

2020

## Theory and Politics in the Thought of Louis Althusser: An Interview with Étienne Balibar

Petr Kužel

*The Institute of Philosophy of the Czech Academy of Sciences*

---

### Recommended Citation

Kužel, Petr (2020) "Theory and Politics in the Thought of Louis Althusser: An Interview with Étienne Balibar," *Décalages*: Vol. 2: Iss. 3.

This Interview is brought to you for free and open access by OxyScholar. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Décalages* by an authorized editor of OxyScholar. For more information, please contact [cdla@oxy.edu](mailto:cdla@oxy.edu).

# Theory and Politics in the Thought of Louis Althusser: An Interview with Étienne Balibar

Petr Kužel

## IDEOLOGY AND SCIENCE<sup>1</sup>

**Petr Kužel** - In the 1960s Althusser proposed a certain concept of theoretical praxis based on the concept of the epistemological break. Concurrently, he rejected the idea of an external, empirical guarantee of scientific validity, which he in fact considered to be an ideological idea. But if this is the case, then by what criteria can we ultimately determine if a certain concept is truly scientific and not ideological? If science is defined in opposition to ideology and ideology is defined in opposition to science, they define themselves mutually, and if there is no external criterion outside this circle, how will we know whether our praxis is a truly *theoretical* praxis that results in knowledge and not an *ideological* praxis that results in ideology?

**Étienne Balibar** - The logical circulation you described is given by an effort to determine the criterion of scientific validity, which is conceived of as the result of the cutting away of the ideological discourse. This is a question known since the time of Plato. If the criterion of scientific validity is determined by a relationship to ideology, where is the criterion that one discourse is ideological and the second scientific?

**PK** - And does Althusser supply us with a theoretical means to solve this problem?

**ÉB** - No, this is a problem we cannot solve. But we can reformulate it and so transform it. There are different ways that this can be done.

**PK** - What are these possibilities?

**ÉB** - In principle, there are two fundamental, radically contradictory ways. Firstly, we can once more introduce the concept of *critique*, in Kant's sense or that of the Frankfurt School. We assume that what gives value to Marxism – in contrast, for example, to classical economics – is the ability of Marxism, with its critical method, to interpret the

---

<sup>1</sup> The interview was conducted, translated, and annotated by Petr Kužel. (All footnotes are added by Petr Kužel.)

phenomenon of dominance in modern capitalist society. And Althusser of course continues to develop this approach, where the meaning of Marxism rests precisely in this critical capability that is the opposite of ideological discourse. So for Althusser, scientific validity or scientificity was linked with the opening up of the possibility for deeper critical thinking. Deeper not only in the sense that it enables us to better criticize reality, to reveal the oppression of capital and the various maladies of bourgeois society, etc., but – and this is crucial – in the sense that it also contains within itself both the ability to self-criticize as well as the conceptual tools with which to self-criticize. What Althusser was attempting (just as were, for that matter, other communists of his generation) was a renewal of Marxism that would not only provide a critique of capitalism, but also a critique of its own concepts and assumptions; they would then be projected onto the politics of the party, the relationship to the state, and so on.

We thus arrive at the concept of critique in the strong sense of the word, which is (a comparison with Foucault in this affair is, by the way, very interesting) a critique not only from the point of view of the *object* – a critique of the object as the subject-matter of the critique – but is at the same time a critique of itself, of its own critical or criticizing theoretical discourse.

Significant implications flow from this because Marxism – despite Althusser's efforts to transform it (as well as those of some number of other authors, even if their efforts took them in a different direction) – never truly developed an intellectual tool that could be used for its own self-criticism.

In this context I would like to draw your attention to what Althusser said in the text “Marxism as a Finite Theory”<sup>2</sup> in which we not only find a definitive rejection of any

---

<sup>2</sup> Althusser, L., „Marxisme comme théorie «finie» “, in: Althusser, L., *Solitude de Machiavel*, PUF, Paris 1998, pp. 285–296. Here Althusser considers Marxism to be a finite and limited [finie et limitée] theory which is limited to an analysis of the capitalist mode of production and its tendencies. It is thus not a general theory. It is a theory that doesn't assess any eternal truths about historical developments and can't project onto the future anything of its analysis of the capitalist mode of production behind this mode of production. To say that Marxist theory is 'finite' means maintaining the basic idea “that Marxist theory is entirely the opposite of a philosophy of history which ‘encompasses’ the whole future of humanity, and which would thus be capable of defining the ‘end.’” Marxist theory “is inscribed within and limited to the current existing phase: that of capitalist exploitation. All that it can say about the future is the fragmented and negative

sort of closed general theory, but also a rejection of the distinction between general and regional theory. At the same time, it happens that it is not possible to subordinate regional theory under some general theory (whether this general theory is Marxism or another one). We find then a much more skeptical – or, if you will, Wittgensteinian – position. And likewise we find the idea that what causes the finitude of Marxism or other approaches is the impossibility of its incorporating into itself, by way of an integral method, a criterion of its own scientific validity.

### SCHISMATIC SCIENCE

**ÉB** - I cannot however assume an impartial position towards those things that Althusser was striving after. Basically, I am still reflecting on the questions that he was asking. They are questions that are still worth thinking about because they are unsettling. So, for quite some time now, I have been seeking, by way of various methods and detours, a way to deal with the concept of science as a finite theory. This is essentially related to the concept of science that I attribute to Althusser and which I denote with the phrase “schismatic” or “conflictual” science.

The idea of a “conflictual” science was revealed in Althusser’s text “On Marx and Freud”. The history of this work is complicated. When I cite it, I refer to the phrase “schismatic science.” In the French wording of the text however the expression “schismatic” is not there directly, instead there is the attribute “conflictual” and “scissionist” [“conflictuelle”, “scissionnelle”].<sup>3</sup> The expression “schismatic science” is not, however, mine. The history of this text is actually quite schismatic. It’s a strange thing, but I first read it in German because it hadn’t been published in French yet and

---

extension of the current tendency...” “The acceptance of the idea that Marxist theory is finite [finie], quite excludes the possibility that it would be a *closed* theory [fermée],” for only a “finite” theory can be “open” [ouverte]. Ibid., pp. 287–288.

