper has been upon analysing social structures; examples being Althusser's and Balibar's accounts regarding social relations at the level of MoP. However, these drastically change in Althusser analyses of the work of Niccolò Machiavelli (1469-1527). In *Machiavelli and Us (MU)*, Althusser develops an extended examination of two of Machiavelli's works: *The Discourses on Livy* and *The Prince*. For Althusser, Machiavelli's arguments concerning ongoing Italian political (in)stability contained a focused and highly tactful analysis of the relations of forces that impeded good and stable government in Italy. Machiavelli's intellectual achievement, Althusser argues, was to accomplish this *from within* the conjuncture of forces that were destabilising Italy. As will be discussed below, Machiavelli produces a largely *aleatory* analysis of the political conditions facing Italy—and which gave Althusser an opportunity to expand his own aleatory materialist account. In *MU* Gregory Elliott, the translator, quotes Althusser as saying: "[Machiavelli] is, without doubt, much more so than Marx,

the author who has most fascinated me” (Elliott 1999: xii). In *MU* Elliott also refers to a comment made by Althusser (in the then untranslated and unpublished *UCME*), where Althusser argues that Machiavelli held:

A materialist tradition almost completely unrecognised in the history of philosophy. ...a materialism of the encounter, hence of the aleatory and of contingency, which is *completely opposed*... to the various registered materialisms, including the materialism commonly attributed to Marx, Engels, and Lenin, which, like every other materialism in the rationalist tradition, is a materialism of necessity and teleology, that is to say, a transformed and disguised form of idealism” (*MU*: xii-xiii; *UCME*: 167-8, emphasis added).

It is this inherent focus upon materialism that marks Machiavelli’s work as distinct from other thinkers. The crucial development that Machiavelli makes is to enable a theorist to “think in the conjuncture.” This means

...[T]aking account of all the determinations, all the existing concrete *circumstances*, making an inventory, a detailed breakdown and comparison of them. ... This inventory of elements and circumstances, however, is insufficient. To think *in terms* of the category of conjuncture is not to think *on* the conjuncture, as one would reflect on a set of concrete data. To think under the conjuncture is quite literally to submit to the problem induced and imposed by its case:... (*MU*: 18, emphasis in original).⁹

It is *not*, therefore, a matter of simply developing a concrete account that analyses the conjuncture *itself* as a ‘thing that is meant to be’ (e.g. that would be akin to analysing a jammed mechanism and trying to understand it *as* a jammed mechanism). Instead, a conjuncture must be analysed as nothing more than a series of forces/relations that, together and in this particular form, produce a particular

⁹ It may be helpful to continue the quote: “...the political problem of national unity and the constitution of Italy into a national state. Here the terms must be inverted: Machiavelli does *not* think the problem of national unity *in terms of* the conjuncture; it is the *conjuncture itself* that negatively, yet objectively, poses the problem of Italian national unity” (ibid., emphasis added).

circumstance (e.g. moving the analysis to investigate what the mechanism consists *of* and that it might do something *other than* be jammed). Machiavelli, and by extension Althusser, is not concerned with the conjunction *qua* conjunction, but is instead concerned with understanding how the conjunction ‘came to be’ and what might destabilise it. It is worth stating that the concept of conjunction need not imply adverse qualities. All stable social relations are, on this understanding, some form of conjunction—whether those relations are deemed to be admirable or deplorable rests with the particular effects experienced (or not) by those within the conjunction.

It is also important to recall that conjunctions—‘crystallised encounters’ Althusser later termed them (*UCME*: 170)—also produce ‘truths’ that are constant for as long as the conjunction endures. The “relations of force” (*MU*: 19) that produce the conjunction also give rise to particular effects that act in the same way as ‘laws’. By maintaining different elements (which themselves each have different strengths, powers, and effects) in a particular relationship and form, the conjunction *partially* (over)determines the outcomes possible from it (on ‘overdetermination’ see: Althusser 1967/1990: 221-223, 1965/2005: 106, 111-113; Balibar 1996: 115)).¹⁰ As has already been argued, in this light the productive relations found in the CMP, for instance, overdetermine elements of the social structures that form around it.

