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Althusser's Scientism and Aleatory Materialism

Introduction

Following the posthumous publication of the last philosophical writings of Louis Althusser on the subject of “aleatory materialism” or, as the philosophy developed in these writings is also known, “the materialism of the encounter,” there has been a steady increase in the number of thinkers engaging with these texts. Most have done so either to explain them, to critique them, to apply them, or to compare them with other theories of revolutionary politics. Scholarly engagement with these writings attained perhaps its highest point with the publication of the collective volumes *Autour d'Althusser, Penser un matérialisme aléatoire* in 2012 and *Encountering Althusser: Politics and Materialism in Contemporary Thought* in 2013.

Almost twenty years after their first appearance in French and eight years after their translation into English, there is now a large body of secondary literature on the subject of aleatory materialism and we can begin to categorize these responses. If we leave to one side the critiques of the later Althusser which begin from a clearly anti-Marxist perspective as well as those that search in Althusser's philosophy for a key to his biography (and in his biography a key to his philosophy) one can divide the responses which take Althusser's philosophy seriously into two categories. In the first are those readings which maintain that Althusser achieved something of importance with his classic works from the early 1960s and which also hold that there may be something of interest in Althusser's subsequent revision of these ideas and arguments. However, these readings also assert that—at a certain point—Althusser's thoughts become inconsistent, contradictory, and

of little philosophical or political value.¹ The present essay will challenge this position only indirectly, by suggesting that the difference between the Althusser of 1965 and that of 1985 is more a question of rhetorical style and of philosophical rigor than a question of philosophical content, depth, consistency, or applicability. In the second category can be placed those readings that take seriously Althusser's philosophical work from the late 1970s and 1980s, who try to explain it, to apply its insights to political questions, and who use ideas from these works to engage with other political philosophies. Within the responses of this type, there is another large division. On the one hand, there is a group of readings which maintain that the importance of the philosophy of the encounter is due somewhat to the fact that, with this philosophy, Althusser rejected the scientistic aspect of his political philosophy and, instead, replaced it with a new ontology—a materialism of the encounter—that could explain and justify a renewed political practice.² On the other hand, there are responses which take seriously Althusser's philosophical work from the 1980s but which also maintain that there is a clear continuity between the Althusser of the 1970s—who strongly argued that it is only by the methods of the sciences and particularly by the methods of historical materialism that the political conjuncture could be understood and a correct political line identified—and the Althusser of the 1980s who seemed to hardly speak of these relations or of this need.

The reading of Althusser that emphasizes the continuity of his thought between 1960 (or even earlier) and 1987 is fast becoming the

¹ Balibar, "Tais-toi, Althusser! (1988)"; Cangiani, "Althusser and the Critique of Political Economy," 245; Elliott, *Althusser*, 255–300; Elliott, "Postscript," 74–75; Garo, "<<Il Pleut>> – Matérialisme de la rencontre et politique du vide chez le dernier Althusser."

² Badiou, "Can Change Be Thought? (interview)," 304.

accepted one.³ However, within this consensus, the majority opinion is that, in his last works, Althusser denies, rejects, or simply abandons the theory of the relation he had previously specified as necessary between good scientific knowledge and effective political action (where “effective” is defined as a political action that secures and maintains a desired good). This denial of the scientific aspect of his project has had significant effects. The first consequence is that it has served to obscure the importance of Althusser's arguments and theoretical innovations from the first half of the 1960s as well as the significant revisions and developments these arguments and concepts underwent between 1966 and 1978. The second consequence of this reading is that it has helped establish an apparently clear connection between Althusser and certain contemporary philosophers who look to ontology in order to find a political direction and who tend to reject or minimize the role played by the sciences in such a process.⁴ A third consequence is that it has encouraged or even justified the contemporary retreat of Marxism into political theory (where it mostly competes in theoretical space with other political theories) instead of into a scientific and practical engagement with the socio-economic-political world and its possibilities.

This essay will not challenge the forging of a connection between Althusser and contemporary philosophers who look to ontology in order to discover a revolutionary possibility, nor will it analyze specific instances of this retreat into intramural theory. However, by demonstrating the

³ Boer, “Althusser's Catholic Marxism”; Goshgarian, “The Very Essence of the Object, the Soul of Marxism and Other Singular Things”; Henninger, “Facticity and Contingency in Louis Althusser's Aleatory Materialism,” 37.

⁴ Those who follow this tendency wholly or partially include: Bryant, Srnicek, and Harman, *The Speculative Turn*; Badiou, “Can Change Be Thought? (interview)”; Diefenbach, “Althusser with Deleuze,” 179–180; Illas, “The Procrustean Bed of Class Struggle,” 3; Johnston, “A Critique of Natural Economy: Quantum Physics with Zizek”; Negri, “Notes on the Evolution of the Thought of Louis Althusser”; Toscano, “Aleatory Rationalism”; Vatter, “Althusser et Machiavel.”

correctness of the reading of Althusser which finds in his conception of the relations between science, philosophy, and politics a continuity, it will challenge those critics: (a) who wish to differentiate between an earlier, scientific Althusser and a later, ontological one; (b) who want to forge a connection between Althusser and contemporary philosophers who look to ontology in order to suggest a political direction; and (c) who overestimate the role played by philosophy in understanding and encouraging revolutionary transitions.

In order to show that the reading of Althusser which finds a pronounced continuity in his conception of the relations among science, philosophy, and politics is the correct one, this essay will begin with an examination of Althusser's "scientism." The meaning of this term (one that differs slightly from contemporary usages) will be specified before showing how and in what way Althusser's political philosophy between 1960 and 1980 can be described as "scientific." The next section will detail the important political role Althusser assigned to the sciences and particularly to the science of historical materialism during this period. This accomplished, the arguments of interpreters who emphasize the apparent difference in Althusser's attitude towards science before and after 1980 will be considered. Here, possible reasons for such a reading will be rehearsed. Next, with the support of recently published and archival documents, this essay will engage in a close and comparative reading of Althusser's texts from the 1970s and 1980s that have as their subject the relations among philosophy, science, and politics. This survey will show the continuity in Althusser's position vis-à-vis the sciences: namely, that if we want good (i.e. desired) socio-politico-economic changes to result from our political actions, then it is necessary to engage in social scientific research or, at the very least, to consult such research and to use this knowledge in our political decision making. All this serves to support the conclusion that Althusser's

“new” political philosophy from the 1980s is not really so new. On the contrary, his writings on the materialism of the encounter and aleatory materialism represent prolongations and elaborations of positions and ideas already developed in the 1960s and 1970s and that include a mostly consistent understanding of the relations between scientific knowledge and political action. This is true even if the rhetorical and philosophical style in which these ideas are put forth in the 1980s differs from the ways in which these ideas were introduced during the prior two decades.

1. Definition of Althusser's Scientism

It is well known and often remarked upon by his critics that Althusser's work from the early 1960s until the end of the 1970s is “scientistic” or that he was guilty of something called “scientism.”⁵ Almost always, these remarks are pejorative.⁶ Those who levy this charge do so to mark out Althusser as someone who reductively and wrongly appeals to the methods of the natural or social sciences (or the knowledge produced by these sciences) in order to understand an aspect of existence that the critic believes might better be understood by other means.⁷ Sometimes, though, the charge of scientism is meant to convey a slightly older but still utilized sense of the term: namely, that Althusser holds the epistemological position that all questions of knowledge and action are best answered by the methods of the natural sciences and that the natural sciences on their own can explain any and all phenomena.⁸

⁵ Dosse, *History of Structuralism. Vol. 1*, 88–91; George, “Reading Althusser”; Rancière, “Sur La Théorie de L'idéologie Politique d'Althusser,” 39; Wolin, *The Wind from the East*, 120–121.

⁶ An exception is Amariglio, “Marxism against Economic Science,” 163.

⁷ Schöttler, “Scientisme sur l'histoire d'un concept difficile.”

⁸ Haack, “Six Signs of Scientism,” 77.

Although Althusser certainly endorsed scientific practice during this period as the best and most reliable way to produce knowledge about the way our socio-economic relations are structured and intentionally transformed, he did not believe that all questions of knowledge and action are best answered by the methods of the natural sciences.⁹ For instance, he also argued that artistic and philosophical practice can produce critical awareness of the world and that these practices may even occasion political transformation.¹⁰ He also did not think that the natural sciences can explain or give the truth of any phenomenon or that the social world and its history can be explained wholly by appeal to the laws of the natural world.¹¹ He believed even less that the social sciences could give us the truth of ourselves, of our individual and collective natures, or of our future social and economic arrangements.¹² Therefore, his work does not exactly fit the definition of scientism, at least according to the two most common meanings of the term.

Despite the fact that Althusser's work exactly fits neither of the typical definitions of scientism, his philosophy was scientistic in this precise respect: Althusser consistently argued that science is the only human theoretical practice that allows us to reliably understand socio-political-economic structures such that we might intentionally assist in their transformation. Science, and more specifically the Marxist science of history, historical materialism, can do so, he argued, because it allows us to understand the origin of our ideological notions about what is good for society and about what is to be done politically. It also allows us to critique

⁹ Althusser, *Philosophy and the Spontaneous Philosophy of the Scientists & Other Essays*, 105–109.

¹⁰ Althusser, "Cremonini, peintre de l'abstrait (1964-66)"; Althusser, "Sur Brecht et Marx (1968)"; Bargu, "In the Theater of Politics"; Wilson, *The Visual World of French Theory*.

¹¹ Robert Paul Resch, *Althusser and the Renewal of Marxist Social Theory* (Berkeley (Calif.): University of California Press, 1992), 195–201.

¹² Althusser, "On Levi-Strauss."

these notions and to replace them with scientific understandings (principles) of why we think and act the way we do. In turn, this knowledge allows us to develop new plans for political actions, ones based on a critical and scientific understanding of the actual processes at work in a particular historical conjuncture and of its possible transformation.¹³ Unlike ideological practice, which tends to the reproduction of existing socio-economic relations, one of the most important things about historical materialism for Althusser is that, once inaugurated, its practice tends to replace existing ideas about our social and natural relations and to generate new and politically reliable knowledge about the world. This new awareness and this new knowledge of social relations is practical knowledge or knowledge for practice. Insofar as it is correct, it allows us to change ourselves and to change our world.

2. Althusser's (mostly) consistent scientism: 1960-1980

Although it is part of the argument of this paper that Althusser's scientism was consistent between 1960 and 1980, this contention has not yet

¹³ Louis Althusser, "Théorie Marxiste et Parti Communiste>> (<<Union théorie/pratique). 1966-1967," 1967 1966, 12, Fonds Althusser, Institut Mémoires de l'Édition Contemporaine. All translations are by the author of this paper. All emphases (signified by *italics*) are Althusser's.

Cette révolution théorique a permis ce qui était interdit aux anciennes philosophies de l'histoire : la connaissance du type d'unité complexe existant entre une société et ses idéologies. La science de l'histoire marxiste est en effet une théorie qui rend compte de la *structure* d'une société, et donc en même temps des "niveaux" ou "instances" distincts qui constituent cette structure au niveau économique, mais aussi du niveau politique et du niveau idéologique. C'est l'existence de cette théorie qui permet à la connaissance marxiste de couvrir à la fois la connaissance des fondements de la société existante, ce que le socialisme utopique, suspendu en aveugle aux principes idéologiques existants, est évidemment incapable de produire.

La théorie marxiste met ainsi en oeuvre ses principes scientifiques dans 1/ la connaissance critique de la société existante 2/ la définition des *fins* du socialisme 3/ la détermination des *moyens d'action* propres à faire la révolution.

been supported. It is important to provide an account of this position's consistency for three reasons. First, because this position is often neither well explained nor well understood. Second, because it is unlikely that someone who held such a position for two decades would suddenly renounce it, the demonstration of this position's longevity raises the burden of proof for those who would argue that Althusser dropped the scientific aspects of his political philosophy in subsequent work. Third, detailing the consistency of Althusser's position over this time allows one to see the evolution in his thought regarding the relations among philosophy, science, and politics and, thereby, to better understand any changes to his view of philosophy that may have precipitated a change in Althusser's attitude regarding the role of science in his political philosophy.

In an interview with the Mexican philosopher Fernanda Navarro that took place near the end of his career, Althusser provided a brief periodization of his thought. He distinguished these periods by the definition of Marxist philosophy that characterized each one. During the time that his most well-known or "classic" works were published (1960-65), Althusser defined philosophy as "the theory of theoretical practice." Only a year or so after the appearance of *For Marx* and *Reading Capital* in 1965, he revised his opinion and began arguing that "[Marxist] philosophy represents politics with the sciences and scientificity with the practices."¹⁴ Then, about five years after this understanding of philosophy was promulgated (1972), Althusser replaced it with the pithier definition: "philosophy is class struggle in theory."

In the interview with Navarro, Althusser insisted that the characterization of philosophy as "class struggle in theory" was definitive.¹⁵ However, this neat periodization and the claim that this definition of

¹⁴ Althusser, *Philosophy of the Encounter*, 240, 249fn27.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 240.

philosophy was final is complicated by the fact that Althusser introduced at least five other definitions of Marxist philosophy during the course of his career, three of which were coined between 1976 and 1986. These include the definition of Marx's philosophy as "void," as "non-philosophy,"¹⁶ as the "Marxist position *in* philosophy"¹⁷ as "hyper-materialism," as a "materialism of the encounter" and as "aleatory materialism." Given these shifts, we might wonder whether the successive changes or variations to his definition of philosophy also meant changes to his understanding of science. If they did, then there is perhaps an argument to be made for the evolution of Althusser's scientism. If not, then we can argue that Althusser's view of science, of science's relation to philosophy, and the role of scientific knowledge in politics remains more or less consistent after 1965.

2.1 Althusser's scientism 1960-1965

The most well-known of Althusser's positions on Marx's development, on Marxian philosophy, and on Marxist science were promulgated between 1960 and 1965, first in a series of articles and then in the books *For Marx* and *Reading Capital*. In addition to being original and heterodox, these positions had the virtues of being clean, simple, and formal. In these works, Althusser maintained that, sometime between 1845 and 1847, Marx broke with the idealist notions that characterized his early work and that he then inaugurated a philosophy (dialectical materialism) that allowed for the advancement of a critical materialist science of history (historical materialism).¹⁸ Though Althusser also tried to show that Marx could not and did not always render explicit concepts such as mode of production, productive forces, relations of production, superstructure,

¹⁶ Althusser, "La transformation de la philosophie – Conférence de Grenade (1976)," 177.