<sup>3</sup> See Althusser, L., „Sur Marx et Freud“, in: Althusser, L., *Écrits sur la psychanalyse. Freud et Lacan*, Stock/IMEC, Paris 1993, s. 225–226 (in English: Althusser, L., *Writings on Psychoanalysis: Freud and Lacan*, trans. Jeffrey Mehlman, Columbia University Press, New York, 1996, p. 108–109).

Althusser had given it to my friend Frieder Wolf, who published it in a German collection of Althusser's texts. And Wolf was looking for a way to translate the concept "conflictual science" [science conflictuelle] and translated it into German as "schismatisch." This seemed an excellent choice to me since what characterized science in its capacity as a *critique* is, among other things, precisely its unfailing ability to express and incorporate a certain schism or heresy. At the same time, however, we can also say that Althusser refuted his original epistemological conception [from the middle of the 1960s] and even, in a certain sense, crossed over to its opposite. We are now moving towards a certain characteristic, not of scientific validity generally, but of the paradoxical scientificity of Marxism – or, more precisely, not only of Marxism or psychoanalysis, but of all the human sciences – that rests exactly in a certain internal conflict. It means that human scientists, similar to theologians, struggle with opposing points of view in conflicts that are in principle dogmatic. It is, of course, a matter of playing with fire.

And so: we begin with an epistemological break, and we continue with the dismantling of a certain topos that arises from the break. We arrive at the idea of a certain critical theory, later we cross over from critical theory to finite theory and to its subsequently being transformed into "conflictual theory." And so we find ourselves in the space of a certain derivation of issues. We are climbing further and further from the *original* epistemological discourse while still trying to conserve the idea that Marxism is linked with a certain specific modality of theory on the field of history and politics.

### ALTHUSSER AND SPINOZA

**PK** - And what is the other possibility of transforming the problem, which you mentioned earlier?

**ÉB** -The second possibility is exactly the opposite. It means taking the influence of Spinoza on Althusser's thought very seriously. From the very beginning, this was very substantial and led him to an effort to reformulate the theory of truth. An [exterior]

criterion of scientific validity did not exist for Althusser, because the truth originates from science as its *component*, since science is a conceptual, self-sufficient construction.

So, what is Spinoza's criterion of truth? Spinoza works with the concept of adequation – with the concept of the adequate idea (in contrast to the confused, incomplete, vague idea, etc.), which originated from intellectual intuition, i.e. a formal demonstration. And in this context, of course, a difficult question arises, one that is as old as commentaries on Spinoza and which Badiou solved. Namely, it concerns what, in this regard, differentiates Spinozism from certain forms of Platonism. And I am not overly surprised that Spinoza remains the main source for those who are interested in Althusser. But the Spinoza who is in style these days (I am not saying that this isn't good, it is, to the contrary, very interesting), isn't the "epistemological Spinoza." It is the "ontological Spinoza," the "vitalistic Spinoza," the "ethical Spinoza," it is the Deleuzian Spinoza: the Spinoza who founded the philosophical expression of the idea of the nonerasable force of life and its ability to devise and change the world, which has no analogue. Althusser's Spinoza is of course something quite different. His Spinoza is the Spinoza of the criterion of truth and the imaginary nature of subjectivity.

When we look at what characterized Spinoza's model, which influenced French epistemology (e.g., Cavailles and others), it was composed of mathematics, not physics. When we move into the region of Bachelard's epistemological break, the model is, to the contrary, physics or the other sciences that combine or connect theory with experiments. In the area of mathematics experimenting is never possible except (as Cavailles and others articulated) for a certain internal experimentation. But here we are dealing with thought experiments. They are of a purely intellectual nature and they are linked with a certain intellectual intuition. Cavailles was, by the way, much more of a Hegelian than it would appear. For that matter Althusser, in the way he worked with concepts, was also much more of a Hegelian than he admitted or acknowledged. There is, after all, a certain affinity between a Spinozian and Hegelian approach (and also with

a mathematical approach). What is common to them is the idea of a certain internal operation on the plane of a concept.

### ALTHUSSER AND HEGEL

**PK** - And where do you primarily see this influence of Hegel on Althusser?

**ÉB** - First off it is necessary to mention Althusser's posthumously published dissertation<sup>4</sup> about Hegel, for which, as you know, Gaston Bachelard was the advisor. Althusser wrote his dissertation in 1947, at the same time as his close friend Jacques Martin wrote his, and they both wrote about Hegel. (Jacques Martin also translated a text by Hegel during this time, *L'Esprit du christianisme et son destin*.<sup>5</sup>) Merleau-Ponty read both works and wanted them to be published as a book. But Althusser, at least from what he said, said no to such a possibility. This might have been for philosophical reasons, but it might have also been for political or ideological reasons.

As you know, Althusser was imprisoned in a POW camp. He returned to France in 1945 and was sick for a whole year. Then he very quickly finished his studies. In 1947 he obtained the *diplôme d'études supérieures* and a year later he did his *agrégation*. His fellow students were younger than he was. At this time he also joined the communist party. In his posthumously published collection of work, *Écrits philosophiques et politiques*, there is one text from when he was still a Catholic but also a member of the communist party, which from a historical point of view is quite interesting. Boutang's monograph about Althusser<sup>6</sup> yields some interesting information about that, especially about the relationship between Althusser and leftist Catholic currents such as working-class

<sup>4</sup> See Althusser, L., "Du contenu dans la pensée de G. W. F. Hegel," in: Althusser, L., *Écrits philosophiques et politiques*. Tome I, Éditions STOCK/IMEC, Paris 1994, pp. 59–250.