Alongside defining the form of an *existing* conjunction (i.e. the particular relation of forces of which it consists), Althusser also devoted considerable time to examining the circumstances *leading to* the formation of a particular conjunction. Machiavelli’s analysis is again important because he attempted to define the factors that produced change in an existing conjunction. In *The Prince* Machiavelli outlines the two absolutely *essential* attributes that a Prince must be able to marshal (Datta 2007): *fortuna* (external/objective) and *virtù* (internal/subjective). *Fortuna* corresponds closely to chance events, general good fortune, and to ‘circumstance’ (*MU*: 35, 74). For a Prince to stamp their mark on the world, *fortuna* must manifest as changing events. *Virtù*, on the other hand, is the quality possessed only by those who can *utilise* and, when required, partially create *fortuna* in order to establish themselves. ‘You create your own luck’ gives a partial description of this ability.

¹⁰ See the discussion below on Machiavelli’s analysis of the forces destabilising Italian government.

Virtù is *not* ‘virtue’, nor is it an ‘intrinsic essence’ of the Prince-individual: it is, instead, “merely the reflection [in the individual], as conscious and responsible as possible, of the objective conditions for the accomplishment of the historical task...” (*MU*: 93-4).

Althusser’s identification with Machiavelli’s construction of an *individual* who could potentially harness—possibly even *produce*—an aleatory event might appear at first sight to be a slippage into a form of humanism. This would also be heavily at odds with Balibar’s argument regarding of the change from FMP to the CMP (with its focus upon social structure). However, it is not so much the *agent* of change in Machiavelli’s account that is holding Althusser’s interest; rather it is the creation of the *moment* of change—hence his focus on understanding what can produce a conjuncture (be that cause a human subject or a structural contradiction). For Machiavelli, a Prince is successful precisely because s/he can escape the cyclical forces of history by steering present conjunctures into the void of possibility. In Balibar’s (*RC*) and Althusser’s (1965/2005) work it is these *periods of flux* (Bhaskar 1982) in social relations that open up (or close down) the possibility of change.

To reconcile these two partially conflicting accounts (i.e. of Balibar in *RC* and Althusser in *MU*), Althusser focuses his aleatory materialist account more heavily upon the ‘void’ (for a very good account of the ‘void’ in Althusser’s work, see Matheron 1998). Serving as the initial ‘formlessness’ from which form eventually began—the event of the clinamen, ‘the swerve’ of falling atoms (*UCME* : 169)—the void can be understood as a space containing both *existing* forms and *potential* forms. Existing forms (i.e. structures) partially act as ‘hooks’ (ibid.: 191), capturing some of the possible forms of structure and turning them into copies (like ice capturing water). But the void also exists as the space of possibility: either through chance or through struggle, other forms of structure are possible. It is precisely this element in Machiavelli’s analysis of the Prince-individual that interested Althusser so much. From this, Althusser is able to expand his focus back to the more general encounter between *politics* and *history*, which form as *struggle* (*UCME* : 189). It is as a result of this ‘struggle’, this conflict between forces held in contradiction, that creates conjunctures.¹¹

¹¹ Contradiction is discussed in more detail below.

Conjunctures and Machiavelli's 'dispositive'

Arguably of almost equal importance for Althusser was Machiavelli's use of the concept of 'dispositive'. This was the means that enabled Machiavelli to "to think in the conjunction" (MU: 18). This began with the development of Machiavelli's concept of what Althusser terms a *'dispositif théorique'*. Highly problematic to translate into English (Elliott, 1999: xviii) "*dispositif*" is usually translated as 'apparatus' or 'social apparatus'; however, intriguingly, Elliott decided (partly on the advice of David Macey, translator of many of Foucault's works, which regularly contain the term) to translate it as "dispositive". The reason for this becomes clearer when Elliott outlines the use Althusser has for his *dispositif*:

The peculiarity of this term *dispositif*... is to state a series of general theses... which are literally contradictory, yet organised in such a way as to generate concepts not deducible from them, for the purpose of theorising an "*object' which is in fact a determinate objective*" (MU: 42, emphasis in original). [This is] Machiavelli's "endeavour to think the conditions of possibility of an impossible task, to think the unthinkable," (MU: 50) (Elliott, 1999: xviii).