¹⁷ Althusser, *Initiation à la philosophie pour les non-philosophes*, 375.

¹⁸ Althusser, "On the Young Marx: Theoretical Questions (1961)"; Resch, *Althusser and the Renewal of Marxist Social Theory*, 169–170.

contradiction, overdetermination, ideology, etc., that allowed this science to proceed, he argued that these and other concepts could be made so by a symptomatic reading of Marx's mature writings.¹⁹

Along with this revisionist reading of Marx and the analytic work on Marxist concepts, Althusser also undertook the complementary epistemological task of explaining how Marxist science went about producing true knowledge of the socioeconomic world and of how this knowledge differs from the ideological understanding we have of it spontaneously. According to Althusser, Marxist Science or "historical materialism" differs from other social sciences. It does so both in terms of its object, the history of class struggle, and in terms of its method, which is synthetic and critical. Historical materialism is synthetic insofar as it employs the results of the social and natural sciences in its own demonstrations. It is critical insofar as it also sees fit to direct scientific research and to evaluate any specific science's results or methodology. However, historical materialism does not differ in terms of being a science. As a science, it makes use of a body of concepts and abstractive practices including experimentation, observation, and quantification to develop new knowledge about the real. This knowledge is verified by the criteria it has established in the formation of its proper concepts.²⁰ Historical materialism also recognizes the knowledge that it produces as provisional, that is, as amenable or as able to be overturned through further scientific practice.²¹

The knowledge that scientific practice produces is seen in its openness and novelty to differ fundamentally from that other theoretical practice which Althusser habitually contrasts it with and from which it emerges: namely, ideological practice. Defined as that set of beliefs

¹⁹ Althusser, "From Capital to Marx's Philosophy"; Solomon, "L'espace de La Lecture."

²⁰ Elliott, *Althusser*, 82.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 84.

necessarily held by groups of individuals whose effect is to guarantee the reproduction of certain socioeconomic relations,²² ideology always relates directly to the political and economic exigencies of the events that give birth to it and to which it is subjected. As Althusser notes, ideology is “content to *reflect* the historical changes which it is its mission to assimilate and master.”²³ Therefore, unlike science, which is potentially productive of new knowledge and remains open to revision, ideology “is theoretically closed.”²⁴

But how does one tell the difference between scientific knowledge and ideological knowledge? During this period, Althusser solved the problem of demarcation by bringing in Marxist philosophy as arbiter. Marxist philosophy, he maintained, is itself a science, but one that has as its object the rational critique of the scientific ideas established in the course of historical materialist research. Philosophy, he maintained, is the “Theory of theoretical practices” and its job is to rationally differentiate between ideological notions and scientific concepts. By seeing if a theory accords with Marxist philosophical concepts, philosophy can rule on what constitutes a genuine addition to knowledge.²⁵ Without such an analysis, Althusser argued, it is impossible to differentiate between scientific and ideological knowledge. Further, and because correct action follows from

²² Althusser, *Lenin and Philosophy, and Other Essays*, 132–33.,

²³ Althusser and Balibar, *Reading “Capital,”* 141–42.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ To rehearse a simple example employed by Althusser, if some set of thinkers was to claim that the historical essence of human beings is to be engaged in creative acts that tend toward the overcoming of our own alienation, then a philosopher could use her stock of Marxist concepts to analyze and critique this claim. Is it scientifically warranted, this philosopher might ask, to believe that humans are fated to achieve the self-overcoming of their own alienation through creative acts? Which of Marx’s scientific concepts are used in order to make such a claim? What historical materialist research supports such a claim? If no concepts are used and no support is given and yet such a belief persists and is promulgated, then the historical materialist has reason to suspect that the idea may be ideological and that it somehow reinforces existing socioeconomic relations. Althusser, “Letter to the Central Committee of the PCF, 18 March 1966.”

correct knowledge, without historical materialist research, it is impossible to ensure correct political action.²⁶

Clearly, Althusser's thinking about the relationship between scientific knowledge and successful political action between 1960 and 1966 was scientific according to the definition of the term given above: historical materialism is said to be the only human theoretical practice which allow us to reliably understand existing socio-economic structures in their history, their existence, and in their possible transformation. However, it is also true that Althusser maintained during this period that Marxist science (historical materialism) had need of Marxist Philosophy (dialectical materialism) in order to certify its research and to monitor its progress.²⁷ Science, though crucial for political progress, was not represented as an autonomous practice that independently produces reliable results. Marxist philosophy was needed to modify its body of knowledge and its methods by separating out from the science any ideological contents. In this respect, philosophical practice guaranteed historical materialism's own scientificity.²⁸

2.2 Althusser's scientism 1966-1972

Despite fighting strongly for this position and for the political recommendation which followed from it that the direction of the Communist Party be given over to philosophers or at least that philosophers' voices be given more weight in party decision making, in 1966 Althusser began modifying his ideas about the definition of Marxist philosophy and about its relation to Marxist Science. He also weakened his claim about a clear break in Marx's work.²⁹ From this time on, he referred to

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Althusser, "Theory, Theoretical Practice and Theoretical Formation: Ideology and Ideological Struggle.," 5–13, 34–42.

²⁸ Ibid., 38–40.

²⁹ Lewis, "Editorial Introduction to Louis Althusser's "Letter to the Central Committee of the PCF, 18 March, 1966"."

this epistemological stance as “theoreticist” and admitted his mistake in thinking that philosophical practice allowed one to clearly differentiate scientific from ideological knowledge.³⁰ While he did not give up on finding a method to differentiate between the two types of knowledges, he also no longer maintained that this could be done using solely rationalist criteria.

Though the transition was by no means sudden or entirely clean, by 1967 and certainly by the time he was preparing his lecture notes for the seminars that would eventually be published as *Philosophy and the Spontaneous Philosophy of the Scientists*, Althusser had revised his definition of philosophy.³¹ Philosophy was no longer understood as the “the theory of theoretical practices.” Instead, he now ventured the thesis that “philosophy represents politics in the domain of theory, or to be more precise: *with the sciences* – and, *vice versa*, philosophy represents scientificity in politics.”³²

In the early 1960s, philosophy was understood by Althusser to exist outside of both ideology and science; it was an independent theoretical practice that had its own rules and its own object. Now though, it was thought to exist only as a void, as a partisan and critical moment within the existing theoretical practices of ideology and science.³³ Within a specific science’s body of theory, Althusser explained, philosophy acts in a partisan manner when it works against that science’s tendency to embrace idealistic explanations of its object.³⁴ It also acts critically when it calls a specific science’s attention to its own ideological contents. The contents that it critiques may be ideological prejudices from the wider society that constitute part of the conceptual assumptions of the science or they may be biases that color its results and their reception. Alternately, these ideological contents may consist in the importation of concepts proper to other sciences within a

³⁰ Althusser, “Lenin and Philosophy (February 1968),” 182–186.

³¹ Goshgarian, “Introduction,” xiii–xvi.

³² Macherey, “Althusser et Le Concept de Philosophie Spontanée Des Savants.”

³³ Althusser, “Lenin and Philosophy (February 1968),” 65.

³⁴ Matheron, “The Recurrence of the Void in Louis Althusser,” 28.

particular science's explanatory schema.³⁵ Within politics, Althusser maintains, philosophy acts by demanding that our accepted ideas about the world, about how it works, and about who inhabits it be subjected to scientific scrutiny or that they be informed by scientific results. Because scientific practice always and in the long run tends to the side of materialism, this act is also a partisan intervention against ideal explanation (and therefore against ideological support) of the socio-economic world and its contents.³⁶

As the last paragraph suggests, Althusser did not argue after 1966 that the knowledge science produced was free from ideology or that philosophy could emancipate it and us from all ideological thinking. In fact, one of the main and lasting changes Althusser's epistemology underwent between mid-1966 and 1968 was his embrace of Foucault's insight that thought always functions in relation to politics or, better put, that all theory is political.³⁷ A correlate to this insight was Althusser's claim that science and ideology are always admixed, that there is no definitive method for their separation, and that ideological concepts always frame the production and reception of scientific results.³⁸ Despite this correlation, Althusser remained consistent in his belief that scientific practice tends to produce a more reliable understanding of the world (at least if we wish to change it) than does the preexisting conception of our world that we find ready-to-hand (and mind) in ideology. More specifically, Althusser persisted in his argument that all societies are class societies riven by class conflict, and that, on the basis of this discovery, Marx founded a science called historical materialism.³⁹

³⁵ Althusser, "Lenin and Philosophy (February 1968)," 64.

³⁶ Althusser, *Philosophie et philosophie spontanée des savants*, 1967, 96–98.

³⁷ Garo, "The Impossible Break," 282.

³⁸ Althusser, *Philosophie et philosophie spontanée des savants*, 1967, 132–134.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 256.

Further, he argued that it was only by the adoption of this science that the worker's movement could potentially find success.⁴⁰

Not only was Althusser steady in this position, he developed it further in works like *Lenin and Philosophy* (1968) and in the 1968 interview "Philosophy as a Revolutionary Weapon." In texts from this phase in his career, Althusser argued that historical materialism produces a reliable form of socio-economic knowledge, one that can be used in the intentional transformation of human social and economic relationships. As a critical and overarching social scientific discipline, it makes use of the results from specific sciences while also engaging in their critique and in their synthesis.⁴¹ Historical materialism's critical powers are derived from its understanding of historical necessities, of why we must think and act the way we do, and of the ways we might potentially think and act. They are not derived from any extra-scientific critical method, morality, or philosophical anthropology, although this is always a danger that must be guarded against.⁴² Historical materialism allows us to understand our history, our present, and our future possibilities scientifically (that is, by way of abstractions from experience and then by demonstrations).⁴³ With this knowledge, philosophy can then argue in politics. It can demonstrate what ideas about the social world are

⁴⁰ Ibid., 130.

⁴¹ Althusser, "The Historical Task of Marxist Philosophy (1967)," 161.

⁴² As Althusser writes in the draft of a Communist Party manual in 1966 or early 1967:

La critique de la société existante passe donc, dans le marxisme, par la critique de ses principes *idéologiques*. Mais alors la *critique* prend un nouveau sens : il ne s'agit plus de *juger* de la bonté ou de la malveillance de telle société, au nom de "valeurs" (morales ou juridiques) donc d'approuver et de condamner, - il s'agit d'abord de *connaître*, donc de *comprendre* la nécessité *à la fois* de la société existante et de ses principes idéologiques et de leur disparition. La critique n'est pas première, elle est seconde à la connaissance de la nécessité historique, elle ne lui est pas antérieure mais intérieure.

Althusser, "ALT2. A7-01.09 <<Théorie Marxiste et Parti Communiste>> (<<Union théorie/pratique>>). (1966-1967)."

⁴³ Ibid.; Goshgarian, "The Very Essence of the Object, the Soul of Marxism and Other Singular Things," 105.

ideological (including philosophical ones), explain why they exist, and it can suggest the correct actions to be taken if we want to change not only these ideas but also the social forces that produce and sustain them. The result of this intervention of philosophy into politics is better political practice; that is, a political practice more likely to generate the results desired.⁴⁴

2.3 Althusser's scientism 1972-1980

While most associate the definition of philosophy as “class struggle in the field of theory” with Althusser’s short work from 1972 titled “A Reply to John Lewis,” the approximate phrase appears already in the 1968 interview cited above. It is also strongly implied in the 1967 work *Philosophy and the Spontaneous Philosophy of the Scientists*.⁴⁵ However, it is in the polemic against John Lewis that Althusser introduces its definitive formulation: “philosophy is, in the last instance, class struggle in the field of theory.”⁴⁶ This new formulation marks more a simplification of the phrase “philosophy represents politics in the domain of theory, or to be more precise: *with the sciences* – and, *vice versa*, philosophy represents scientificity in politics” than it does any significant change to its meaning. This is the case because, as Althusser explains in the “Reply,” philosophy is only able to affect these practices within theory itself. Philosophy does not march in the streets, call for a general strike, or bribe an official. However, it can be employed within politics to suggest that, based on a historical materialist analysis of the historical conjuncture, it may be a propitious time to do any one of the above.⁴⁷ Philosophy also does not experiment, observe phenomena, or reason deductively about natural or social processes.

⁴⁴ Althusser, *On the Reproduction of Capitalism*, 7; Althusser, *Philosophy and the Spontaneous Philosophy of the Scientists & Other Essays*, 103.

⁴⁵ Althusser, *Philosophy and the Spontaneous Philosophy of the Scientists & Other Essays*, 116–17; Baltas, “Critical Notice,” 655.

⁴⁶ Althusser, “Reply to John Lewis,” 37.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 58; Althusser, “The Historical Task of Marxist Philosophy (1967),” 166.

However, within science and from the point of view of class politics, it can move around in existing theory. Once there, it can critique the results of a science or suggest that there are problems with a science's presuppositions or with its reasoning. These criticisms may change the way a science is practiced and how it understands its object or it might even inaugurate a new way of thinking about social processes and structures.⁴⁸

Althusser's streamlining of his definition of philosophy in 1972 did little to change his understanding of the role of science in effective political decision making. In fact, the first half of the 1970s saw Althusser refining this position as part and parcel of his enduring war on two fronts against Stalinism and Humanism within the communist party. The second half of the decade though saw him developing his theory of how science contributes to political change and how it influences philosophy in some detail. This development was occasioned by discussion within the PCF of whether or not it should drop from its platform the position that a dictatorship of the proletariat is necessary to effect a transition from capitalism to communism. Spurred on by these discussions and indignant that a sound historical materialist concept developed over the course of the worker's movement might be dropped, Althusser elaborated his points about how scientific knowledge must be harnessed so as to optimally inform communist political action.

The specifics of Althusser's plan to direct social scientific research and to employ it in party political decision making are covered in my essay "Concrete Analysis and Pragmatic Social Theory (Notes Towards an Althusserian Critical Theory)" and the political context is made clear in Goshgarian's 2006 introduction to *Philosophy of the Encounter: Later Writings*

⁴⁸ Althusser, *Essays in Self-Criticism*, 117–118; Althusser, "Projet de livre sur l'impérialisme. 1973," 5–6, 9.

1978-87.⁴⁹ Rather than rehearse these details, it may be more useful in this section to look at some texts from this period that evidence these elaborations but that also show Althusser's developing thoughts on the relationship between philosophy and science.