<sup>5</sup> Hegel, G. W. F., *L'Esprit du christianisme et son destin*, introduction par Jean Hyppolite, traduction de Jacques Martin, J. Vrin, Paris 1948.

<sup>6</sup> See Boutang, Y. M., *Louis Althusser. Une biographie. La formation du mythe (1918–1956)*, Bernard Grasset, Paris 1992, especially pp. 233–342.

priests, who were quite severely repressed by the Vatican. The Vatican of that time – it wasn't the Vatican of John Paul II but of Pius XIII – promulgated the most reactionary and coarse anti-communist Catholicism.<sup>7</sup>

Let us however return to Althusser's dissertation, which happens to be, by the way, quite readable and presents an outstanding interpretation of Hegel's dialectic as a real dialectic. It is of course an *anti-idealist* interpretation of Hegel, which nevertheless finishes with a characteristic surpassing of Hegel by Marx. Althusser knew Hegel's work very well; he told us that, *for theory*, Hegel is irreplaceable. Naturally not in the sense that we should become Hegelians or something of the sort, but that it is necessary to use Hegel to learn how to work with philosophical concepts. So I began to ask myself if Althusser had really and completely cut himself off from the Hegelian model of thinking as he himself had declared to be the case. It seemed to me that there are many elements in Althusser's thinking that are difficult to understand if we aren't familiar with Hegel. Today people look for anything and everything in the background of Althusser's thought – except, that is, for Hegel. They occupy themselves with Nietzsche, Freud, Lucretius, Machiavelli. What is not usually emphasized is that Hegelian elements are also present.

The most evident connection with the Hegelian model of thought is, of course, how Althusser himself openly acknowledged the idea of “a process without a Subject or Goal(s).”<sup>8</sup> Althusser thus placed into the center of his critical philosophy a rejection of teleology and a rejection of the philosophy of progress. At the end of *Logic*, Hegel wrote a large chapter about Teleology, which he followed with a chapter about Idea. In the very conclusion he characterizes the Absolute method. Which means that if we hold to a dialectic in the Hegelian sense, the Absolute method not only comes after Teleology

---

<sup>7</sup> In 1949, for example, Pius XIII issued a decree that excommunicated members and backers of the communist party from the Catholic Church.

<sup>8</sup> See Althusser, L., “Sur le rapport de Marx à Hegel,” in: Althusser, L., *Lénine et la philosophie. Marx et Lénine devant Hegel*, Maspero, Paris 1982, pp. 49–71; Althusser, L., “Remarque sur une catégorie: ‘Procès sans Sujet ni Fin(s),’” in: Althusser, L., *Réponse à John Lewis*, Maspero, Paris 1973, pp. 91–98.



but dialectically overcomes it and cancels it. I think that Althusser continued and developed this problem of overcoming teleology. And this is an aspect that is deeply Hegelian. Of course, I am not saying that he did it in the same way and with the same means as Hegel did.

There is also another [Hegelian aspect] that I find very interesting and which touches upon the problem of ideology. If we take the text “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses,” we see that Althusser says that we of course cannot be Hegelians – seeing that ideological interpellation is an unconscious phenomenon, etc. – but that in idealist philosophy we can seek out models that facilitate our thinking about the different aspects of the ideological process: recognition/misrecognition, interpellation, etc. But there is something here that interests me even more than that. When instead of reading Hegel’s *Logic* we read his *Phenomenology of the Spirit* – a work that was quite fundamental for a whole generation (because of Kojève, Hyppolite and others, but mainly, needless to say, because of the significance of the work itself) – we are necessarily caught off guard by the formulation that Hegel used in the Introduction to *Phenomenology of the Spirit* and which appears again in the works that follow. It is a formulation about process, which goes on behind the back of consciousness itself. Hegel says that consciousness has to do not only with its own representations, but that there also exist truths which, without being evident to consciousness, play out behind its back. This, of course, is a metaphor. A metaphor very close to what Freud said in his interpretation of dreams – that is, that a certain part of the psychic process plays out off stage. It means that for consciousness not everything plays out on the field of the visible; indeed, not by a long shot. That a significant part of that which plays out beyond the view of consciousness and is inaccessible to consciousness – about which consciousness doesn’t know – determines and conditions that which it sees or which it is able to see. Here a theme again emerges which was very present in the early years of structuralism and was common to both Althusser and Foucault: the visible – invisible,

the thinkable – non-thinkable. And this continues for example with Rancière in *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible* and others.

I am suggesting, then, that Althusser remained more influenced by Hegel than he himself would have wanted, but I don't think that this was a bad thing. From my point of view, it is, to the contrary, very philosophically productive. If I said that he was influenced by Hegel, then it is true only in the sense that we grasp Hegel not as somebody who created an apologia for an omnipotent consciousness, but to the contrary as one who performed a critique of consciousness and its limits.

**PK** - And so you believe that this Hegelian theme is most evident in “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses”?

**ÉB** - When I think about where the Hegelian influence can be seen most clearly in his works, I can't say that “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses” would be among them. If there is an Althusserian text in which we can see the continuing presence of this great Hegelian metaphor of the process playing out behind the back of consciousness, of which we spoke of before, it would be in his text on theater [‘Piccolo Teatro,’ Bertolazzi and Brecht] that is found in *For Marx*. In this text, of course, we are not moving about on a conceptual level. We are on the field of allegory and metaphor. But it isn't necessary to remind ourselves here that with Althusser, just as it is with the majority of philosophers, the metaphor can be quite important. Naturally, there is the question as to how to grab onto those contents that are outside of consciousness. And Althusser in this context proposed a theory, or rather a metaphorical description of that which takes place behind the scenes. According to this metaphor, consciousness is like a closed room or building whose walls we must tear down so that we can see what is going on in the background. It is a violent and traumatic moment. Of course, it isn't only Hegel who allows us to contemplate this “screenplay,”

but I think that the affinity of Althusser with Hegel is manifested, among other places, precisely in it.