The idea of a *dispositif* that Althusser elaborates, therefore, develops Machiavelli's analysis of the criteria under which *an impossible event* could occur. For Machiavelli, this was stable government in Italy and the 'dispositive' is precisely the series of contradictory statements that together outline this (im)possible event. This series of statements should, under normal circumstances, prove either nonsensical or produce null results (i.e. the product of incompatible factors). Instead, Althusser argues, Machiavelli's great development is to outline a series of statements that, under a *specific* internal relationship to each other, produce a viable outcome: a 'theoretical object'. Translated as 'dispositive', therefore, it becomes clear that it implies a *dis-positive*: instead of a series of increasingly *supportive* statements (i.e. each one building upon the other, as would be expected to usually occur in a theoretical argument), Machiavelli instead brings in a number of contradictory statements *but yet* structures them together in such a way as to make a viable result.

By bringing three contradictory theses into a particular relation with each other, Machiavelli is able to theorise a possibility that did

not previously exist: the means to achieve stable government in Italy. The three contradictory theses are: (1) the course of natural and human things is immutable; (2) everything is in continual unstable motion and subject to an unpredictable necessity; and (3) that history is cyclical (*MU*: 34-6). The first thesis allows Machiavelli to compare different examples of government across different principalities. However, immutability would imply that things never change, when obviously they do. Althusser argues that Machiavelli's second thesis, that everything in the world is subject to radical change, is a clear negation—and an outright contradiction—of the first thesis. However, it allows Machiavelli to adopt the position that there are moments of stability in a changing world *and* that these periods of stability are comparable. The third thesis, of a cyclical history, is Machiavelli's means of negating the 'randomness' implicit in his second thesis: now we find that throughout the periods of radical change that alter the periods of stability, they follow a set of related forms.¹² This allows Machiavelli to develop the position that without intervention it is the fate of Italy to suffer the continual imposition of either ineffectual (i.e. short-lived) government or simply 'evil' forms of government (*ibid.*). (For a broader examination of the historical philosophy behind Althusser's assessment of Machiavelli, see Del Lucchese 2012: 5-7).)

The importance of this argument is that it brings together three statements that are not just in opposition with each other but are outright *contradictions* of each other. However, as Althusser argues, the particular form—i.e. the *relation*—in which Machiavelli brings them together enables the development of a fourth 'thesis' *additional to and outside of* these relations. This fourth thesis is, according to Althusser, Machiavelli's final 'position': viz. that (theoretically) there exists a *void* (*MU*: 41-2; Matheron 1998; Datta 2011; Kolšek 2013). As discussed above, the void is not understood as a 'negativity', rather it represents both the neutrality and the unlimited bounds of *possibility*. It is this fourth thesis adopted by Machiavelli, Althusser argues, that allows him to displace the cyclical nature of government—"a very peculiar negation, since it does not merely deny [the third thesis], but completely *displaces* it" (*ibid.*: 41, emphasis in

¹² To be precise Machiavelli argues that government cycles through: (i-a) Monarchy, (i-b) Tyranny, (ii-a) Aristocracy, (ii-b) Oligarchy, (iii-a) Democracy, (iii-b) Anarchy, then back to (i-a) Monarchy for the cycle to begin again (*MU*: 36-7).

original). It is an example in theoretical writing of cutting the Gordian Knot.

The dispositive enabled Machiavelli to set three otherwise contradictory statements into a productive relationship with each other. The result is the formation of a fourth thesis—the presence of the void and its possible futures—that enables the negation of the dispositive itself. The breakthrough that Althusser wishes to utilise is the idea of the *arrangement*:

We thereby perceive Machiavelli's relation to his general theses, to what can be called his theory of history. By working on these theses, he so arranges them that, far from applying them as the general truth of every possible object to a particular concrete object, he *determines* them in negating them by one another. And he does so in order to make them produce, on their own theoretical basis, which plays the conjoint role of philosophical principle and conceptual matrix, concepts that it is strictly impossible to *deduce* from these theses.

Indeed, *taken literally*, these theses are contradictory, and the only effect they can have is to preclude any discourse. But if they are considered in their *arrangement*, their dispositive and their interplay, their inconsistency becomes productive of a new theoretical space and precise conceptual effects (*MU*: 44, emphasis in original).