A few writings from this period that show the development in Althusser's ideas about how Marxist science can aid the worker's movement and which also show the relationship between philosophy, politics, and science are grouped together in Althusser's archives under the rubric "Textes divers sur la philosophie." Their argument is difficult to follow if one does not keep in mind that—by this point in his career—Althusser had largely stopped repeating the communist dogma that Marxist philosophy is identical with dialectical materialism. After trying for years to reconstruct dialectical materialism as a "non-speculative, non-positivist" position in the public (and communist party) mind and failing, Althusser had by this point almost given up.⁵⁰ Instead, he began to label the philosophy inaugurated by Marx as, alternately: "the philosophy of Marx," "a Marxist position in philosophy" or, to better contrast it with the idealist philosophy of which dogmatic dialectical materialism had for him become a representative, "anti-philosophy" or "non-philosophy."⁵¹

If we register this change in nomenclature, we can better follow Althusser's critique of the position that "a science [and in particular the science of historical materialism] is an integral part of a philosophy

⁴⁹ Goshgarian, "Translator's Introduction"; Lewis, "Concrete Analysis and Pragmatic Social Theory (Notes Towards an Althusserian Critical Theory)"; Sotiris, "Philosophy of the Encounter," 148–49.

⁵⁰ Althusser, "Elements of Self-Criticism," 115.

⁵¹ Althusser, "Marx in His Limits," 32–33. By the end of 1978, Althusser had given up trying to identify Marx's philosophy with dialectical materialism and crossed the term out from texts he was in the process of writing. He replaced it with the other terms mentioned above; see Althusser, *Initiation à la philosophie pour les non-philosophes*, 375.

[dialectical materialism.]”⁵² This Stalinist formula, he notes, has historically deformed historical materialism; it has subordinated Marxist science to the “philosophy” of dialectical materialism and to its laws. Why has this subordination occurred? Althusser suggests that one reason may be the influence of bourgeois ideology (in the form of bourgeois philosophy) on the communist movement. However, he does not believe it is simply this. The complementary reason he cites for historical materialism’s subordination is the perennial need for philosophy and especially for idealist philosophy to totalize, unify, and control all.⁵³ Against this tendency, Althusser continues, “the sciences always present a certain danger to the established order...they always have the smell of materialism and of liberty about them...”⁵⁴

Because they present this danger, Althusser explains, idealist philosophy working on behalf of the established order tries to control the sciences and, simultaneously, to provide them with their epistemological guarantee. In providing this guarantee and by placing dialectical materialism over and above historical materialism an existing political situation can be justified or one can end up responding incorrectly to the actual political demands of a situation. When philosophy is placed in this dominant

⁵² Althusser, “ALT2. A22-01.02, Texte de Louis Althusser sur la philosophie marxiste.”

...il est surprenant, du point de vue marxiste d'entendre affirmer qu'une science (le Matérialisme historique) est partie intégrante d'une philosophie (le Matérialisme dialectique).

⁵³ Ibid.

C'est clair pour la fonction apologétique de la philosophie : si la philosophie se met au pouvoir sur les sciences, c'est pour leur extorquer l'aveu philosophique d'un sens dont elle a besoin pour boucler son système au service de l'idéologie dominante, contre le matérialisme. C'est clair aussi pour les fonctions de contrôle et de garantie, puisque dans les deux cas il s'agit d'orienter les sciences ou de les confiner dans un domaine limité, pour bien s'assurer qu'elles se tiendront tranquille à la place que leur assigne l'idéologie dominante.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

...les sciences présentent toujours un certain danger pour l'ordre établi, ne serait-ce que parce qu'elles ont toujours une certaine odeur de matérialisme et de liberté?

position it is charged with a huge number of strategic tasks, which it works on without the benefit of the sciences. Althusser's chief examples of these tasks are that of defining what is human or what is good for humanity and of deciding based on these understandings what are to be socialism's and communism's main goals. However, by appealing only to philosophy to make such definitions and to decide on its objectives, it sets up the Communist Party's direction (which has the power to dogmatically dictate Marxist philosophy) as the communist movement's sole authority.⁵⁵ Althusser concludes these texts with a warning, a wager, and a promise. The warning is that "when scientific analyses are lacking, it is necessary that something else take their place. It is taken by philosophy."⁵⁶ The wager is that "Marxist philosophy has everything to gain from the abandonment of all [philosophical] formulas" and that "the Marxist movement has everything to gain from the correction of the practices which follow from adherence to these formulas." The promise is that "the worker's movement today...has everything to gain by making use of scientific, theoretical, historical, and concrete analyses."⁵⁷

⁵⁵ Ibid.

Et derrière cette justification, derrière cette mise au pouvoir de la philosophie sur la science marxiste-léniniste, se profilait une autre justification, où il était aussi question de pouvoir: la justification du dirigeant du Parti à dire le dernier mot sur toutes les questions, y compris les questions scientifiques, ce qui supposait non seulement une certaine conception du rapport entre la philosophie et les sciences, mais aussi une certaine conception du rapport entre le dirigeant et le Parti, le Parti et l'État, et le Parti et les masses, et aussi, bien entendu, une certaine conception de la lutte des classes.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

...lorsque les analyses scientifiques manquent, il faut bien que leur place soit prise: elle est prise par la philosophie.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

Pour tout dire, la philosophie marxiste n'a rien à perdre, mais tout à gagner, en abandonnant les formules dont la fonction d'apologétique, de contrôle et de garantie sont évidentes. Et si, comme c'est à parier, ces fonctions ont des effets pratiques réels, les marxistes ont tout à gagner à la rectification de ces pratiques. Oui, tout à gagner. Et pour me limiter à un seul point, je dirais que le Mouvement ouvrier a tout à gagner aujourd'hui à disposer des analyses scientifiques, théoriques, historiques et concrètes, qui lui manquent

In this warning about the deformation of Marxist science and of Marxist political practice by the rationalizing force of idealist philosophy, one can see Althusser's consistent idea that scientific knowledge is what the Marxist movement needs in order to correctly direct its political practice. In their condemnation of philosophy as being for the most part idealist and as serving bourgeois interests, one can also see in the *Textes divers sur la philosophie* the emergence of a position characteristic of Althusser's aleatory materialism. This is not surprising as more than one observer has noted that many of the ideas that were to characterize the Materialism of the Encounter are clearly present in documents from this period.⁵⁸

The co-existence of recognizably Aleatory Materialist ideas with ideas that we have already labeled as scientistic is also found in an unpublished manuscript from 1976. Titled “*Être marxiste en philosophie*,” This text begins with a critique of philosophies which try to totalize all entities and occurrences and which posit an origin as well as an end to the world. Part of this manuscript reads just like the criticism of idealist historiography that is found in writings from the 1980s.⁵⁹ In addition, it includes a discussion of the “givenness” of the world (citing Heidegger positively) and lauds Epicurus for his idea of contingency and of the encounter. Further, it includes the idea of a *Kulturkampf* in philosophy between materialist and idealist camps.⁶⁰

However, notwithstanding all the thematic similarities to Althusser's Aleatory Materialist writings, at a certain point there is a clear shift to

cruellement: je ne parle pas d'analyses d'inspiration philosophique, mais des analyses scientifiques...

⁵⁸ Goshgarian, “Translator's Introduction,” xvi–xvii, xlv–xlvi; Goshgarian, “The Very Essence of the Object, the Soul of Marxism and Other Singular Things,” 89–90; Beaulieu, “La politique de Gilles Deleuze et le matérialisme aléatoire du dernier Althusser,” 162–163.

⁵⁹ Althusser, “ALT2. A25-01.03, *Être marxiste en philosophie*, chapters 13–24 (1976),” 10–13.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 72–73, 98–100, 110–112.

science and a justification of Marxist scientific practice that the published writings associated with the materialism of the encounter do not make as clearly. In fact, there is a long and rather surprising section in *Être marxiste en philosophie*,⁶¹ where Althusser points out his agreement with Karl Popper on the criterion for distinguishing a scientific theory from other types of ideas. Though he does not agree with Popper that we can say in advance whether a scientific theory is falsifiable, he does concur with Popper's point that hypotheses that cannot be invalidated by experience are not scientific.⁶¹

If historical materialism is a science, Althusser maintains, it must be able to be validated. If this is so, then in what way is its results validated? Historical materialism, Althusser explains, like mathematics and psychoanalysis, presents a special case among the sciences because its results are not experimentally reproducible. Mathematics is distinct because the objects that it studies are not material; rather, it has for its object the results of its prior practices. Its demonstrations therefore do not consist of experimental proofs, but in a logical reordering or analysis of its objects.⁶² Psychoanalysis and historical materialism are unique as well, Althusser maintains, because, in contrast to the natural sciences which study the material real and whose findings (as theoretical representations of universal elements) are or should be infinitely reproducible, they have for their object complex historical singularities or "conjunctures." Unlike the universal elements that natural science studies, the moment of the class struggle

⁶¹ Althusser, "ALT2. A25-01.02, *Être marxiste en philosophie*, chapters 1-12 (1976)," 19.

L'expérience historique (et les exemples foisonnent) montre au contraire qu'on ne peut jamais décider d'avance si telle théorie est scientifique ou non, c-à-d sera ou non vérifiée ou infirmée (démentie) par l'expérimentation. On peut même soutenir l'idée qu'il existe des théorie scientifique, comme le marxisme et la psychanalyse, bêtes noires de Popper...qui échappent apparemment aux "critères" de la vérification et du démenti expérimental, car les expériences qui y sont pratiquées ne peuvent pas être reproduites dans des conditions absolument identiques.

⁶² Ibid., 20–21.

studied by historical materialism or the moment in a subject's psyche analyzed by depth psychology "is singular and only defines and describes itself *progressively* in the course of the analysis or of the struggle itself."⁶³ This does not mean that these science's findings cannot be confirmed, only that they are confirmed by experience but not by 'experiment.'"⁶⁴ In this sense, the proof of historical materialism's and psychoanalysis' truth is "inseparable from the direct transformation of their object[s]."⁶⁵

The rudiments of such a practical transformation and therefore of such a validation are spelled out in more detail in a book written by Althusser between 1976 and 1978 (but only recently edited and published) titled *Initiation à la philosophie pour les non-philosophes*. In a chapter devoted to "Philosophy and the Science of Class Struggle," Althusser imagines how and under what conditions such a transformation (and thereby confirmation) is possible. He supposes that the conditions for such a transformation are the following. First, that the members of a non-exploitative class become unified in their understanding of themselves as exploited subjects and that they do so by subscribing to a philosophy that facilitates this unification. Then, if that class "arms itself with a scientific theory of class struggle, the conditions of that philosophy's elaboration will change completely." This philosophy will change from a "blind" and subjective class ideology expressing and ensuring that class's relation to the dominant mode of

⁶³ Ibid., 21bis.

Ce qui distingue le dispositif expérimental des sciences de la nature du dispositif du marxisme et de la PA [psychanalyse], c'est que le premier est monté de toutes pièces, en fonction d'éléments *universels* parfaitement définis *au départ*, alors que dans la cure analytique et dans la lutte des classes, ils sont *singuliers* et ne se décrivent et définissent que *progressivement* au cours de la cure et de la lutte.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 20, 21bis.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 21bis.

... chacun voit bien que la théorie [psycho]analytique et la théorie marxiste à la différence des autres pratiques scientifiques, sont inséparables de la transformation directe de leur objet.

production to an objective and “conscious determination, assured by scientific knowledge of [that relation’s] conditions, of its forms, of its laws.”⁶⁶

This philosophy (just like all philosophies) will then be deployed politically. It will suggest to politicians, or at least to those who can direct the expression of political power, the reasons and objective means for the transformation of these relations. From this will follow a political line.⁶⁷ As Althusser maintains in another document from the same period, if this philosophy does not include objective, social scientific knowledge of existing relations—of that which produces and sustains them and of what tendencies in them might allow for their transformation—and if the philosophy does not grow and change from lessons learned in the course of its implementation, then there is no hope of choosing the correct line and for the transformation of existing relations.⁶⁸ Without this knowledge, the philosophy expressed by the non-exploitative class and the political choices that follow from it are easily influenced and countered not only by the dominant ideology, but also by the repressive state apparatuses (army, state,

⁶⁶ Althusser, *Initiation à la philosophie pour les non-philosophes*, 364.

Mais supposez une classe qui n’exploite personne, lutte pour sa libération et pour la suppression des classes ; supposez que, dans son combat, cette même classe entreprenne de s’unifier elle-même en unifiant son idéologie de classe, et unifie cette idéologie en forgeant une philosophie qui parvienne à cette unification ; alors, si cette classe est armée d’une théorie scientifique de la lutte des classes, les conditions de l’élaboration de sa philosophie changent du tout au tout. Car la dépendance dans laquelle cette philosophie va nécessairement se trouver à l’égard de l’idéologie politique du prolétariat ne sera pas une servitude aveugle, mais, au contraire, une détermination consciente, assurée par la connaissance scientifique de ses conditions, de ses formes, et de ses lois.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 364–65.

Nous pouvons maintenant avancer qu’elles peuvent être dites « justes », si cet adjectif « juste » désigne l’effet d’un ajustement prenant en compte tous les éléments d’une situation donnée dans laquelle une classe lutte pour atteindre ses objectifs. « Juste » est alors l’adjectif non de la justice, catégorie morale, mais de la justesse, catégorie pratique, qui indique l’adaptation des moyens aux fins, en fonction de la nature de classe de celui qui les poursuit.

⁶⁸ Althusser, “Que Faire? (1978),” 17–24.

police, laws, courts, etc.),⁶⁹ which guarantee the reproduction of the conditions of the proletariat's exploitation.⁷⁰

In the spring of 1980, Althusser gave an interview to his friend, Italian journalist Giorgio Fanti.⁷¹ In it, he answered wide-ranging queries about present political issues, about the difference between Italian and French communist parties, about the current crisis in the communist movement, and about how to resolve it. He also reflected on his career as a whole and offered up some reflections on the relations between philosophy, science, and politics. Regarding Marxist philosophy, Althusser stated in no uncertain terms his judgment that “dialectical materialism” as it had been historically formulated through the course of the Marxist movement is “absolutely indefensible” and that it has nothing to do with Marx's philosophy.⁷² Though less detailed than the balance sheet provided in the 1978 essay “Marx in his Limits,” Althusser supported this contention by tallying up the idealistic philosophical mistakes committed not only by Marx's interpreters, but also by Marx himself.⁷³

When asked by Fanti whether his rejection of dialectical materialism for a version of Marx's position in philosophy that Althusser now referred to as “*sur-matérialisme*” or “*hyper-matérialisme*,” meant a change to his position regarding the Marxist science of historical materialism, Althusser offered a detailed and passionate reply. He began by saying that his core argument had not changed and that “we must defend in the trenches the idea that Marxism is a revolutionary science.”⁷⁴ Further, though he continued to disavow his earlier position that there is a definitive break in Marx's

⁶⁹ Althusser, *Sur la reproduction*, 95–95.