### THE BAD SUBJECT

**PK** - You segued to the problematic of ideology. What do you consider to be the possibilities for the existence of, let's say, the subversive subject in the framework of Althusser's theory of ideology considering that, according to Althusser, each subject is a subject because of ideological interpellation and so is always an *ideological* subject incorporated into the ideological mechanism of the dominant ideology that reproduces the given social condition and its relations? Although Althusser says that ideological apparatuses can, apart from the dominant ideology, also, as a byproduct, produce a secondary ideology that can be subversive or even, to state it more forthrightly, revolutionary, the subject nevertheless remains closed in the logic of a given system and is "always-already" an ideological subject. The question then is whether, in Althusser's system, a subversive subject can truly even exist. If it is possible to "tear down the wall," as you expressed it earlier, and if so, how?

**ÉB** - It was precisely this question that troubled Althusser's student, Micheal Pêcheux. He published two books in Althusser's series *Theory*: the first, *Les vérités de la Palice* (1975), is from this point of view the most interesting, and then there was *La langue introuvable* (1981).

**PK** - Pardon me, but was Pêcheux a psychoanalyst?

**ÉB** - That is a very complicated question. No, he wasn't a psychoanalyst.

**PK** - But he was heavily involved with psychoanalysis?

**ÉB** - Yes, very much so. He was the only one who seriously tried, even desperately so, to make a truly general theory out of psychoanalysis. You can look on the internet pages

of Pierre Macherey and find his very interesting lecture about Michel Pêcheux: “Langue, discours, ideologie, sujet, sens: de Thomas Herbert à Michel Pêcheux.”<sup>9</sup> Pêcheux actually published two articles about ideology in *Cahiers pour l'Analyse* under the pseudonym Thomas Herbert.<sup>10</sup> (By the way, all the issues are now available online, on the Website of Kingston University.<sup>11</sup>) At the time it seemed a little strange to me that he wrote them under a pseudonym. He was the only one who truly attempted to create an Althusserian-Lacanian theory of discourse, subject, and ideology. It is a very difficult – perhaps even impossible – task. In any case, so that we may return to Althusser, when Althusser wrote his article about ideology and ideological state apparatuses, Michel Pêcheux said to him (which makes his complete desperation clear to us): if the subject only exists through ideological interpellation, then there isn't any way to exit from ideology. The two of them discussed this and Pêcheux, who was very interested in psychoanalysis and psychiatry, which of course also interested Althusser, said to him that the one thing which can rescue us are “bad subjects.” Althusser appended an observation to “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses” in which he stated that there are, here, “bad subjects.”<sup>12</sup> But this of course didn't mean that the issue had been resolved for him; we can still, ask the question as to whether bad subjects truly escape ideological interpellation. They are subjects who react “*badly*,” who *don't obey*. But *why* don't they obey? Because they are simply rebels, freaks...? That whole era put such questions forward. A little bit later Foucault provided a certain answer that I find interesting, but which is extremely optimistic in contrast to Althusser, who was influenced by the psychoanalytic model of identification.

---

<sup>9</sup><http://stl.recherche.univ-lille3.fr/seminaires/philosophie/macherey/macherey20062007/macherey17012007.html>

<sup>10</sup> Herbert, T., “Réflexions sur la situation théorique des sciences sociales et, spécialement, de la psychologie sociale,” *Cahiers pour l'Analyse*, February 1966, no. 2, pp. 1–29. Herbert, T., “Pour une théorie générale des idéologies,” *Cahiers pour l'Analyse*, Summer 1968, no. 9, pp. 74–92.

<sup>11</sup> <http://cahiers.kingston.ac.uk/>

<sup>12</sup> See Althusser, L., “Idéologie et appareils idéologiques d'État,” in: Althusser, *Positions*, Éditions sociales, Paris 1976, p. 120. Althusser, L., *On the Reproduction of Capitalism. Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses* (London: Verso, 2014), p. 269.

Foucault, who did not come out of the psychoanalytic tradition, out of a psychoanalytical conception of identification, created a distinct version of the idea of a “bad subject.” Additionally, we can say that in a certain sense Foucault engaged with the idea of a “bad subject” for his entire life. Bad subjects are those who behave improperly, who engage in a “counter-behavior” [contre-conduite], as Foucault put it. A big question for those who come out of Althusser was whether this “counter-conduct” would be incorporated into the cycle of reproduction, or if, to the contrary, it would open up new prospects of subversion. This question, of course, still hasn’t been answered. Nevertheless, neoliberalism has an enormous capacity to digest various forms of “counter-conduct.”

Althusser’s conception was, in contrast to Foucault’s, founded on the model of identification, as Freud described it. In Althusser’s archive there is a file about Freud; in it, besides notes and excerpts from Freud, we can find Althusser’s summary of Freud’s text *Psychologie des masses et analyse de moi*, which is from the exact time that Althusser wrote his text *Sur la reproduction* and therefore also “Ideological state apparatuses.” (It is interesting to follow how the author chose passages which he then used in his article about Ideological state apparatuses.)

Even for those kinds of texts that the rest of his generation wrote out by hand, Althusser would use a typewriter. And what always amazed me was the unbelievable speed with which he managed to write. He even typed the notes about the authors that he was reading – Rousseau, Marx, and others. And so there is a whole stack in the archives containing various files about various authors, and it is here that you can find the file about Freud that I just mentioned. And when we take a look inside it, we see that if interpellation functions on the basis of the [Freudian] model, it will force us to the conclusion that the end of ideology doesn’t exist, that the end of the subordination of the subject towards authority, the imaginary representation, doesn’t exist. It is therefore necessary to surrender the illusion about a possible end of ideology that would

be based on emancipation from all imaginary subjectification. The result that comes out of this, if we hold to the Freudian line, is that the various forms of our identification or interpellation can only be transformed when one of them is substituted for another. If we then want to follow along the lines of what Althusser wrote, we can infer from it that we can substitute an interpellation that forces us to believe in the Republic, for example, or God, or I don't know what else, with a very different interpellation. It will still be an ideology, but a very different one. And it is also necessary to realize that during certain historical conditions the same form of subjection will produce very different results. In short, it isn't the same to believe in revolution as in universal harmony.