To reiterate, Machiavelli's displacement of existing social relations through the theoretical dispositive creates a particular form of problematic. The *possibilities* that the dispositive opens up (i.e. 'the void') is the means by which Machiavelli is able to 'exit' the problematic that he has created. Althusser is here bringing to the forefront the aleatory elements of Machiavelli's theory. Machiavelli represents, for Althusser, one of the finest examples of theorising *within* the conjunction. It was precisely because Machiavelli did not succumb to ideological thought—e.g. 'the aristocracy are our betters, all that is required is for them to be more pious and then their inherently superior qualities will manifest and their good governance over us will ensue'—but instead focused on the concrete relations that existed in the political and theoretical conjunction of which he was part (Althusser 1967/1990: 103).

Theory from the Conjecture: Developing Aleatory Materialism in and Beyond Althusser

So far it has been identified that aleatory materialism understands change as a process identifiable in both structures *and* conjunctures. Furthermore, it rejects explanations that rely upon transcendental forces (e.g. gods, Reason, or subjectivity). Instead, change is understood as the outcome of alterations between social relations that, for the most part, exist in tension with one another. The rejection of teleological or agent-centred explanations places the focus of aleatory materialist theoretical inquiry firmly upon social (and natural) structures and how these manifest as social relations. By creating an ontological account of social relations that understands them as (1) complex, (2) mutually influential, and (3) as partly formed by the structures that place the elements in some form of relation to one another, social change *per se* can now be understood as the alteration to the *relations* between elements.

The *theory* of aleatory materialist change, however, has so far only been briefly discussed when elaborating Althusser's argument in *UCME*. However, by breaking down Althusser's aleatory materialist argument it becomes possible to identify which elements of his theory he draws upon in developing the foundations for aleatory materialism.¹³ The first of these theoretical elements is Althusser's expansion of Marx's exclusion of Hegel. This allowed Althusser to retain the concept of a 'decentred totality' and of history as a 'process'—including understanding social relations as operating in terms of contradictions and with the effects of overdetermination. The second aspect was to conceive of the forces present in a conjuncture both as an inventory *and* as an interacting system. Third and finally, there is the aleatory form of the changes that occur to social relations—a relation that enables key elements in Althusser's argument to be brought together into a relational whole.

Historical events within decentred totalities

Althusser's argument for the development of history as a process and society as a totality of interlinked relations is too complex to go into even partially here. The details of these arguments made by Althusser and others can be found in (Althusser *CO*; *RC*; 1970/2007;

¹³ n.b. This is not to make the revisionist claim that Althusser 'always was' an aleatory materialist, nor that his work necessarily 'led' to aleatory materialism. The claim being made is only that identifiable elements of his earlier work can be seen in the later aleatory materialism.

Balibar 1996; Benton 1984; Callari & Ruccio 1996; Elliott 1994; Resch 1992).

However, a brief summarisation of Althusser's argument is useful because it gives context to the operation of aleatory materialism. Althusser expands Marx's original (but only partial) expulsion of Hegel's idealism (CO). While retaining Hegel's argument that it is through *changes to social relations over time* that society changes, Althusser ejects the Hegelian dialectic and all of the 'teleological mysticism' that it entails (CO: 101-103). Instead of a transcendental force being the engine that drives history, all change is now generated by and occurs within an already-existing space/place, altering and (re)forming this space/place into something different (Althusser 1970/2007: 181). Because there is no overarching *telos*, etc. to society its structures are together understood to be a 'decentred totality'—i.e. there is no thing/object/force that drives the totality in any one direction. Of course, this is not to say that there are no structures of great force or influence (for where, otherwise, would that leave the concept of 'mode of production'?). There can be dominant relations—like that of capital and labour—but those relations neither establish and maintain themselves through some inherent supra-historical force already contained within them, nor suddenly become supra-historical. For the aleatory materialist, all structural relations have both a history and a need for continuous reproduction.

When changes to structural relations *do* occur, Althusser terms them *historical events* (CO: 126). Of all of the events that continually occur in society, these become significant because they either *alter* or later become *inserted into* existing social relations, it is because of these changes that they become understood as 'historical'.