⁷⁰ Althusser, *Initiation à la philosophie pour les non-philosophes*, 362.

⁷¹ Althusser, “AL T2. A46-04.05, Entretien avec Giorgio Fanti.”

⁷² *Ibid.*, 51–52.

⁷³ Althusser, “Marx in His Limits,” 26–61.

⁷⁴ Althusser, “AL T2. A46-04.05, Entretien avec Giorgio Fanti,” 52.

J'ai dit alors qu'il fallait défendre dans la tranchée l'idée que le marxisme est une science révolutionnaire.

philosophy when Marx rejects idealist philosophy and becomes scientific, Althusser told his interviewer that there remains a discernable difference between Marx's scientific ideas (which are sound and potentially transformative) and his philosophical ideas (which were mostly bourgeois and ideological).⁷⁵ When Fanti asked a follow-up question about whether or not Althusser had said in 1973 that dialectical materialism was the undeniable core to Marx's thought,⁷⁶ Althusser replied:

“No, no. On the contrary, for me, [this core] is historical materialism... If this word designated something, it was that there was something scientific in Marx. It remains to be seen if the extent of the scientific ground opened by Marx was effectively as big as we had believed it to be, as Marx believed, etc. What I have always defended is the idea that there is something scientific in Marx, and I will defend that always.”⁷⁷

3. Althusser 1982-1987: Marxist philosophy without Marxist Science?

The 1980 interview with Giorgio Fanti contains Althusser's last recorded and edited thoughts on the relations between philosophy, science, and politics prior to the two-year philosophical caesura occasioned by Althusser's murder of his wife, Hélène Rytman on November 16, 1980. Some readers have argued that Althusser's thought underwent a change during this interval or that a change begun in 1975 or 1976 was solidified. These analysts maintain that when Althusser began writing again in the

⁷⁵ Ibid., 50–51.

⁷⁶ Fanti is probably misremembering the line from Althusser, “Elements of Self-Criticism,” 117. where Althusser states: “Yes, it is quite correct for us to speak of an unimpeachable and undeniable scientific core in Marxism, that of historical materialism.”

⁷⁷ Althusser, “AL T2. A46-04.05, Entretien avec Giorgio Fanti,” 51–52.

Non, non. Pour moi le matérialisme historique, contrairement ! Justement Si ce mot désignait quelque chose, c'était ce qu'il pouvait y avoir de scientifique dans Marx. Quitte à voir, si effectivement, l'extension du domaine scientifique ouvert par Marx était aussi grande qu'on avait pu le croire, que Marx le croyait, etc....Ce que j'ai toujours défendu c'est l'idée qu'il y avait quelque chose de scientifique dans Marx, et ça je le défends toujours.

summer of 1982 it was with a profoundly changed view of the relation between Marxist philosophy, Marxist science, and Marxist politics. In this new assessment, Marxist science was dismissed while ontology and politics were foregrounded. Exploring neither the plausibility of this claim nor its possible external political and philosophical motivations,⁷⁸ this section of the paper will briefly explore how some readers have argued that there was such a modification in Althusser's attitude towards science in his idea of philosophy after 1980.

Within Althusser scholarship, there is a divide between those who emphasize a continuist reading of his work and those who emphasizes its breaks. The “breakist” understanding, which emphasizes the changes or ruptures in his thought, was in the majority in the 1990s and remains a popular interpretive rubric. Almost all who hold this position argue that Althusser renounced his scientism in his last works.⁷⁹ However, among those scholars who have worked extensively with posthumously published materials and who have tried to comprehend the arc of his career, a continuist consensus has emerged over the last decade that focuses on the permanence of certain themes in Althusser's work. These themes include the primacy of relations, the idea of the conjuncture, the claim that history is a process without a subject, and the idea of philosophy as a void.⁸⁰ Even amongst the continuists, however, a significant majority explicitly holds the

⁷⁸ Garo, “<<Il Pleut>> – Matérialisme de la rencontre et politique du vide chez le dernier Althusser.” In this essay Garo offers a comprehensive assessment of the political and philosophical climate that may have encouraged the foregrounding of ontology and politics in Althusser's work in the mid 1980s.

⁷⁹ Bargu, “In the Theater of Politics”; Bensaïd, “Un univers de pensée aboli,” 253; Diefenbach, “Althusser with Deleuze”; Elliott, “Postscript”; Garo, “<<Il Pleut>> – Matérialisme de la rencontre et politique du vide chez le dernier Althusser”; Haider and Mohandesi, “Underground Currents”; Navarro, “An Encounter with Althusser,” 96; Thomas, “Althusser's Last Encounter”; Williams, “Althusser and Spinoza,” 73–74.

⁸⁰ Morfino, “An Althusserian Lexicon”; Goshgarian, “The Very Essence of the Object, the Soul of Marxism and Other Singular Things”; Matheron, “The Recurrence of the Void in Louis Althusser.”

position that Althusser gave up his scientism in the 1980s or else supports this position implicitly by emphasizing only the political and philosophical aspects of Althusser's thought from this period.⁸¹ Despite a near consensus among his readers that Althusser gave up his scientism in the 1980s, there is a contingent of continuists who argue that Althusser's scientism remains consistent throughout his career.⁸² One purpose of the present paper is to provide more and better evidence of this consistency.

The next few paragraphs will summarize the accounts of a few representative readers who explicitly maintain that Althusser gave up his scientism in the 1980s. This survey will begin with one interpreter who accentuates the break from Althusser's earlier philosophical positions with the advent of aleatory materialism. It will then review the readings of two representative continuists, both of whom maintain that—despite the deep continuities discernible in Althusser's philosophy as a whole—his later philosophy lacks the scientistic element that had previously marked his thought. Following this review, the form, presentation, and content of Althusser's posthumously published work on the materialism of the encounter will be examined in order to show why, based on these texts, there are perhaps good reasons for thinking that Althusser altered his position on the role of science in his political philosophy as a whole. In addition to a close and comparative reading of Althusser's published and

⁸¹ Beaulieu, "La Politique de Gilles Deleuze et Le Matérialisme Aléatoire Du Dernier Althusser"; Boer, "Althusser's Catholic Marxism"; Del Lucchese tr. Warren Montag, "On the Emptiness of an Encounter"; Gillot, "Althusser, Wittgenstein, et la question du sujet"; Ichida and Matheron, "Un, Deux, Trois, Quatre, Dix Mille Althusser?"; Illas, "The Procrustean Bed of Class Struggle"; Lahtinen, *Politics and Philosophy*, 87; Matheron, "The Recurrence of the Void in Louis Althusser"; Moulier-Boutang, "Le Matérialisme Comme Politique Aléatoire"; Fernández Liria, "Regreso al <<Campo de Batalla>>"; Thomas, "Althusser's Last Encounter," 148.

⁸² Goshgarian, "Translator's Introduction," 95; Haider and Mohandesi, "Underground Currents"; Kim, "Between the Tenth and Eleventh Theses on Feuerbach," 346–47; Sotiris, "Philosophy of the Encounter," 170; Suchting, "Althusser's Late Thinking about Materialism"; Tosel, "The Hazards of Aleatory Materialism in the Late Philosophy of Louis Althusser," 15.

unpublished texts from the late 1970s and 80s, the final section of this paper will make use of one “continuist non-breakist” reading of aleatory materialism to support its contention that Althusser’s writings include a mostly consistent understanding of the relations between scientific knowledge and political action.

3.1 Althusser’s Scientism abandoned?

The best-known identifier of a break in Althusser’s thought is Antonio Negri. In a frequently cited essay that appeared only two years after the collections that contained the bulk of Althusser’s reflections on aleatory materialism (*Sur la philosophie* and *Ecrits philosophiques et politiques, Tome 1*) were published, Negri argues that Althusser’s last writings evidence a profound *kehre* or turn in his thought. Negri pegs the beginning of this turn to Althusser’s rereading of Machiavelli in 1978. At this time, Negri maintains, “the structural framework of Althusser’s previous theoretical analysis is completely reversed: theory does not show the convergences and consequences, in a structural and systemic manner; on the contrary, it shows ruptures, paradoxes, voids and points of crisis.”⁸³ This structural change, Negri argues, firmly took hold by the early 1980s. At this time and in the works comprising the corpus of aleatory materialism, Althusser developed “an ontological conception of crisis as key to an understanding of the historical process and as motor of the transformation of the real.”⁸⁴ In this ateleological universe constituted solely of discrete materials bound and sundered only by “chance and event,” a revolutionary struggle can happen anywhere and at any time. No longer burdened by a “distinction between ideological and non-ideological thinking”⁸⁵ or by the need to scientifically analyze the conditions of a revolution, any subject “in the open freedom of

⁸³ Negri, “Notes on the Evolution of the Thought of Louis Althusser,” 54.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 59.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 63.

the surface” can assert an aleatory revolutionary thesis, (“a revolutionary truth unacceptable to the given conditions”⁸⁶), which may have the possibility of overturning current theoretical practices. At least as Negri interprets Althusser, aleatory materialism includes a denial of the difference between ideological and scientific knowledge and, therefore, of the practical efficacy of scientific knowledge in politics. Because, according to Negri, any given condition is subject to change by an unexpected event, it is simultaneously an affirmation of the supremacy of philosophy (which may operate in the void beyond current theoretical practices) in politics.⁸⁷

Negri’s position on aleatory materialism is extremely loose and schematic and it takes many liberties in its citations, interpretations, and overall argumentation. Probably not coincidentally, the aleatory materialism described by Negri anticipates and prophetically justifies many of the positions that Negri was simultaneously asserting in his own work.⁸⁸ However, even among those readers who are not so obviously involved in acts of creative appropriation, who read Althusser carefully, and who take an overall continuist view of his work, the thesis that aleatory materialism includes a renunciation of Althusser’s philosophy’s scientific elements remains an influential interpretation.

Among the proponents of the view that aleatory materialism—despite its fundamental continuity with the rest of his oeuvre—includes a renunciation of his political philosophy’s scientific element is Althusser’s biographer, Yann Moulier-Boutang. In a 1997 article that is mostly concerned with the relation between Althusser’s biography and his contradictory philosophical claims, Moulier-Boutang states that the theoretical crisis brought on by Althusser’s relinquishment of dialectical

⁸⁶ Ibid., 54.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 62.

⁸⁸ Day, “The Aleatory Encounter and the Common Name Reading Negri Reading Althusser”; Read, “To Think the New in the Absence of Its Conditions.”

materialism led around 1975 or 1976 to the “abandonment of historical materialism” and its “apparatus of scientific laws of history...in favor of a logic of the singular situation, of the pure political practice of the aleatory encounter.”⁸⁹ The details of this abandonment are provided by Moulier-Boutang in a 2005 essay titled “Le matérialisme comme politique aléatoire.” In this paper, Moulier-Boutang connects aleatory materialism with the logic of overdetermination developed by Althusser in the early 1960s.⁹⁰ In addition to persuasively forging this connection, Moulier-Boutang argues that, with the materialism of the encounter, Althusser gave up on the idea of using Marx’s historical materialist scientific tools to engage in “the concrete analysis of the concrete situation.”⁹¹ As he sees it, Althusser abandoned this idea in his later works because he grasped that “revolution is an irreducible, unpredictable, ‘overdetermined’ event” and because the idea of univocal causality and the assumption of continuity in nature cannot explain such revolutionary occurrences.⁹² With this realization, Moulier-Boutang maintains, Althusser put to one side his older supposition that historical change happens in an orderly and predictable way as well as the corresponding idea that, because of this orderliness, scientific analysis of the present conjuncture will allow one to understand how to occasion revolutionary change. The prior ontological assumption of orderliness was replaced with the supposition of “the absolutely arbitrary character of

⁸⁹ Moulier-Boutang, “L’interdit Biographique et L’autorisation de L’oeuvre.”
 “La solution théorique vers laquelle Althusser se dirige à partir de 1975-76 est l’abandon du matérialisme historique, avec la crise du marxisme: l’appareil scientifique des lois de l’histoire (mode de productions, succession, transition), conjurateur de l’angoisse, est désinvesti, au profit d’une logique du cas singulier, de la pratique politique pure (Machiavel et nous) de la rencontre aléatoire.”

⁹⁰ Moulier-Boutang, “Le Matérialisme Comme Politique Aléatoire,” 163.

⁹¹ Ibid., 162.

⁹² Ibid., 163.

“La révolution est un événement irréductible, imprévisible, « surdéterminé ». La causalité univoque, la continuité ne sont d’aucune utilité.”

existence.”⁹³ Further, the idea of the usefulness of concrete analysis for first understanding and then precipitating revolutionary change gave way in Althusser’s late thought to the idea that an aleatory materialist ontology demands that we think of revolutionary politics as an art rather than as a science.⁹⁴ As a practitioner of this art of revolution, Moulier-Boutang explains, the aleatory materialist philosopher stops looking at what was and what is in order to see what can be changed in the future; he does so because he recognizes that the relation between present patterns and future possibilities is always uncertain.⁹⁵ Akin to and inspired by Machiavelli, such a philosopher instead steps into an existing situation and attempts to found an absolutely new political regime where one has not before existed. To do so, he or she must “think of politics as the meeting of the conditions of becoming, of that which is not still, of that which is otherwise missed.”⁹⁶

Like Moulier-Boutang in 2005 but in much more detail, Mikko Lahtinen in his 2008 book *Politics and Philosophy: Niccolo Machiavelli and Louis Althusser's Aleatory Materialism* attempts to show what Althusser’s late thinking on the materialism of the encounter owes to his reading(s) of Machiavelli. As with Moulier-Boutang, this account includes the thesis that aleatory materialism includes a renunciation of the scientistic elements of Althusser’s political philosophy. Along with many others, Lahtinen is critical of the scientism in Althusser’s work prior to 1980. He correctly recognizes that between 1960 and 1965 Althusser sought to position Marxism “as a

⁹³ Ibid.