### POLITICS

**ÉB** - A last comment on this point: Althusser didn't completely believe in his own theory. And, in any case, he was right in not wanting to use it in some kind of a rigid, absolute form. This surfaced, for example, in the question of the character of the communist party, when Althusser wrote (in the framework of a debate with the Italian communists about the state, the role of the party, and so on, that appeared in *Il Manifesto*) that the communist party must be outside of the state [hors-État].<sup>13</sup> I said to him at the time, and also wrote it in the course of the discussion: how can a political party exist outside of the state if, according to your own definition, each political party is an ideological state apparatus? And Althusser's answer was that it will be a party that won't be a party in a strict sense.

---

<sup>13</sup> "On principle, according to its political and historical purpose, the party must be *outside the state*, both under the bourgeois state, and even more so under the proletarian state. The party must be the instrument of the destruction of the bourgeois state, before becoming, bit by bit, one of the instruments of the withering away of the state." Althusser, "Le marxisme comme théorie 'finie,'" p. 290. The article appeared for the first time in Italian in *Il Manifesto* (March 4, 1978), later it was reprinted under the title "Il marxismo como teoria 'finita,'" in: *Discutere lo stato*, De Donato, Bari, 1978, pp. 7–21.

**PK** - Yes, this expression grabbed my attention when I read it in Althusser. But what does it mean exactly?

**ÉB** - It means nothing other than that it is a question that has the form of an answer: Do historical circumstances exist in which various modalities of subjectification are able to break free from the very institutional logic which made them possible?

**PK** - I would like to ask you what Althusser thought about politics in the 1970s. It is obvious why he criticized the communist party and why he feared its bureaucratism. Nevertheless, what type of organization did he propose for an emancipatory politics?

**ÉB** -We cannot hope to find in Althusser an answer to a question that nobody in his generation was able to answer. Many in that generation renounced communism or Marxism, which naturally led to the question as to why he didn't do that. And the answer is clear: we cannot reject the very air that we breathe – and that was his metaphor. Althusser was a member of the communist party. Wicked tongues assert that he was in the party because, for him, it substituted for the church, and so on. But he was in the communist party because it represented a historical horizon that he considered to be unsurpassable, so all that he could do was to try to somehow transform it from within.

**PK** - That is quite understandable, but I still have the impression that in the 1970s he no longer believed very strongly that the communist party could be the initiator or that it could play some kind of a progressive role in this change. At that time he also spoke sympathetically about various social movements and emphasized their importance, but it doesn't seem to me that he was very convinced of this either. Thus, my question is instead aimed at whether he saw (and I'm mainly asking here about his private opinion, which he might not have necessarily aired publicly) any subject that could become the subject of change...

**ÉB** - It would be possible to have a long discussion about this, but my personal sense is that he didn't see any such subject. But we can again shift this question to the question of what should be the model party from the point of view of some revolutionary strategy. It is also necessary to start from the fact that Althusser was unusually, shall we say, "French." I think that his viewpoint originated and was determined above all by what happened in France and Italy. He was never, for example, very interested in the United States or the Third World. Not because he didn't support the idea of the battle of the Third World against imperialism. To the contrary. He also criticized Eurocentrism and was of course a critic of the Kantian, Hegelian, and Marxist philosophy of history because they were Eurocentric. Regarding the countries of the East Bloc, we can see (for example in the discussion with the Italian communists or in a contribution to the Venice conference<sup>14</sup>) that he really did try to understand the character of the social formation which arose there as a result of the October revolution.

When we look at the historical trajectory of Marxism beginning with the Russian revolution, we see two dominant, strategic revolutionary lines that follow one after the other but which were also in competition with one another. In the first phase it was a strategy of "class against class." According to this line it was necessary to reduce all the complexity of social activity, diverse interests, and cultural traditions to a "great clash" between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. Later, in the second phase, because of fascism, it changed into a strategy of popular fronts that should constitute a complex alliance of various strata led by the working-class. Thanks to Gramsci, this manifested itself more strongly in Italy than in France. The original goal was to provide the communist movement in Western Europe with a Marxist theory of revolution that wouldn't solely consist of some kind of conflict between two different classes but would represent the displacement of one hegemony in favor of another. It was a matter of creating a theory on the basis of the experiences and goals of the popular fronts.

---

<sup>14</sup> See Althusser, L., „Enfin la crise du Marxisme!“, in: Althusser, L., *Solitude de Machiavel*, c. d., pp. 269–279.



As to how that relates to people's democracy in Eastern Europe, it is no accident that there was such great concern over the use of the popular front strategy. There was an attempt to realize such a strategy in Eastern Europe, but it was immediately transformed into the dictatorship of one party that had no emancipatory potential.

In Italy, the strategy of "class against class" was newly revived in the model of the operaistas, people such as Tronti and Negri, who were rabidly anti-Gramsci and who didn't want to hear anything about class alliances, hegemony, and so on, but who thought that the clash of "class against class" should play out inside the factories. And they carried this idea all the way to its conclusion by reasoning that the place where the state directly asserts its class dictatorship isn't parliament or the administrative apparatus of the government but in the place where the direct organization of work takes place. And if this class dictatorship plays out or reveals itself in the factories, then the battle against this dictatorship and the actions of the revolutionary party should also play out in the factories.

France represents a specific case, in which the language of the French communists was expressly influenced by the strategy of "class against class." And, in my opinion, Althusser was deeply influenced by this. I don't want to say that Althusser was simply a French communist like all the others, but all the same it is very difficult not to read him with this in mind. On the other hand, we can see how he himself tried to escape from this vicious circle, how he sought out some strategy that would include both revolutionary action based on the principle of radical antagonism (and so a strategy or a method which would not be a compromise) but also consist of the concrete unification or convergence of various forces that have a common goal and a common enemy but lack a common praxis or ideology.