What makes *such and such* an event *historical* is not the fact that it is an *event*, but precisely its *insertion into forms which are themselves historical*, into... forms which... are perfectly *definable* and *knowable*.... An event falling within one of these [historical] forms, which has the wherewithal to fall within one of these forms, *which is a possible content for one of these forms*, which affects them, concerns them, reinforces or disturbs them, which provokes them or which they provoke, or even choose or select, that is a *historical event* (CO: 126, emphasis in original).

Importantly, it is *a posteriori* knowledge that allows an event to be recognised as historical or not. For Althusser, an event is ‘historical’ only because it affects the social structure in some way. But this does not explain *how* an event becomes part of the wider social structure and a conjuncture in its own right.

Conjunctural elements as both inventory and system

Understanding a conjuncture as a particular *relation of forces* and not as an independent thing-in-itself, Althusser is undertaking two simultaneous analyses. The first is that when inquiring into the form of the conjuncture it is necessary to develop an *inventory* of the particular forces in operation at the time. For Machiavelli, in both *The Prince* and the *Discourses on Livy*, he outlines the extreme misery brought to Italy by the incessant wars between the numerous mini-republics, the various papal interventions, and the continuous recourse to and invasion by foreign monarchs (MU: 18). This is the ‘inventory’ aspect of Althusser’s analysis: what is it that *constitutes* the forces active in the conjuncture?

However, merely listing elements present within a conjuncture is insufficient for creating an account of what that conjuncture actually *does* when operating. For Althusser, the strength of Machiavelli’s analysis is that he moves to create the different components into a working *system*. “The conjuncture is thus no mere summary of its elements, or enumeration of diverse circumstances, but *their contradictory system*, which poses the political problem and indicates its historical solution, *ipso facto* rendering it a political objective, a practical task” (MU: 19, emphasis in original). By working through the concrete relations and interactions in a particular conjuncture, the conjuncture becomes transformed into an abstract *political* problem—i.e. it becomes possible to theorise a means of destabilising the relations between the forces present within the crystallised conjuncture.

This demonstrates the importance of the dispositive for Althusser. The dispositive acts as a means of structuring what would appear to be contradictory or (otherwise) nonsensical theses/propositions into a working system. If this can be achieved, then a resolution to the conjuncture may become apparent (be it the void, or something else). This remains one of Althusser’s most underdeveloped aspects of aleatory materialism: how to determine not only the elements present in a conjuncture, but also their system

of interrelation. While there is not space here in the article to go much further into this next point, an intriguing similarity exists between Althusser's arguments for the need to examine the *inventory* and *system* contained in a dispositive (*MU*: 18), his later argument for *retroaction* (*UCME*: 193-194), and the critical realist concepts of *retroduction* and *retrodiction* (Bhaskar 1978/2008, 1979/2005, 1986; Elder-Vass 2007; Hardy 2011; Lawson 1997/1998; Pearce 2007). Crudely put, *retroduction* establishes what elements are present in a 'closed' system (meaning outside interferences are excluded); while *retrodiction* examines how elements, especially in an 'open' system (where outside forces are unable to be excluded), affect each other at different times. The *prima facie* similarity between 'inventory' and 'system' should be apparent. The result is a part empirical, part theoretical account that provides a detailed analysis of an event in terms of both elements and interaction. It might also be worth noting (Elliott 1987: fn.6 330-331) that Roy Bhaskar, the founder and one of the key early critical realists, stated that "Althusser was 'the foremost Marxist influence' on a *Realist Theory of Science*" (the first critical realist text).

The aleatory formation of conjunctures

The final component of Althusser's analysis incorporates the introduction of the aleatory moment into the conjuncture. This works along the following lines: first, there is the initial aleatory encounter, which brings different elements together; second, the different forces, powers, and attributes of the elements provide the initial background 'mechanics' as to how the conjuncture arises;¹⁴ third, the conjuncture may (or may not) create effects, that impact upon other structures or conjunctures; finally, the conjuncture or its effects may (or may not) crystallise into an enduring form. The outcome of this argument means the following four propositions can be made.

(a) That the material world is (ontologically) immanently *sui generis*, i.e. the world exists 'as is', with no outside structure or form determining it;

¹⁴ This is not to imply that things always-already contain their attributes. Things can have powers, like the human power of labour, but the form and utilisation of that power differs depending on the social circumstances they are in—e.g. is labour expended in an agrarian, artisan, or industrial form? This point relates to Footnote 8 above.