“La...caractère absolument aléatoire de l’existence n’apparaît pas comme thème philosophique chez Louis Althusser avant la rencontre avec Machiavel.”

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Ibid., 162.

⁹⁶ Ibid., 164.

“...il pense la politique comme la réunion des conditions de l’avènement de ce qui n’est pas encore, qui a d’ailleurs raté.”

high-standard science able to withstand critique.”⁹⁷ He also rightly notices that later, during the period of his self-criticism, Althusser became less optimistic about the possibility of separating science from ideology (even as Althusser still insisted that critical science was essential to the revolutionary movement).⁹⁸ When the book comes to its interpretation of Althusser's aleatory materialism, however, Lahtinen contends that the idea of science did not play an important role in Althusser's late political philosophy. With aleatory materialism, Lahtinen maintains, Althusser renounced even the epistemologically modest idea, which dated from the period of his self-criticism that Marxism should be thought of as a critical science perpetually on guard against its idealist contents and suppositions. He replaced it, Lahtinen argues, with a “philosophy for Marxism,” which understands itself as a non-scientific critical political practice. Lahtinen traces the reason for this change to Althusser's reflections on Machiavelli. Through these sustained (if intermittent) readings, Lahtinen argues, Althusser developed an increasingly subjectivist epistemological position, one of whose consequences was a changed understanding of the relationship between politics and philosophy.

The basic argument of Lahtinen runs like this. From his sustained reading of Machiavelli, Althusser learned that an objective standpoint on politics is impossible and that “the effects of coincidences and exceptions on human life” as well as the perspectival nature of all political knowledge made a “general theory about human life or *praxis* in general” likewise unrealizable.⁹⁹ This new awareness excluded the possibility of an objective, universal, “modern” political science upon which a revolutionary science of politics might be based.¹⁰⁰ However, according to Lahtinen, Althusser also

⁹⁷ Lahtinen, *Politics and Philosophy*, 74.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 77, 81.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 123.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 117.

absorbed from Machiavelli the lesson that the subjective knowledge of a particular political situation from a particular perspective is not the sole type of knowledge available to the aleatory materialist philosopher but that this practical knowledge is desirable for the philosopher who wishes to encourage revolutionary change. Because politics is not predictable in the same way as physics, knowledge of a conjuncture (of a particular socio-economic-historical arrangement) cannot come from an understanding of the general laws of social organization or from laboratory-like experiments on persons or on social groupings.¹⁰¹ Rather, in order to be effective, the aleatory materialist philosopher or political actor must study “the constants repeated from one case to another, knowledge of which *may* be useful for the political actor planning a strategy of action.” This actor must also be sensitive to the workings of chance and to the specifics of his or her situation.¹⁰² Unlike Moulier-Boutang, who goes from the identification of an aleatory materialist ontology to the requirement that we think of revolutionary politics as an art rather than as a science and also unlike Negri, who goes from ontology to rhetoric, for Lahtinen, the ontological portion of Althusser’s aleatory materialism appears as secondary or instrumental. According to this reading, the primary reason for Althusser abandoning any claim to the scientificity in Marxism in his later works is the realization, taken from Machiavelli, that as participants we can have no objective knowledge of laws animating our social life and that radical changes to our social life always appear as a surprise, without knowable antecedent cause or causes.

3.2 Internalist explanation of the abandonment thesis

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 162–63, 238.

¹⁰² Ibid., 309–310.

In contrast to Negri's reading, the accounts of Moulier-Boutang and Lahtinen are well sourced and take few liberties with the posthumously published texts on aleatory materialism. However, irrespective of the quality of the analysis or whether or not their author is a continuist or a breakist, the majority of scholars who have engaged with Althusser's late works have come to the conclusion that, in them, Althusser abandons the scientism that was hitherto a constant in his political philosophy. As this paper will argue in its final section that this is not the case and that aleatory materialism represents a prolongation and elaboration of positions and ideas already developed in the 1960s and 1970s, we should perhaps seek an explanation for why so many readers believe that aleatory materialism represents a change from Althusser's previous endorsement of scientism.

Even if we avoid referencing the personal, political and philosophical circumstances of their writing, by looking at the selection and editorial presentation of the works constituting the aleatory materialism corpus we can find sufficient internal explanation for the preponderance of the interpretation that Althusser abandons scientism in his work from the 1980s. Indeed, given the content of the available texts, their presentation, and their immediate reception, the conclusion that Althusser dropped his scientism appears somewhat warranted. The next two paragraphs will examine explicit statements from these texts that tend to support such a conclusion. The paragraph that follows them will look at a few relatively clear editorial inclusions as a factor in this work's reception as anti- or non-scientistic.

In both their French and English editions, the philosophical essays on aleatory materialism are accompanied by letters which Althusser wrote to friends and collaborators and with an interview whose status is somewhere

between that of original work and collaboration.¹⁰³ The letters in particular provide an account of Althusser's mental state at the time of the project. They also set out its philosophical and political intent as well its historical and biographical context. Clearly present in many of these epistles is Althusser's desire to synthesize and present ideas that had been percolating for years in an accessible form and to construct a "philosophy for Marxism."¹⁰⁴ As this philosophy was presented as "new" or as a break from Althusser's previous work it is little wonder that people have looked to see how this work differs from the previous philosophy.¹⁰⁵ One can add to this the fact that a few of the letters and interviews included passages where Althusser seems to denigrate or question his prior work and to problematize its account of the sciences.

Two letters and two interview responses stand out in particular for the way in which they seem to show Althusser in the process of rejecting his earlier scientism. In the first, a 1978 letter addressed to the Georgian philosopher Merab Mardashvili, Althusser announces himself as being in a period of transition and hints at the gestation of the materialism of the encounter (no doubt the reason this letter is included).¹⁰⁶ He also reflects on his previous work and its relation to the sciences, writing: "I see clear as day that what I did fifteen years ago was to fabricate a little, typically French justification, in a neat little rationalism bolstered with a few references (Cavaillès, Bachelard, Canguilhem, and, behind them, a bit of the Spinoza-Hegel tradition), for Marxism's (historical materialism's) pretension to being a science."¹⁰⁷ In another letter, this one from April of 1986 and addressed to Fernanda Navarro, Althusser instructs his collaborator on how to edit and

¹⁰³ Althusser, *Philosophy of the Encounter*, 1–6, 208–251; Althusser, *Sur la philosophie*, 81–137; Goshgarian, "Translator's Introduction," xvi.

¹⁰⁴ Althusser, *Philosophy of the Encounter*, 258–59.

¹⁰⁵ Elliott, "Postscript," 366; Navarro, "An Encounter with Althusser," 94.

¹⁰⁶ Althusser, *Philosophy of the Encounter*, 5.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 3.

improve the text of the interview she was conducting with him, writing: "I'd like you to drop the passage about 'lines of demarcation' in the sciences, particularly the demarcation between the scientific and the ideological, as well as everything pertaining to the difference between ideology and the ideological."¹⁰⁸

In the published interviews, we see two more responses that seem to show Althusser in the process of rejecting his earlier scientism. In the first, Althusser responds to a question posed by Navarro about the distinctive features a materialist philosophy might be said to display with the reply, "...it does not claim to be autonomous or to ground its own origin and its own power. Nor does it consider itself to be a science, and still less the Science of sciences."¹⁰⁹ In the second, Althusser replies to a question about the nature of history by stating that the objects of Marxism and psychoanalysis "belong not to accomplished history but to *Geschichte*, to living history, which is made of, and wells up out of, aleatory tendencies and the unconscious. This is a history whose forms have nothing to do with the determinism of physical laws."¹¹⁰

In addition to statements and passages like these which seem to imply that Althusser was in the process of rethinking the position that Marxism is a science or even that he was engaged in this position's active denigration and renunciation, there are also the unfinished 1978 essay "Marx in his limits" and the likewise fragmentary "Machiavelli and Us." The former was published with the aleatory materialist writings while the latter appeared in French and English editions during the 1990s alongside prefaces that suggested the connection between Althusser's reading of Machiavelli and the materialism of the encounter.¹¹¹ As has been noted above, one source of

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 287.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 274.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 264.

¹¹¹ Althusser, *Ecrits philosophiques et politiques, Tome 2*, 40; Elliott, "Introduction: In the Mirror of Machiavelli."

the claim that Althusser renounces his scientism are the passages in his writing on Machiavelli where Althusser says that he is not interested in Machiavelli as a founder of political science but only as a philosopher of the contingent event.¹¹² That this may have been a conscious choice of Althusser's to concentrate on the relation between philosophy and politics rather than a dismissal of political science *tout court*, however, seems to have been missed.¹¹³

A similar interpretation appears to have been made in the case of “Marx in his Limits” as well as the other “texts of the crisis”: “Marxism Today (1978)” and “The Transformation of Philosophy (1976).” Each speaks extensively of science and of Marxist science.¹¹⁴ However, each does so almost exclusively in pejorative terms, enumerating the problems that have resulted in the worker's movement due to its adoptions of certain “Marxist scientific” concepts about the material nature of the world, concepts that are, in reality, merely idealist philosophical notions.¹¹⁵ The lack of any mention of Marxist theory of science in positive terms, as well as the diagnosis of a “crisis in Marxism” caused in part by Marxism's erroneous scientific claims might lead one to conclude that, during the late 1970s' “crisis of Marxism,” Althusser abandoned his longstanding claim that Marxism is a science, that this science is historical materialism, and that its object is the history of class struggle. Indeed, some read these texts as announcing this repudiation. For example, one of Althusser's best readers, Gregory Elliott, was moved to interpret these texts in this way. In a post-script and intellectual balance sheet included with the second edition of *The Detour of Theory* (2006) he wrote:

¹¹² Lahtinen, *Politics and Philosophy*, 117–18; Elliott, “Introduction: In the Mirror of Machiavelli,” xvii.

¹¹³ Althusser, *Machiavelli and Us*, 11.

¹¹⁴ Althusser, “Marx in His Limits”; Althusser, “Marxism Today”; Althusser, “La transformation de la philosophie – Conférence de Grenade (1976).”

¹¹⁵ Cavazzini, *Crise du marxisme et critique de l'État*.

Around 1976, a new period [of Althusser's work] begins, which is one not of the auto-critique, but of the auto-deconstruction – even self-destruction – of Althusserianism and the radical problematisation of the scientificity of Marxism itself. It is most dramatically attested to in the 1977 talk ‘The Crisis of Marxism’ and the 1978 encyclopaedia article ‘Marxism Today’ – texts whose content overlaps with that of the abandoned manuscript on ‘Marx in His Limits’. Writings of *a break*, they can also be regarded as in some sense *transitional* works, paving the way for a final period of Althusserian production.¹¹⁶

4. An aleatory materialism consistent with Marxist Science?

In the preceding section we have suggested why, given the form, presentation, and content of the published texts, readers of Althusser might come to hold the position that he gave up his scientism in the 1980s. Nonetheless, given the manifest consistency of his scientism prior to 1980 (as detailed in section 2 of this paper and summarized again below), we have reason to be suspicious of this inference. Another reason to mistrust this conclusion is that the information that it is based upon is partial: the bulk of Althusser's writings having to do with the materialism of the encounter and its gestation remain unpublished.¹¹⁷ In addition, the principal texts which develop this philosophy have been subject to marked editorial interventions. For instance, in order to compose the essay “The Underground Current of the Materialism of the Encounter,” the introductory chapters of the book provisionally entitled *J'écris ce livre en octobre 1982* were cut. These chapters include an evaluation of the present

¹¹⁶ Elliott, “Postscript,” 366.

¹¹⁷ Althusser, “«Sur le mode de production»”; Althusser, “La grande répétition de l'histoire”; Althusser, “Ouvrage sans titre commençant par : «J'écris ce livre en octobre 1982».”; Althusser, “«La philosophie c'est enfantin».”; Althusser, “Qu'y faire ? Que faire ?”; Althusser, “Thèses de juin.”

conjuncture and specific recommendations for political action.¹¹⁸ Rather than presenting *J'écris ce livre en octobre 1982* as Althusser unambiguously intended—as an attempt to think the (then) present conjuncture “otherwise,” this omission gives the appearance that, in one of the two principal texts on aleatory materialism, Althusser was exclusively involved in the development (exhumation?) of a politico-ontological philosophical tradition.¹¹⁹ In addition to debatable rearrangements, comparable omissions mark that other principal aleatory materialism text, “Philosophy and Marxism: Interviews with Fernanda Navarro.” Also missing from consideration or, in the case of *Initiation à la philosophie pour les non-philosophes*, only recently published, are numerous texts from the 1970s (some of them book-length) which clearly contain aleatory materialist arguments and concepts and that may or may not corroborate the thesis that Althusser was in the process of abandoning his scientism or that this abandonment went along with aleatory materialism’s development.¹²⁰

Except for in one instance where Althusser gave specific permission that a text be edited and published posthumously (and that only in Latin America), there is little reason to privilege the published texts over those still held in the archive.¹²¹ Therefore, in trying to make the judgment of whether

¹¹⁸ Althusser, *Philosophy of the Encounter*, 164; Althusser, “Ouvrage sans titre commençant par : «J'écris ce livre en octobre 1982»,” 17–30. According to its editors, these sections of the book were omitted because they consisted of

“exchanges of opinion, of dubious value because they are not justified, not defended, not supported by textual citations or convincing examples.”

However, given their misleading and erroneous citations, the dubious interpretations of philosophers both modern and contemporary, and the quality of argumentation, the sections that were included in the book might fall under these same criticisms.

¹¹⁹ Althusser, “Ouvrage sans titre commençant par : «J'écris ce livre en octobre 1982»,”

¹²⁰ Althusser, “ALT2. A22-01.02, Texte de Louis Althusser sur la philosophie marxiste”; Althusser, “ALT2. A25-01.02, Être marxiste en philosophie, chapters 1-12 (1976)”; Althusser, “ALT2. A25-01.03, Être marxiste en philosophie, chapters 13-24 (1976)”; Althusser, “Que Faire? (1978)”; Althusser, Louis, “Cours sur le mode d'exposition chez Marx.”