## THE EPISTEMOLOGICAL BREAK AND THE PROBLEM OF STRUCTURE

**PK** - I would like to turn from politics back to theory, specifically to the epistemological break and a particular problem, i.e. the specific logical circle that is related to it. Before the epistemological break, we are still moving in an ideological field and our thought is determined by ideological concepts. The epistemological break is actually a cutting away of ideological concepts. In that moment when we carry out this epistemological break, it is, however, necessary to already know what it is that we are cutting away. The recognition of ideological concepts would therefore, in certain sense, already presume an epistemological break. An epistemological break would then, however, have had to come about before the epistemological break – it would actually have to presuppose itself before it was realized.

**ÉB** - The epistemological break, as it is conceptualized by Althusser – which combined Spinoza, Bachelard, and even Freud and others – is very much a retrospective concept. What you described as a circle is in reality a logical characteristic that Althusser endeavored to retain. Said otherwise, it is never possible to say that we have carried out an epistemological break. The only possibility is to retrospectively ascertain the fact of this break. In view of the fact that there exists, in the history of ideas, a continual change of paradigm, terrain, etc., it is a question whether what Althusser called an epistemological break isn't simply a change in the type or framework of thinking. For Althusser this objection was, of course, very disagreeable because it only seemed to be the case at first glance, but it is in reality quite the opposite of a simple change of paradigm. From this point of view it is very interesting to compare him with Foucault, who never liked the concept of the epistemological break but who, in the years between 1960 and 1966, extensively utilized the idea of the transformation of the paradigm, especially in *The History of Madness*, *The Birth of the Clinic*, and *The Order of Things*. And we see that what appeared to Foucault demonstrable was the fact that a certain language

and a certain paradigm are mutually *incommensurable*, so that for example between the classical and the modern episteme there is such a change of system and signification that they represent two different historical a priori. But it is quite evident that an epistemological break represents a different approach. We can of course also only become aware of it afterwards, but it is something quite different than the concept of an epistemological break.

In this context, Althusser introduced something that came from Spinoza, meaning from the theory of three kinds of knowledge. In the framework of a discussion about the epistemological break, Pierre Macherey stated in a short article in *Nouvelle Critique* (which he, by the way, published in his book *Histoires de dinosaure*<sup>15</sup>) a proposition that Althusser used for his own purposes and cited in the introduction to *Reading Capital*<sup>16</sup> because it best expressed the idea that all science is science about ideology. It is Spinoza's idea *verum index sui et falsi* expressed in a modern language, when this *verum index sui et falsi* are not two separate things, as if the *true* facilitates the recognition of that, on one hand, which is true, and of that, on the other hand, which is untrue. In reality, it is the critical recognition of the relationship between the two. It is what is taken from Bachelard's lectures about physics or from a Marxist critique of political economy. The criterion of science (in the sense of the epistemological break) isn't that it has extricated itself from ideology, but that it *explains* ideology.

This implies (and it could seem strange), that there is no area of scientific discourse that exists independently of the explanation of ideology. Scientific discourse supersedes an ideology that it rejects by explanation of ideology, i.e. by recognition of ideology as ideology. It is evident that it isn't simply about the idea of a change of paradigm but rather its virtual opposite. The idea of a change of paradigm means that today we don't understand how we could have been thinking in the way that we were thinking

<sup>15</sup> *Histoires de dinosaure. Faire de la philosophie. 1965/1997*, PUF, Paris 1999.

<sup>16</sup> See Althusser, L., "Du *Capital* à la philosophie de Marx," in: Althusser et al., *Lire le Capital*, Quadrige/PUF, Paris 1996, p. 47. It concerns Macherey's article "A propos de la rupture," *Nouvelle Critique*, mai 1965, pp. 136–140.

yesterday. Whereas the idea that all science is a science concerning ideology, such as is present in the concept of the epistemological break, is the idea that although we cannot know beforehand what will come about, we can on the basis of contemporary theoretical discourse comprehend and explain the mechanism of the creation of mistakes and illusions that were particular to the previous discourse.

**PK** - Is it something like the Marxist methodological principle that “human anatomy contains a key to the anatomy of the ape” and not the reverse.

**ÉB** - Yes, that is it precisely, you are absolutely right. But just for this reason it is also problematic, since it is actually teleological. When you asked me before why I think that Althusser was more influenced by Hegel than he acknowledged, such as in the idea that the subsequent moments contain the principles of the understanding of the preceding moments as errors that were overcome, it is naturally difficult not to see an analogy with the Hegelian dialectic.

**PK** - I would also like to ask about Althusser’s concept of structure and structural causality and about one problem that might be present in it. Which is to say, if each element of a structure is fully determined by the structure, and if there isn’t anything exterior in relation to this structure (it is an autonomous structure), how can we explain its motion and transformation? If each of its elements is itself actually inert and in a certain sense a passive consequent of structural determination...

**ÉB** - ...If its elements are inert, then the structure isn’t of course in motion...

**PK** - ...Isn’t it then self-contradictory when we have to explain its motion?

**ÉB** - Of course it is self-contradictory. Because when we were working on the concept of structure with Althusser in the period that *Reading Capital* was being written, some number of orientations, that were present *en bloc*, were included; besides that, the

concept of the structure didn't have the same meaning during the whole of that period. My own text in *Reading Capital* was, at least as I see it today, a perfect example of a blind alley into which a blind use of the concept of structure was directed, manifesting itself above all in our use of two different meanings of the term at the same time.

On one hand, the structure could only be a different expression for the totality or social formation. To accept the totality as a certain structure or a structured totality means to risk, or rather inevitably leads to an emphasis of what we can designate as the functional or functionalist way of the representation of structure, when behind certain variances and substitutions we can recognize the invariant that is specific for a certain historical epoch.