(b) That structures exist *in the present* and so must continually require renewal and reconstruction, meaning they are open to change;

(c) That the task of the philosopher—following Marx’s lead in the Eleventh Thesis (Marx 1845/1983)—is to abstractly break a structure into its component parts and establish how they maintain their relations; and

(d) The philosopher must try to understand the struggle(s) inherent in politics (in the Althusserian sense), for politics increases the likelihood of altering crystallised conjunctures.

These four points can be linked together because Althusser relates properties, tendencies, powers, and capabilities found within a conjuncture to its particular configuration of elements. The conjuncture overdetermines many, if not all, of its elements—at least it overdetermines the *social* elements (e.g. even the CMP has to observe gravity when enacted upon the Earth’s surface). This enables the aleatory materialist philosopher to produce accounts of how, and why, particular structures produce different effects at different times—even when they might be expected to ‘operate’ differently.

It is worth letting Althusser have the closing words on this matter.

...[T]here exists a word in German, *Geschichte*, which designates not an accomplished history, but history *in the present* [*au présent*], doubtless determined in large part, yet only in part, by the already accomplished past; for a history which is present, which is living, is also open to a future that is uncertain, unforeseeable, not yet accomplished, and therefore *aleatory*. Living history obeys only a constant (not a law): the constant of class struggle. Marx did not use the term ‘constant’,... but an expression of genius: ‘tendential law’, capable of inflecting (but not contradicting) *the primary tendential law*, which means that a tendency does not possess the form or figure of a linear law, but can bifurcate under the impact of an encounter with another tendency, and so on *ad infinitum*. At each intersection the tendency can take a path that is unforeseeable because it is *aleatory* (Althusser 1987/2006: 264).

Conclusion

The arguments presented in this article have attempted outline both the theory behind and the process of aleatory materialist accounts of social change. Aleatory materialism was argued to be a significant development in regard to materialist accounts because it enabled a *non-deterministic* and *non-reductionist* articulation of change. Able to encompass and explain change in both social structure and in various forms of conjuncture (e.g. theoretical, social, etc.), aleatory materialism emphasises the contingency and necessity associated with change without reducing it to pure random chance.

However, aleatory materialist accounts were argued to require theoretical development because of their conceptual underdevelopment. A result of aleatory materialism's incompleteness at the time of his death, theoretical integration was required to link aleatory materialism into existing Althusserian accounts. Examples of this were achieved through analysis of the (failed Italian and successful British) formations of a capitalist mode of production. By examining these accounts, substance was given to what might, otherwise, be only a skeletal account of aleatory materialism.

Also identified in Althusser's work were important arguments regarding Machiavelli. Machiavelli's conceptual elaboration of what, as Althusser would later term them, a 'conjuncture' and a 'dispositive' were argued to be key in forming aleatory materialism. The concept of conjuncture is crucial not only because it enabled *vertical* comparisons to be made between social structures (e.g. from modes of production to forms of government to individual events), the concept of conjuncture also enabled *horizontal* comparisons between different *types* of conjuncture (e.g. from social structures to the structured relations of politics, ideology, and theory). The concept of dispositive was used by Althusser to relate a number of contradictory theses into a relational structure. This structuring enabled *theoretical* resolutions to protracted conjunctures (as argued by Machiavelli and Althusser for the formation of a void).

By bringing conjuncture and dispositive together, the result was to enable conjunctures to be theorised both as a number of different social elements (an inventory) *but also* as being interrelated (a structured system). This analysis can account for (semi-)stable social relations, yet also enable the social theorist/philosopher to query *how* the maintenance of the conjuncture occurs and—by extension—where possible sites of political struggle might exist.

It is worth concluding on a cautionary note. It is sometimes easy to forget—and Althusser appears at times to fall victim to this—that what is being discussed is *all in the abstract*. While Machiavelli achieved an intellectual feat worthy of respect and consideration, he was not able to *effect* change: he was able only to theorise a process through which change *might* occur. The difficulty of this was summarised in his argument for why there needs to be a Prince for whom the possession of *virtù* and the wielding of *fortuna* is a real possibility. It should always be held in mind, therefore, that theory from within the conjuncture is only the first half of the conundrum, the second is in undertaking the struggle that is the theory's result.

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