¹²¹ Althusser, *Philosophy of the Encounter*, 249–50 fn30.

or not, in his later works, Althusser abandoned his scientism, it is both licit and important to consider the unpublished writings. To the end of making such a determination, the next section of the paper will examine relevant passages from the posthumous collections of Althusser's writings as well as some texts from the period 1982-1987 that remain unpublished. In so doing, it will provide a counter-reading to those accounts which argue that Althusser gave up his scientism in the late 1970s as well as to those which claim that Althusser's thought emerged in 1982 cleansed of its previous scientism. The primary goals of this counter-reading will be to demonstrate that Althusser did not abandon his scientism and to show how it appears in his later work as a continuous and important part of his Marxist theory. A secondary objective will be to account for the seemingly anti-scientistic statements detailed above.

4.1 An alternative to the abandonment thesis

If one wants to build the argument that Althusser rejected the scientistic aspect of his thought in his later works, the claim that he emerged in the summer of 1982 after two years marked by trauma, by severe mental illness, by institutionalization, and by little access to philosophical materials with a profoundly changed view of Marxist thought appears psychologically implausible. As it explains the origin of such a change in the context of a profound theoretical and political struggle in which Althusser rejected his well-known claims about the scientificity of Marxism, the theory that marks the origin of this rejection in the texts from "crisis of Marxism" period appears the much more likely account. However, based on the sum of available evidence is the best reading of what was happening in Althusser's philosophy during the late 1970s and is it the best explanation for the genesis of his work from the 1980s?

The examination of Althusser's published and unpublished writings from 1972-1980 in section 2.3 of this paper showed that he was neither in the process of reconsidering the position that Marxism is a science nor that he was modifying the corresponding assertion that there is a necessary relationship between correct scientific knowledge and effective political action. On the contrary, most of the texts from this period emphasize this relation. They also show that Althusser attempted to work out the practical details of how Marxist science should be pursued and then integrated into political decision making. Though some of the published materials display little of this effort, the recently published *Initiation à la philosophie pour les non-philosophes* (1978) includes an extensive discussion of the relations between Marxist philosophy, Marxist science, and Marxist politics as well as a clear endorsement of Marxist science.¹²² In short this book, as well as many other lengthy and (as yet) unpublished pieces, show Althusser developing the argument in philosophical, practical, and polemical terms that intentional political change is best enabled by scientific analyses of the political conjuncture.¹²³

If it is the case that Althusser did not abandon his claims about the scientificity of Marxism in the late 1970s, then what was he up to in works like "Marx in his Limits" and "Marxism Today" that are singled out by some critics as evidence of this undoing and which gave rise to this confusion? As we have argued, the explanation that fits the available evidence is that Althusser was in the process of doing with Marxist science something very similar to that which he was simultaneously trying to do with Marxist philosophy. Specifically, he was attempting to purge it of its ideological components and, therefore, of its idealist content and inheritance.

¹²² Althusser, *Initiation à la philosophie pour les non-philosophes*, chapters 4, 9, 10, 17–19.

¹²³ Althusser, *Initiation à la philosophie pour les non-philosophes*; Althusser, "Que Faire? (1978)"; Althusser, "Les Vaches noires : interview imaginaire"; Althusser, "ALT2. A22-01.02, Texte de Louis Althusser sur la philosophie marxiste."

Rather than condemning Marxist science as a whole, the Marxist science that Althusser ruthlessly critique between 1975 and 1980 is the version of historical materialism historically paired with Marxist philosophy and that is known as “dialectical materialism.” Understood as “an integral part of dialectical materialism” or as a “result of the application of dialectical materialism to history,” this version of Marxist science has historically been dominated and defined by its dyadic relation with an idealist metaphysics of history and of nature.¹²⁴ That the historical pairing of historical materialism and dialectical materialism has had deleterious consequences for the worker's movement, Althusser often marks as obvious between 1976 and 1980.¹²⁵ Nevertheless, it does not follow from Althusser's simultaneous dismantling of historical materialism and of dialectical materialism that “the core of Marxist thought” is not scientific. After all, simultaneous to these critiques, Althusser was in the process of working out what a scientific analysis of the present socioeconomic and political conjuncture should include.¹²⁶ He was also arguing that, in order for political action to be successful, the communist party must engage in critical social scientific analyses of the present conjuncture.¹²⁷ Further, and as evidenced by the Fanti interview and many other texts from this period, Althusser did not shy away from calling this analysis “historical materialist.” Seen in this context, Althusser's criticism of historical materialism in the late 1970s appears as deeply complementary to his simultaneous elaboration of a renewed

¹²⁴ Althusser, “ALT2. A22-01.02, Texte de Louis Althusser sur la philosophie marxiste.”

On trouve en effet de nos jours constamment, sous la plume d'auteurs marxistes autorisés, la formule suivant : “*le matérialisme est partie intégrante du matérialisme dialectique.*”

¹²⁵ Althusser, “Marx in His Limits,” 18–33; Althusser, “Marxism Today,” 10–12; Althusser, “The Transformation of Philosophy (1976),” 262.

¹²⁶ Lewis, “Concrete Analysis and Pragmatic Social Theory (Notes Towards an Althusserian Critical Theory),” 97–105.

¹²⁷ Althusser, “Les Vaches noires : interview imaginaire,” 22–24.

materialist approach to Marxist science and to Marxist philosophy in which both are stripped of their relations to idealist metaphysics.

As with his critique of Marxist philosophy but to a greater extent, the problem of nomenclature arises with this elaboration. In the case of Marxist philosophy, Althusser marked the difference between the historical iterations of Marxist philosophy that he was trying to dismantle and the philosophy for Marxism that he was in the course of developing in the late 70s by labeling the historical iteration “dialectical materialism” and his reconstructed materialism variously as “non-philosophy,” “anti-philosophy,” and “philosophy for Marxism.” In the 80s, the designations for this reconstructed Marxist philosophy grew to include “aleatory materialism” and “materialism of the encounter.” Though Althusser was not always consistent in his use of these expressions and often employed the generic “Marxist philosophy” to refer both to the idealist version of Marxism he rejected and to the materialist philosophy he was in the course of developing, the distinction had at least been made. Further, the type of Marxist philosophy Althusser meant to denote was usually clearly signaled by context.¹²⁸ In contrast, whether Althusser referred to the concept of Marxist science as historically dominated by dialectical materialism or to his revised version of the concept stripped of its relations to an idealistic metaphysics, he habitually referred to each by the same names: “Marxist science” and “historical materialism.”

That Althusser was in the late 1970s critical of historical materialism and that he argued for an alternative understanding of Marxist science, for this alternative science’s pursuit, and for its use in political decision making should have been made clear in Section 2.3. What has not been made explicit though is exactly of what this reconstructed understanding of historical materialism consisted. Negatively, we know from Althusser’s

¹²⁸ Althusser, *Philosophy of the Encounter*, 173–74, 188–89.

critique of the relation of Marxist science to dialectical materialism that it is an idealist mistake to think that: (a) there are general laws of history and (b) that social relations are determined in the manner that physical relations are determined.¹²⁹ We also know from our scrutiny of texts written between 1975 and 1978 that, in Althusser's reconstruction, historical materialism has the following positive characteristics. First, it is a science that has for its object of study the existing forms of class struggle and that has as its goal the transformation of its object of study. Because of this goal and the changing structures of its object, it defines and describes itself *progressively* in the course of the struggle itself. Second, the characteristics of its object of study delimit the type of knowledge that it is possible for it to acquire. Unlike the natural sciences which study the material real and whose findings (as theoretical representations of universal elements) are or should be infinitely reproducible, reconstructed historical materialism has as its object complex historical singularities or "conjunctures." Under analysis, these structures reveal tendencies or patterns of relation that endure over time and which can be said to differentially order and structure these conjunctures in terms of the way in which a tendency is (or is not) expressed in relation to the other tendencies that constitute a singular conjuncture.¹³⁰ In order to gain knowledge of a specific conjuncture, this version of historical materialism synthesizes the findings of the other (non-critical) social sciences that it judges to be relevant to understanding the conjuncture

¹²⁹ Dumenil, *Le concept de loi économique dans "Le Capital."*

¹³⁰ Although Althusser used this word frequently in his previous work, it is clear that by 1978 (and probably by Althusser, "ALT2. A25-01.02, Être marxiste en philosophie, chapters 1-12 (1976).") it had taken on this particular meaning in the context of HM2 analysis. For instance in Althusser, "Que Faire? (1978)." Althusser writes:

Tout dépend alors de "l'analyse concrète" de la "situation concrète," de la tendance actuelle de la lutte de classe ouvrière et populaire dans son antagonisme avec la lutte de classe bourgeoise, donc de l'analyse concrète de cet *antagonisme* qui constitue à la fois la classe bourgeoise en classe dominante et exploiteuse et la classe ouvrière en classe dominée et exploitée.

and initiates inquiry into those areas where it finds knowledge lacking. In order to help weed out the influence of bourgeois ideology on these sciences' assumptions, methodology, and conclusions, it also subjects this knowledge to critical scrutiny.¹³¹ The result of all of this labor is a synthetic analysis of the present conjuncture and a concrete political recommendation for how to transform it. Reflecting the goal and object of the science, the validity of this result can only be confirmed practically by the transformation of the very object that it has studied: the existing forms of the class struggle.¹³²

In the last few paragraphs we have summarized the available materials in order to detail Althusser's understanding and endorsement of a reconstructed historical materialism in the five years prior to 1980. In so doing, we have shown why any analysis that marks out 1975-80 as a period of transition away from scientism in Althusser's thought is incorrect. Not only do most of the writings from this period evidence an explicit endorsement of historical materialism, they also position it as a science separate from any dialectical materialist underpinnings. Though Althusser's understanding and endorsement of historical materialism between 1975 and 80 differs in some of its details from its earlier conceptualization (and particularly that of 1960-1965), his overall position is still recognizably scientific in that he continues to mark out science and particularly the Marxist science of historical materialism as the only human theoretical practice that allow us to reliably understand socio-economic structures such that we might intentionally assist in their transformation.

If this summary accurately represents Althusser's reconstructed understanding of historical materialism right before the two year break in

¹³¹ Althusser, "Les Vaches noires : interview imaginaire," 23–23bis.

[Une analyse concrète] ne peut se passer d'une véritable analyse de ces succès et échecs que mette en lumière leur lien dialectique, et le moyen de transformer un échec passager en victoire durable.

¹³² Althusser, "The Transformation of Philosophy (1976)."

philosophical activity which began in the spring of 1980, then the burden of proof is yet higher if one hopes to maintain that the 1980s writings on aleatory materialism are marked by their sudden rejection of scientism. This is the case as many of the ideas that are associated with Althusser's reconstruction of historical materialism clearly appear in the aleatory materialist writings. We also know that the development of a reconstructed historical materialism and the beginnings of Althusser's radical revisions to Marxist philosophy were simultaneous and that the two projects were conceptually linked. Therefore, in addition to needing to show that the positive endorsement of historical materialism disappears in the 80s, one would also need to show how and why a set of concepts and practices that were once described by Althusser as constituting a Marxist science complementary to a reconstructed Marxist philosophy are no longer so described.

4.2 The explicit endorsement of scientism in Althusser's later works

As we have seen, due to the lack of positive mentions of Marxist science in the published texts from the 80s and owing to certain statements where Althusser wrote negatively about his attempts in the early 1960s to make Marxist philosophy scientific, a case can be made that Althusser was in the process of developing a non- or even anti-scientistic Marxist political philosophy. However, if we look at these writings against the background of the mid-to late 70s reconstruction of Marxist science and Marxist philosophy and if we include the additional context provided by Althusser's writings between 1982 and 1987 that remain unpublished, we will see that Althusser never abandoned his scientism and that the endorsement of scientific practice appears in these works as a continuous and important part of his political philosophy.

In order to make these points, this sub-section will examine selected passages from Althusser's unpublished writings between 1982 and 1987 that clearly contradict the theory that he forsook his scientism. Aware that the mere statement of Althusser's continued endorsement of Marxist science does not constitute proof that he remained steadfast in his belief that science is the only human theoretical practice that allows us to reliably understand socioeconomic structures such that we might intentionally assist in their transformation, the sub-section that follows this one will turn to a reading of published and unpublished writings that illustrates how the scientific aspect of Althusser's late thought relates to its philosophical and political aspects. This illustration will challenge our preliminary account of how the published materials can be read as evidencing an abandonment of Althusser's advocacy of scientific practice for the worker's movement. It will do so by giving an explanation for the apparent negative references to science in these texts.

In the archives at IMEC there are multiple texts from the 1980s in which Althusser indicates his endorsement of scientific practice and declares scientific knowledge's privileged relationship to political change. These texts also detail the relation of scientific practice to Marxist philosophy. Included among these texts are unpublished sections of the Interviews with Fernanda Navarro as well as two long drafts from 1985 and 1986-87 titled "Qu'y faire? Que faire?" and "Thèses de juin." The latter two are not only unambiguous in their endorsement of science and in their assessment of its efficacy; they also connect this affirmation to the project of aleatory materialism.¹³³ This connection, along with the less clear-cut but still evident

¹³³ The omission of these texts does not appear to reflect an active intent on the part of Althusser's posthumous editors to erase his scientism as it does an attempt on their part to emphasize the philosophical content of his work and to downplay the often hallucinatory or prophetic aspects of these texts, aspects which become prominent when Althusser speaks of current events and their concrete analyses.

endorsement of science found in the Navarro interviews, will be explored after citing these texts' explicit scientistic statements.

Following the model set by Lenin in 1901, both “Qu'y faire? Que faire?” and “Thèses de juin” resemble a slew of unpublished texts from the 1970s and 1980s in which Althusser reflects on “What Is to Be Done?” in order to advance communism's goals. As the complete text of *J'écris ce livre en octobre 1982* contains an evaluation of the present conjuncture along with specific recommendations for political action, the unfinished book from which the essay “The Underground Current of the Materialism of the Encounter” is culled also fits this pattern. Consistently, these “stocktaking” sorts of pieces are comprised of historical and philosophical reflections, socio-economic analyses, and strategic recommendations. These exercises also habitually express Althusser's judgment that historical materialism is a science, that it has for its object the class struggle, and that this science must be pursued if one wishes to arrive at an effective political strategy. For example, in the introductory section of 1985's “Qu'y faire? Que faire?,” Althusser states that a successful long-term political strategy “can only rest on objective...scientific knowledge” of the present “economic, political, and ideological conjuncture.” He further stresses that, “in order to achieve this knowledge” which is, “in the last resort, the analysis of the relations and forms of class struggle in the present conjuncture and its contradictory tendencies and its conflicts” we need to have “at our disposal a scientific theory, one capable of furnishing the abstract-general concepts” that will allow us to understand the whole of the present conjuncture. Without such a theory, he maintains, “we remain blind and we fall into political error.”¹³⁴

¹³⁴ Althusser, “Qu'y faire ? Que faire ?,” 2.