When I wrote my article, I worked with the concept of "structure" in a different sense, one which was contradictory to the first one: it wasn't going on about an expression of the invariant of the whole or structure in its functional character but, to the contrary, about the description of the transformation from one figure to the second, i.e. the thinking of the very process of transformation.

I actually took two contrasting meanings of the word "structure" (one linked with the concept of thinking of invariants of structure, the second with the concept of structural transformation of structure) and tried to put these two aspects together.

But when, today, I turn back to the history of structuralism, I note with satisfaction that I wasn't the only one who tried to do this and that even great figures, who I very much admired, faced the same problems. Levi-Strauss is a very good example. If you take the first sense of the word "structure," he introduces it in *The Elementary Structures of Kinship*, it is a combinatorial analysis. If you take the second meaning of the word "structure," as *Mythologiques* presents it, we can see an effort to recognize the laws of the transformation, and we can remark that practically any kind of discourse can transform itself into any kind of other.

## THE REAL, THE SYMBOLIC, THE IMAGINARY

**PK** - But what I wanted to say was that if a certain structure is moving by itself, has some form of its own dynamic, we must consider that each element of the structure, on whatever level of the structure, must also be characterized by its own self-motion, which is only *secondarily* structurally determined, modified, and functionally transformed so that it becomes the structure's functional component, fits into it and, lastly, jointly forms it. That, primarily, there is something here that precedes the effect of the structure, which is transformed by it and subordinated to the determination of structure, but that evidently cannot be entirely subordinated to it if we want to explain its dynamic and transformation. And I don't think that Althusser thematizes this. If we return to what we said about ideology, I think that there must be, in point of fact, something that always escapes subjection (i.e. escapes the ideological structure) and that only facilitates the ideological structure's impact and operation... And only in this way can we actually explain the motion or transformation of the structure. It is a condition of ideological effects and its effectiveness.

**ÉB** - That's an interesting idea.

**PK** - ...And in this context it occurs to me: what did Althusser think about Lacan's Real? Because, it seems to me, he only dealt with the subject on the plane of the symbolic and imaginary orders and didn't accept the Real, with which he could, perhaps, have explained exactly that which escapes subjection.

**ÉB** - ... I understand where you are going with this...

**PK** - ...So what did Althusser think about the possibility of incorporating the concept of the Real into his system? And could we include it? Would it be compatible with his theoretical system? It occurs to me that in this context we could use his notion of "individual" in opposition to the "subject." And we could understand the "individual"

in a certain sense as the Real – that therefore escapes subjection and at the same time it enables it ... It also occurs to me in this context that what Althusser designated in the 1980s as aleatory materialism is a type of materialism that was already present in the 1960s in his concept of the structure...

**ÉB** - ...Precisely.

**PK** - ...And that, for example, in the article “On Genesis” (“Sur la genèse”), which was written, I believe, in 1966, he even specifically writes about a “theory of the encounter”... And this type of materialism enables us to think about some effects that are not structurally determined, but in a certain sense escape from the structural determination and originate from the so called void.

**ÉB** - Yes, this problem has several levels. It is very good that you mentioned aleatory materialism, because while you were asking me if there is something in Althusser that it would be possible to consider as an equivalent to Lacan’s Real, I was saying to myself that the only “candidate” (as they say in English these days) is the concept of the aleatory. Althusser found something at that time which evidently filled the same function as the concept of the Real does in Lacan in the second meaning of that concept, because the Lacanian Real you alluded to isn’t the Real of Lacan’s early writings but the Real from his final period, when the Real is radically *non-representational*. And not only non-representational but non-tolerable, traumatic. And is aleatoriness traumatic, according to Althusser? No, not directly. But the interesting historical examples that engaged him and that he sought in Machiavelli or in Marx’s chapter on primitive accumulation are nevertheless always connected, almost directly, with the question of the eruption of extreme violence in history. So, in conclusion, I would say that you are correct, in spite of the fact that my first reaction was along the lines that what differentiated Althusser from Lacan isn’t the absence of the Real but the absence of the Symbolic.

**PK** - How do you mean that?

**ÉB** - In the sense that the Symbolic is dealt with as something that essentially fills a function between the Imaginary and the economy of the imaginary formation.

**PK** - Subjection of the individual and his or her transformation into a subject is nevertheless linked with the order of the Imaginary and, precisely, the *Symbolic*. The subject, who is the result of subjection, imaginarily recognizes him- or herself finally in the order of the Symbolic.

**ÉB** - Yes, there we are in agreement. But it is necessary to say that the mechanism of interpellation and the recognition of the subject – and so how Althusser described it in the main part of “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses” – doesn’t originate from Lacan but from Freud. In my opinion, the greatest difference resides in the fact that Althusser didn’t believe in the existence of an autonomous symbolic order in Lacan’s sense or in some type of superiority of the Symbolic order above the Imaginary order, nor in some type of its superiority in relation to the phenomenon of recognition/non-recognition that defines it.

So it is rather a certain type of inversion of Lacan. I’m almost tempted to say a placing/inversion of Lacan on his feet. Because Lacan – in the period when he published *Écrits* and Jacques-Alain Miller produced his index for it – quite clearly expressed a perfectly absolute (almost theological) primacy of the symbolic order or significant.<sup>17</sup> But in the Althusserian text it is the opposite: theology, law, all dimensions which are characteristic of the symbolic order are understood as a function or moments of the imaginary representation of the world of the subject.

---

<sup>17</sup> Balibar is referring to Miller’s “Index raisonné des concepts majeurs,” which is attached to Lacan’s *Écrits*, concretely to the first subchapter of the first chapter, “L’ordre symbolique,” titled “Suprématie du signifiant,” which relates to the places in which Lacan expresses exactly the dominance of the symbolic order. See Miller, J-A, “Index raisonné des concepts majeurs,” in: Lacan, J., *Écrits*, Éditions du Seuil, Paris 1966, p. 895.