Cette stratégie ne peut, en bons principes marxistes et léninistes, reposer *que* sur la connaissance objective, c'est-à-dire scientifique (c'est l'expression même de Lénine sur l'analyse concrète de la situation « concrète » qui est pour Lénine l'essence du marxisme).

Written in the summer and edited a few times during the fall or winter of 1986, “Thèses de juin” may be the last philosophical text to which Althusser touched a pen. It is certainly his ultimate sustained reflection on the relation among philosophy, politics, and science. Even at this late date and in a text that is disarmingly prophetic, Althusser’s endorsement of scientific knowledge for correct political practice rings clear. In its first section, Althusser introduces “Thèses de juin” as a piece intended to “provide a couple of observations that might increase the awareness of men engaged in the struggle or of those who are waiting for ‘a different politics’.”¹³⁵ He then poses a methodological question about how to proceed to this knowledge, asking whether or not one should begin with “the concrete analysis of the *concrete situation* of some country or even of the world; or, the examination and correction of the *theoretical instruments* that permit this analysis.” Because he believes that “the second [path] will be more difficult but more sure,” Althusser begins the critical section of the text with some detailed remarks on Marxist philosophy and Marxist science. After finishing this methodological portion, he then proceeds to what he labels a markedly “less assured” concrete analysis of the contemporary political-economic-ideological situation.¹³⁶ We will return to the preliminary

Cette analyse concrète de la conjoncture économique politique et l’idéologique, c’est-à-dire en dernier ressort *l’analyse des rapports et formes des luttes de classes* dans la conjoncture actuelle et des tendances contradictoires de ces conflits, ne peut s’effectuer *que* si on dispose d’une *théorie scientifique* ...capable de fournir les concepts abstraits-généraux d’ensemble de l’évolution, non-évolution ou répression de la situation actuelle, de la conjoncture actuelle. Sans ces concepts aucune « analyse concrète de la situation concrète » n’est possible. ...sans théorie on reste dans l’aveuglement et on tombe dans l’erreur politique (cf.

¹³⁵ Althusser, “Thèses de juin,” 1.

Voici néanmoins quelques observations générales qui pourront peut-être aider à la prise de conscience des hommes engagés dans la lutte...comme des hommes non engagés dans la lutte mais qui attendent une « autre politique ».

¹³⁶ Ibid., 2. A charitable reader of this analysis would recognize it as the musings of a shut-in who has access to a television and to some newspapers but not to scientific materials. An uncharitable reader might label it hallucinatory, paranoid, and overly-optimistic.

methodological remarks on Marxist philosophy and Marxist science below. However, it is important to note here that, in the theoretical section of one of his last texts, Althusser continues to insist that it is only “historical materialism” and its body of “scientific concepts” that “permits a concrete analysis of the concrete situation”¹³⁷

4.3 Aleatory materialism and Marxist science: theory for Marxism

As mentioned above, “Qu'y faire? Que faire?” and “Thèses de juin” as well as unpublished sections of the Interviews with Fernanda Navarro are doubly remarkable. These texts do not merely endorse Marxist science and link its practice directly to political efficacy; all three also contain explicit passages detailing the relation among aleatory materialist philosophy, scientific practice, and political practice. As supplements and corrections to the published materials, these writings make it clear that aleatory materialism in the 1980s represents the positive side to the critical project of the mid-to late 1970s when Althusser endeavored to purge Marxist philosophy and historical materialism of idealist elements. Indeed, Althusser unambiguously confirms this reading of the project in an unpublished section of the

Ici, deux voies s'ouvrent devant nous :

–ou bien *l'analyse concrète* de la situation concrète de tel pays ou même du monde

–ou bien l'examen et la rectification des *instruments théoriques* permettant cette analyse.

La première voie serait plus facile mais moins assurée. La seconde voie sera plus difficile mais plus sûre. Je choisis donc la deuxième voie.

¹³⁷ Ibid.

A Marx nous devons des concepts scientifiques irremplaçables, comme les concepts de mode de production, de forces productives, de rapport de production, de marchandise, d'échange, de consommation, de capital fixe, de capital variable, de exploitation économique, de dictature d'Etat, des vues sur l'action révolutionnaire des masses, sur l'avenir inéluctable du communisme etc. etc.

Ce sont là –et je ne cite que les principaux–des *concepts scientifiques* relevant de ce que la tradition marxiste désigne sous le nom de *matérialisme historique*, corpus de concepts permettant une analyse concrète de la situation concrète.

Navarro interview where he states that the aleatory materialist conceptions of philosophy and of scientific practice represent “precisions” of his earlier ideas rather than their rejection.¹³⁸ In the next few paragraphs, we will explain what Althusser meant by precisions and how these refinements relate to his earlier work. We will also clear up any lingering misconception that Althusser renounced his scientism in his later work.

It is easier to understand the precisions made to Althusser’s Marxist theory in the 1980s if one takes into account his consistent and overarching understanding of Marxism as well as the impetus for these adjustments. Fundamentally, Althusser saw Marxism as a political movement whose goal is the revolutionary transformation of existing socio-economic practices into communist ones. As a philosopher and a committed Marxist, he put much effort into working out exactly how theoretical and political practices should be related in order to achieve the goals of the Marxist movement.¹³⁹ This focus comes through in most of the published work after 1966 and it is pronounced in the “Marxist manuals” authored between 1966 and 1978 and of which *Initiation à la philosophie pour les non-philosophes* is a late example. Althusser’s consistent effort to relate theory and practice in such a way as to attain the goals of the Marxist movement is also unmistakable in the series of stock-taking pieces from the 1970s and 1980s mentioned above where he goes from philosophical reflections on Marxist philosophy and Marxist science to methodological and procedural recommendations for party policies and procedures that will best allow it to analyze the contemporary “concrete situation” and to politically act successfully in relation to this knowledge.

¹³⁸ Althusser, “Philosophie et marxisme. Entretiens avec Fernanda Navarro,” 47.

... je parie que la même méprise va se reproduire avec les précisions radicales que j’apporte maintenant, toujours dans la même ligne, à mes thèses anciennes. [*J*]e n’ai jamais changé de ligne théorique et politique, même si j’ai rectifié, en les affinant, quelques formules, provisoirement définitive.

¹³⁹ Althusser, *On the Reproduction of Capitalism*, 51.

Stated simply, the impetus for most of Althusser's political philosophical output is his consistent belief that correct practice flows from correct theory.¹⁴⁰ If Marxist practice is not doing well in a specific conjuncture and if Marxist practice flows from Marxist theory, then it follows from this belief and this judgment that a new theorization of how the socioeconomic world works and how to change it is a pressing problem for the Marxist movement. Given this basic supposition, one way to make sense of Althusser's career is as a series of reactions to practical (and therefore theoretical) crises in the Marxist movement. First there is the crisis of Stalinism, then that of Humanism, then that of Eurocommunism. Finally, after 1981, there is the problem of the rapid decline of the French Communist Party as a political power. During each crisis, Althusser worked to develop an alternative understanding of Marxist theory that he believed to be materialist and correct. As a body, this theory included positions on Marxist philosophy, Marxist science, and Marxist organization. Taking stock of the philosophical, political, ideological, economic, and theoretical conjuncture at each moment of crisis, Althusser positioned this reconstructed theory in contradistinction to a hegemonic or nascent Marxist theory that he believed to be incorrect and idealist.

If we acknowledge Althusser's overall understanding of Marxism as well as the impetus for his successive interventions into Marxist theory, it is clear that the common thread which links the Marxist manuals, balance sheets, and many of the published works is that all represent critiques and revisions to existing Marxist theory that are written in order to better enable Marxist practice to achieve Marxist goals. If we then connect Althusser's consistent belief that correct practice flows from correct theory with these ideas about theory and especially with his understanding of philosophy as a

¹⁴⁰ Althusser, *Essays in Self-Criticism*, 111–112; Althusser and Matheron, *The Humanist Controversy and Other Writings, 1966-67*, 297; Althusser, "Philosophie et marxisme. Entretiens avec Fernanda Navarro," 48.

perpetual battle between materialist and idealist tendencies, then we can better see what Althusser was up to with his critique of dialectical materialism and his reconstruction of historical materialism in the late 1970s.¹⁴¹ More directly and for the purposes of this section of the paper, we can also better understand Althusser's development of a new Marxist philosophy, aleatory materialism in the 1980s. In this light, the "texts of the crisis," "Marx in his Limits" and "Marxism Today," can be recognized as attempts to weed out those elements in Marx's or Marxism's philosophy that are idealist and to distinguish these elements from the materialist ones. Similarly illuminated by these connections, "The Underground Current of the Materialism of the Encounter," and "Philosophy and Marxism" can be seen as attempts to reconstruct a Marxist philosophy without or with less idealist elements and for the then-present conjuncture.¹⁴² As we have shown above, this "new" or unearthed materialist philosophy does not include a rejection of Marxist science. Instead, it is specifically proposed as a philosophy for a Marxist theory that, at its inauguration, lacked a philosophy and "was basically scientific in nature"¹⁴³ It was also meant to critique and replace that other "Marxist philosophy," dialectical materialism, which had filled in the gaps in Marx's theory with idealist concepts and whose adoption and development had led to such unfortunate results for the Marxist movement.¹⁴⁴ Finally, it was meant as a philosophy for the Marxist movement during a time in which the communist political movement was in

¹⁴¹ Althusser, "Lenin and Philosophy (February 1968)," 18; Althusser, *Philosophy and the Spontaneous Philosophy of the Scientists & Other Essays*, 116, 198, 619, 1919; Althusser, "Du Matérialisme Aléatoire (1986)," 184.

¹⁴² Quote from "The Underground Current of the Materialism of the Encounter," about how this is written so he can say something about Marx.

¹⁴³ Althusser, "Philosophy and Marxism: Interviews with Fernanda Navarro (1984-87)," 257.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 254.

decline in France and in Europe but where smaller communist movements showed promise in other areas.¹⁴⁵

4.4 The relation between aleatory materialism and Marxist science

This section of the paper will not argue that the materialism of the encounter meets the goal that Althusser set for it of being a philosophy that can successfully battle the idealist notions of dialectical materialism and replace them with a set of theses about the world and its relations that, if adopted, might better allow for the success of the global Marxist movement. Like Bourdin, Sotiris, Suchting, and Tosel, we think that aleatory materialism contains some interesting ideas and that it is worth exploring and developing.¹⁴⁶ However, we also agree with these and other commentators that much of this work is sloppy and often delirious, that it is rife with paradoxes and contradictory claims, and that the misreadings of the philosophers it brings in to support its ideas detract from its virtues.¹⁴⁷ This sub-section of the paper will also not try to correct these faults, to explain these shortcomings, or to give an account of aleatory materialism's contents. Instead, it will merely try to suggest what Althusser meant when he argued in his later writings that Marxism is a science and to show how this science relates to the philosophy of aleatory materialism. Its thesis is this: aleatory materialism is the philosophical part of a body of Marxist

¹⁴⁵ Althusser, "Qu'y faire ? Que faire ?," 22.

Quoi donc nous attend ? Eh bien comme les petits dieux d'Epicure dans les « interstices » des sociétés antiques, ce qui nous attend ce sont des « *interstices de communisme* » dans les pores de nôtre propre société capitaliste-impérialiste-interimpérialiste mondiale.

¹⁴⁶ Bourdin, "The Uncertain Materialism of Louis Althusser"; Sotiris, "Philosophy of the Encounter"; Suchting, "Althusser's Late Thinking about Materialism"; Tosel, "Les Aléas Du Matérialisme Aléatoire Dans La Dernière Philosophie de Louis Althusser."

¹⁴⁷ Bourdin, "Ce que fait la rencontre aléatoire au matérialisme (et à la philosophie)," 59; Tosel, "The Hazards of Aleatory Materialism in the Late Philosophy of Louis Althusser"; Sotiris, "Contradictions of Aleatory Materialism."

theory that also includes ideological, philosophical, political, and scientific components. As the philosophical component of Marxist theory it is not meant to replace Marxist science but to complement it. It complements this movement as a whole by seeking to remove from Marxist philosophy the idealist notions that prevent the Marxist movement from having access to scientific knowledge about the world and to replace them with concepts that facilitate the gathering of such knowledge. Althusser's hope was that this knowledge could allow the Marxist movement to overcome ideological notions about what is to be done and to develop a correct political line, a line which allows for the world's and that movement's own practical transformation.

As we have seen, the relationship between the Marxist philosophy of aleatory materialism and the Marxist science of historical materialism is obscured by the editorial choices made during the publication of Althusser's posthumous works. Despite not being especially visible in the published work, the nature of the relationship between the materialism of the encounter and Marxist science was nevertheless clear to at least one attentive reader, Jean-Claude Bourdin. In a 2012 book chapter titled "Ce que fait la rencontre aléatoire au matérialisme," Bourdin notices that Althusser describes aleatory materialism as an "assiette," as a serving plate on which correct (i.e. politically efficacious) ideas about philosophy, science and politics can be constructed.¹⁴⁸ In this understanding, aleatory materialism is not presented primarily as the launching of new political ontology, one which establishes the ever-present possibility of an aleatory reconfiguration of politics. Instead, aleatory materialism is recognized by

¹⁴⁸ Bourdin, "Ce que fait la rencontre aléatoire au matérialisme (et à la philosophie)," 63.

...on dira qu'une « assiette » représente un ensemble de catégories les plus générales, indépendantes de l'expérience de toute preuve expérimentale, qui énonce des propositions sur la structure et le devenir du monde (ou de la nature) et sur la forme que doit prendre la pensée pour parvenir à ces énoncés.

Bourdin as “a group of general categories, the most general, which are independent of experience and of all experimental proof, and which state some proposition on the structure and the becoming of the world (or of nature) and on the form that thought must take to arrive at these statements.”¹⁴⁹ Just as we have argued above, Bourdin contends that this set of categories is meant to replace the dialectical materialist assumptions that have failed both Marxist science and Marxist politics. As such, these categories are offered as a basic set of propositions about the world that might enable the Marxist movement to understand the historical conjuncture such that it can direct its transformation.¹⁵⁰ These propositions are not meant to directly replace scientific concepts (though they may end up suggesting that certain “scientific concepts” are not scientific). Instead, they are offered as general categories upon which scientific investigations may be based, ones that will allow the Marxist movement to understand new conjunctures and unexpected conditions.¹⁵¹

Bourdin builds up his case for this understanding of aleatory materialism in a compelling manner: first by showing how the ontological and voluntarist readings of the materialism of the encounter are problematic and then by linking Althusser's description of aleatory materialism as an “assiette” to his insistence that aleatory materialism is a materialist philosophy for Marxism and not a materialist philosophy or ontology.¹⁵² However compelling, this reading has the disadvantage of being mostly speculative and of departing from a few suggestions dropped by Althusser in the published texts. Fortunately, the texts that corroborate this assertion were written and they exist in Althusser's archive. As we have noted above, “Qu'y faire? Que faire?” and “Thèses de juin” as well as sections of the

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., 65.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., 54–55.

¹⁵¹ Ibid., 82.

¹⁵² Ibid., 70–71.

Interviews with Fernanda Navarro include specific endorsements of Marxist science and of historical materialism. In addition, in more or less lucid fashion, each provides confirmation of Bourdin's assertion that aleatory materialism is intended as an instrumentalist ontology that can ground Marxist science and thereby ground Marxist practice in the particular historical conjuncture that was the early 1980s. This Marxist philosophy can be said to be "true" or more correct than dialectical materialism insofar as its ideas about the political world in its constitution and disintegration inform and allow Marxist science to proceed in such a way that Marxist strategy can be successful.

I will start with "Qu'y faire? Que faire?" as an example of a text which corroborates Bourdin's assertion that aleatory materialism is a materialist philosophy for Marxism, one that enables the Marxist movement to understand the historical conjuncture such that it might direct its transformation. After beginning this strategic piece with an impassioned call for a historical materialist analysis of the contemporary situation, Althusser then proceeds to bemoan the fact that "no one in the world is capable of providing the least 'concrete analysis' of the conjuncture" or "of conceiving any strategy."¹⁵³ He attributes this incapacity to the

general abandonment of Marxist theory, the only [theory] in history which has given itself the means for the analysis of a economico-politico-ideological conjuncture and its aleatory becoming. There exists no *comprehensive theory* of the world capable of trying to *think* the actual conjuncture *and* not only the long-term tendencies but even the medium and short term 'evolution' or regression of this conjuncture.¹⁵⁴

¹⁵³ Althusser, "Qu'y faire ? Que faire ?", 13.

Et comme personne au monde n'est en état de fournir la moindre « analyse concrète » de la conjoncture, personne au monde, même les tout-puissants USA et leurs dirigeants, n'est capable de concevoir la moindre stratégie.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid., 13–14.

...depuis l'abandon généralisé de la théorie marxiste, la seule qui se soit donné dans l'histoire les moyens de l'analyse d'une conjoncture economico-politico-idéologique et de son *devenir aléatoire*, [???] il n'existe aucune *théorie d'ensemble* au monde capable de tenter de *penser* la conjoncture

In this grievance and in Althusser's explanation of the situation that led to this impasse we see marked out the relation between philosophy, science, and political strategy. At its most general, this quote tells us, Marxist theory provides or provided us with a "*comprehensive theory* of the world." This theory renders us "capable of trying to *think* the actual conjuncture" and its tendencies and it permits a historical materialist analysis of the present economico-politico-ideological situation and the possibilities for this situation's transformation.

In a more confrontational tone, the relationship within Marxist theory between philosophy and science is also concisely described in "Thèses de juin" and "Philosophy and Marxism." In the interview, Althusser concludes a response to a question about his antihumanism and the reasons for this position with the statement "we at last understand why it is indispensable to know, and know *scientifically* what the ideological class struggle is in order to at last understand what ideology is. And if one has followed me, one will also have understood in what manner materialist philosophy is indispensable for understanding the ideological struggle."¹⁵⁵ In this summary statement Althusser signals that Marxist philosophy is a comprehensive theory of the world, a theory that is not identical to scientific knowledge. Short of being identical to it, this philosophy is that part of Marxist theory that provides the conceptual categories that allow us to pursue scientific studies.

actuelle et la (ou les) tendances non pas à long termes mais même à moyen et court terme d'«évolution » ou de régression de cette conjoncture

¹⁵⁵ Althusser, "Philosophie et marxisme. Entretiens avec Fernanda Navarro," 48. Je m'arrête, – mais pour répondre à la question posée, on comprend enfin pourquoi il est indispensable de bien savoir, et d'un savoir *scientifique* ce qu'est la lutte de classe idéologique, pour enfin comprendre ce qu'est *l'idéologie*. Et on m'a bien suivi, on aura aussi compris en quoi la philosophie matérialiste est indispensable pour comprendre la lutte idéologique

What is this “center for theoretical thought and therefore the possibility of explaining the conjuncture and its evolutionary tendencies?”¹⁵⁶ Well, after asking a similar question in “Thèses de juin” about “what theoretical instruments are at our disposition for the analysis of a concrete historical situation, either in one country or in the world,” Althusser first entertains the idea that the “bourgeois theory of society” can provide such a center. He rejects this possibility, however, because “the weakness of these theoretical elements is their being rooted in a bad philosophy, whether it be subjectivist-idealist, positivist, or structuralist...”¹⁵⁷ With Marx though, Althusser opines, “we owe irreplaceable scientific concepts... falling within what the Marxist tradition designates under the name *historical materialism*, a corpus of concepts permitting a concrete analysis of the concrete situation.”¹⁵⁸ Does this mean that historical materialism is this center, the “assiette,” on which correct ideas can be constructed? No, on the contrary and despite the recognition of historical materialism’s necessity and power, Althusser does not recommend historical materialist concepts as the center for theoretical thought. Instead, he explains that these “scientific concepts are only valuable on the foundation of a *correct philosophy* and that... we can only make use of them under the correct orientation that this *correct*

¹⁵⁶ Althusser, “Qu’y faire ? Que faire ?,” 14.

Nous nous trouvons donc exactement dans la situation que Machiavel décrit à propos de l’Italie : les moyennes humaines et matériels sont là des hommes capables à l’infini innombrables intelligents et vivants, n’attendant qu’une stratégie pour s’y engager, mais il leur manque un centre de *pensée théorique* donc de possibilité d’explication de la conjuncture et de ses tendances évolutives

¹⁵⁷ Althusser, “Thèses de juin,” 2.

Il y a beaucoup de concepts intéressants à emprunter à la théorie bourgeoise de la société. On pourra les examiner en une autre occasion. La faiblesse de ces éléments théoriques est leur enracinement dans une mauvaise philosophie, soit subjectivistes-idéalistes, soit positivistes, soit structuralistes

¹⁵⁸ Ibid.

A Marx nous devons des concepts scientifiques irremplaçables... Ce sont là – et je ne cite que les principaux – des *concepts scientifiques* relevant de ce que la tradition marxiste désigne sous le nom de *matérialisme historique*, corpus de concepts permettant une analyse concrète de la situation concrète

philosophy confers.¹⁵⁹ What is this philosophy? A few paragraphs later, Althusser writes, “the true materialism that is suitable to Marxism is aleatory materialism.”¹⁶⁰

4.5 Making sense of the anti-scientistic statements

If by this survey of Althusser's published and unpublished texts from the 1980s we have demonstrated that Althusser did not abandon his scientism and that this belief appears in his later work as a continuous and important part of his philosophy then we have yet to account for the seemingly anti-scientistic statements in the published work on the materialism of the encounter. Based on what we have established though, this accounting should not be hard to do. We can now take it as established that Althusser never abandoned Marxist science but that he did engage in its reconstruction in the 1970s. Further, we know that this reconstruction was directly related to a thoroughgoing critique of dialectical materialism and to the positive development of a new version of Marxist philosophy, a philosophy that eventually came to be called aleatory materialism or the materialism of the encounter. In addition, we know that choices made by Althusser's editors resulted in the expurgation of most of the comments where Althusser clearly indicates the necessity of scientific practice for political transformation.¹⁶¹ If we acknowledge all this, then we can see

¹⁵⁹ Ibid., 2–3.

...des concepts scientifiques ne sont valables que sur le fond d'une philosophie juste et que d'une certaine manière on ne peut les utiliser que sous la juste orientation que leur confère cette philosophie juste »

¹⁶⁰ Ibid., 4.

¹⁶¹ In the editorial remarks that accompany the publication of “Of Marxist Thought (1982), Haider and Mohandesi notice this absent presence, remarking:

The vocabulary we have come to associate with Althusser is nowhere to be found: science, ideology, problematic, epistemological rupture, materialism, and so forth are all terms which are either entirely absent or thoroughly emptied of their former theoretical connotations. But while the language in which it is told has certainly changed, the objective of the story seems to be the

Althusser's admission in the letter to Merab Mardashvili that he had in the early 1960s "fabricated a little, typically French justification...for Marxism's...pretension to being a science"¹⁶² as a critique of the *justification* for Marxism's pretension to being a science rather than as a disavowal of the belief that "something in Marxism is scientific." What has changed by the late 1970s is not the belief that historical materialism is a science but the justification for why Althusser understood it to be so. Whereas formerly Althusser had believed there was a rationalist justification for Marxism's pretensions, by 1978 and the writing of the letter to Mardashvili, the justification for Marxism's status as a science had become practical or pragmatic in the technical sense of the term.¹⁶³

This change in the justification of Althusser's belief that an important part of Marxist theory is scientific also explains Althusser's statement from the Navarro interview that materialist philosophy "does not claim to be autonomous or to ground its own origin and its own power. Nor does it consider itself to be a science, and still less the Science of sciences."¹⁶⁴ As we have seen, Althusser did not consider materialist philosophy to be autonomous because its status as a materialism depends on how it relates to other philosophies competing for theoretical space at a particular historical conjuncture; its contents are therefore historically contingent. Similarly, it is neither itself a science nor can it be the Theoretical Science that polices the other sciences. Instead, materialist philosophy in Althusser's aleatory materialist reconstruction is presented as a set of general judgments about the world that allow the sciences and particularly the science of historical materialism to proceed and to constitute itself. Materialist philosophy is not

same: to discover what must be brought to life from the tortuous history of the thought of Marx and Engels.

See : Haider and Mohandesj, "Underground Currents."

¹⁶² Althusser, *Philosophy of the Encounter*, 3.

¹⁶³ Baltas, "Critical Notice," 655.

¹⁶⁴ Althusser, *Philosophy of the Encounter*, 274.

science nor is materialist science a philosophy of the encounter. Both, however, are complementary parts of a larger Marxist theory.¹⁶⁵ In a similar fashion, the larger context we have provided in our account allows us to understand that the editorial advice given by Althusser in a letter to Navarro in 1986 to drop the bits about science and ideology from the interview cannot possibly be motivated by a denial of the possibility of making a distinction between the two types of theory or by an abandonment of Marxist science. Instead, we should take Althusser at his word that “[t]hat section is not ready yet, and ought to be rewritten.”¹⁶⁶

Of the seemingly anti-scientistic statements made by Althusser, there remains the Navarro interview where Althusser stated that the objects of Marxism and psychoanalysis “belong not to accomplished history but to *Geschichte*, to living history, which is made of, and wells up out of, aleatory tendencies and the unconscious. This is a history whose forms have nothing to do with the determinism of physical laws.”¹⁶⁷ Though there is not space to go into a full explanation of this statement here, we should note that Althusser does not write that there cannot be a science of history, only that the objects of history do not act in a deterministic manner, as do physical objects. This recognition does not mean that there is no science of history; just that history cannot be a science of objects characterized by their adherence to certain invariable, deterministic laws. Indeed, as we have argued in another paper, to go from the statement that history does not work according to the determinism of physical laws to the assertion that Althusser rejects a science of history can only be done by ignoring the consistent contrast Althusser makes between natural laws and the social scientific laws of which historical laws are a subset. One can also only make

¹⁶⁵ Althusser, “Philosophy and Marxism: Interviews with Fernanda Navarro (1984-87),” 22.

¹⁶⁶ Althusser, *Philosophy of the Encounter*, 287.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 264.

such an assertion if one ignores Althusser's decades-long campaign against dialectical materialism for its insistence that historical laws and physical laws are identical in terms of their both being instances of the fundamental dialectical law of nature.¹⁶⁸ In short, this quote does not so much reveal the abandonment of Marxist science as it does the fruits of historical materialism's reconstruction as a non-teleological science that examines existing historical tendencies in the complexity of their contingent interactions and for the possibility of their adjustment or transformation.

Conclusion

Using both published and unpublished texts, this essay has provided a diachronic examination of Althusser's understanding of Marxist theory and of the relations among philosophy, science, ideology and political change at different periods of his career. It has shown that, even with all the changes, precisions, and reconstructions to this theory's component parts and to his thoughts about these parts' interrelations, Althusser has consistently maintained that scientific practice tends to replace existing ideas about the social and natural world and to generate new knowledge about these interactions which, insofar as it is correct, conduces to these relations' transformation. By demonstrating that the reading of Althusser which finds in his conception of the relations between science, philosophy, and politics a pronounced continuity as well as pronounced scientism, it has also challenged those who insist upon a differentiation between an earlier, scientific Althusser and a later, ontological one. A corollary to this finding is that it is now more difficult to forge a connection between Althusser and certain contemporary political philosophers who abandon historical materialism and the social sciences and who look to ontology in order to suggest the possibility of political transformation. In addition, the correction

¹⁶⁸ Lewis, "Althusser on Laws Natural and Juridical," 39.

of the misunderstanding that Althusser abandoned his scientism in his later works allows us to view this later philosophy in a more charitable light. No longer is it necessary to assess aleatory materialism against other, more sophisticated, less contradictory, and more fully realized ontologies. Now, we can judge the materialism of the encounter as Althusser seems to have intended, pragmatically, in terms of how well it works with Marxist science to produce practical knowledge advantageous to our political transformation. Finally, if one agrees with Althusser about the relation between aleatory materialism and Marxist science, it becomes less easy to overestimate the role played by philosophy in understanding and encouraging revolutionary transitions. It should also encourage us to return to the scientific study of our socio-economico-political conjuncture, its tendencies, and of how we can intervene so as to transform these conditions and relations.

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