Now to the question of the Real. You are quite right that the concept of “encounter,” which became one of the cornerstones of aleatory materialism, most definitely existed earlier and thus didn’t only emerge in his final period. When we carefully read the text you referred to earlier, and some of his other texts, we see that whether it is on the plane of terminology (e.g., the concept “encounter”) or on the plane of definitions, it emerges much earlier. I am thinking here of Althusser’s statement that overdetermination [*surdétermination*] never exists without underdetermination [*sousdétermination*] when by way of these concepts the question of the aleatory or the contingent in the historical process is actually being expressed. And that creates a certain constant in Althusser’s thinking, albeit of course differently accentuated in different periods.

And, returning to “Ideological State Apparatuses,” you gave me an idea which, it seems to me, is correct: the point of indetermination is found in Althusser’s writings in two extreme forms that are clearly quite independent of each other.

Firstly, it is a space of radical contingency that produces the need of a concept of “individual” which could be interpellated in the subject. So this individual has a very enigmatic status. We could say that he is “material” which receives a certain form – that would be a sort of Aristotelianism in a nutshell. More interesting is to ask how, in essence, Althusser imagined that a specific ideological mechanism, which is clearly, let’s say, “self-producing,” *finds* (in some manner) the individuals and makes it so that they “work”, and that they “work by themselves.” And Althusser himself actually says nothing of this to us, but it is an aleatory or contingent element of this process.

The second aspect is that Althusser proposed an unusual, functionalist representation of the role of ideology, which resides in the reproduction of class dominance, state power, and finally in the reproduction of capitalism itself. And its language (and he himself realized this, albeit possibly too late) is so functionalist that the reader can only understand one thing from it: that the subjects are passive

participants in capitalist reproduction and don't have the possibility of escaping from this role. But, in reality, if we read the text in a different way, and if we already know about aleatory materialism, we can also reason that what Althusser was trying to understand was the question of what destabilizes and subverts this reproduction of capitalism, or of social dominance of whatever sort. And that which can destabilize and subvert (but at the same time also strengthen) this reproduction of capitalism is ideology – ideological interpellation, which is the mechanism guaranteeing the given social dominance. Nonetheless, with the fact that the mechanism of social repression *needs* just this ideological guarantee, the reproduction of dominance actually becomes by this very fragile.

It is a question of how precisely to define contingency between the individual and the instability and fragility of the subject, but it is evident that something takes place between the two that Althusser never theorized in any way, but which is nonetheless at the heart of his obsession. I discuss this in a short text that I wrote as an introduction on the occasion of a new release of his book *On the Reproduction of Capitalism*.

### MACHIAVELLI

**PK** - Althusser's thinking about politics is closely linked with his thinking about Machiavelli...

**ÉB** - Yes. I'm sure you know Althusser's text about Machiavelli, *Machiavelli and Us*. I prepared it for publication in the form of a small book.

**PK** - Yes, I read it in the edition of selected works from Althusser's posthumous texts.

**ÉB** - In the large edition. Certainly, but I always thought that the text *Machiavelli and Us* is a *book*. It isn't large, in fact it is rather small, but it is a *book*. And it is, of course, an unfinished book. It then falls into a category of philosophical book that I created for my own purposes, and which I would term *aporetic*. In it, I differentiate between books

in which the author for some reason simply didn't finish writing, and aporetic books, which remain unfinished because the theme is of such a nature that it isn't possible to bring the book to any conclusion.

**PK** - Do you mean that the question to which the text is seeking an answer is itself contradictory?

**ÉB** - No, the concept of aporia is related to the Greek word *aporie* (*aporos*), which indicates a problem that has no solution. But, as regards the discovery of *Machiavelli and Us*, I must say that it was quite a shock for me. Althusser showed me many of the manuscripts that he had written over the years but had never finished. This was because, as you know, he had a manic-depressive psychosis, so he had periods of hypomania connected with an exaggerated optimism in which it seemed to him that he was capable of doing almost anything. It was true that for a short period of time he could generate an unbelievable amount of energy when he wanted to make up for a previous depressive phase. So he would launch himself in writing a book, which he always approached as an act of demolishing a certain ideology or as a philosophical-political intervention, working on it for a whole week (day and night) in the course of which he would write 300 pages. But then these 300 pages would result in something that we could truly call aporic – that is, in a problem that has no solution and which therefore doesn't lead to further development. After the manic phase the depressive phase would come. Depression would keep him from continuing and the manuscript would remain in its given state. There are many of these manuscripts, from which some were posthumously published: “On the Reproduction,” “Marx in his Limits,” and other writings of this type. I had thought that he'd shown me everything [laughs], but he'd never discussed the text about Machiavelli with me. So when it surfaced and I read it over, I said to myself that it was one of his most successful texts. If somebody asks me which of Althusser's books I consider the best from an aesthetic and conceptual point of view,

then I answer that there are three: the small book about Montesquieu,<sup>18</sup> *For Marx*, and this exact book about Machiavelli. For this reason I also very much regret that the book about Machiavelli isn't seen as a *book*, that it got a little lost or buried among the other texts in the second volume of Althusser's posthumously published texts.<sup>19</sup> So I was glad that it was later published on its own.<sup>20</sup>

---

**Petr KUŽEL**, The Institute of Philosophy of the Czech Academy of Sciences  
(kuzelpetr82@seznam.cz)

---

<sup>18</sup> Althusser, L., *Montesquien, la politique et l'histoire*, Presses universitaires de France, Paris 1959. In English, first part of Althusser, L., *Politics and History: Montesquien, Rousseau, Marx*, tr. Ben Brewster, Verso 2017

<sup>19</sup> Althusser, L., *Écrits philosophiques et politiques. Tome II*, Éditions STOCK/IMEC, Paris 1995, pp. 39–174.

<sup>20</sup> Althusser, L., *Machiavel et nous*, introd. É. Balibar, Tallandier, Paris 2009. In English: Althusser, L., *Machiavelli and Us*, ed. Francois Matheron, Verso 2011.