# Introduction to "Lines of Force: Symposium on *Althusser and His Contemporaries: Philosophy's Perpetual War*"

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In a review article on several works dedicated to Althusser published nearly two decades after his death, Warren Montag noted that Althusser's death in 1990 had the paradoxical effect of bringing the philosopher, so to speak, back to life. Althusser's burial, Montag observed, would simultaneously be "an uncovering," for it would soon be revealed that Althusser

> had produced an enormous body of work over a period of more than four decades that he, for various and often-complicated reasons, had never published. It included not only a thesis on Hegel but a number of book-length manuscripts, essays, course-notes, as well as an astonishing number of letters, many touching on philosophical and political themes.[1]

If the recovery of these unpublished and private materials, above all, the writings on aleatory materialism, allowed for a "reopening of the Althusser case," it also had the effect of periodizing his thought according to distinct and self-enclosed phases or stages: an early, "structuralist" Althusser and a late, aleatory one. Such a periodization, of course, could not but impose limits on how the early and late Althusser could and should be read.

[1] Montag, "Spectres of Althusser," *Historical Materialism*, 19, no. 3 (2011): 148.

What becomes clear in Montag's review, however, is that the problem was not simply that readers had read an "epistemological break" into Althusser's oeuvre when they should have discerned a continuity or culmination; rather, the issue was simply that the most glaring or obvious contradiction between the early and late work became something like an epistemological obstacle in itself, one that blocked the path to a genuine, or better, concrete knowledge of Althusser's work insofar as it caused readers to overlook the smaller tensions, discrepancies, indeed, the "irreducible complexity," that shaped his work "from beginning to end."[2]

This review article, "Spectres of Althusser," appeared in the journal *Historical Materialism* in 2011, two years before Montag would publish *Althusser and His Contemporaries: Philosophies Perpetual War*, and can be read as a preface to the latter. Indeed, Montag's study of a philosopher who once seemed (and perhaps still does) to so many as "a nearly perfect specimen of that now extinct species, the structuralist," takes as its starting point the questions opened by the studies under review—questions, it is worth adding, Montag has explored since his first publication in the 1984:[3] what are the décalages and conflicts that endowed not only Althusser's works with meaning and force, but, above all, the theoretical and political conjuncture(s) in which he and his contemporaries intervened? How does the theoretical conjuncture itself allow certain meanings and effects of these texts to come to light while concealing others within the inner darkness of exclusion? What was the constellation of forces that made an essay such as "Marxism and Humanism" necessarily read in such a way that "obscured the extent to which Althusser's essay remained haunted by the humanism it sought to analyze"?[4]

The initial interest to convene the symposium, "Lines of Force," came out of a certain shared inclination to re-read *Althusser and His Contemporaries: Philosophy's Perpetual War* ten years after its original publication in 2013. The conveners felt that there was a way to make this return in order to learn again from the book's novel critical interventions into the questions posed above as well as to engage again and anew with its eponymous questions: "Althusser and his contemporaries: Philosophy's perpetual war."

The contributors and contributions to the symposium constitute a particular topography of national situations – from USA, Georgia, Greece, Argentina, and Italy – that itself articulates a certain important thesis regarding this 'contemporaneity': while there is an essential unevenness and plurality inhering in and to the globality of the capitalist mode of production as well as the histories of historical and dialectical materialism, there are certain common lines of force traversing the struggles within "Althusser and his contemporaries: Philosophy's perpetual war." Although the contributions employ sundry modes of engagement with the book, the essays advance a

[2] Ibid., 149.
[3] Montag, "Marxism and Psychoanalysis: The Impossible Encounter," *Minnesota Review*, no. 23 (Fall 1984): 70-85.
[4] Montag, *Althusser and His Contemporaries*, 117.

certain practice-theory in common. This is an effort in κρίνω; it is 'drawing lines of demarcation.'

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The contributions show that the concepts and questions of "Althusser and his contemporaries: Philosophy's perpetual war" animate even the thinking and writing that sets out to oppose theses developed under the name Althusser. In the writing known in English as "The Current Situation on the Philosophical Front" from 1977,[5] attributed to Alain Badiou and signed collectively by the Yenan Philosophy Group, the text opens:

> I. So Many Motley Soldiers on One Front
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> Philosophy as partisanship. Philosophy as concentration of antagonism, in terms of worldview. Philosophy thoroughly summoned by history. The servant not of the sciences but of weaponry. Not the reign of the eternal, much less of wisdom, but the trenchant figure of the actual, of the divided, of class. Not heaven and air, the place of contemplative transparency. Not at all the nocturnal waters of reconciliation. But the resilient earth of production, the weight of interestedness, the fire of the historical ordeal.[6]

This text does not aim to safeguard the name of Louis Althusser. On the contrary, one can see Badiou/Yenan Philosophy Group here already working to interrupt any kind of hagiography:

> Here we are going to place a few names, three notable names on the whole apparent surface: Lacan, Deleuze, and Althusser. Does this not say it all? No, because our philosophical times, since the revolt spread, no longer finds an emblem in a name. Every list of notables is foreclosed. We will explain why these names are at best masking and misleading the philosophical novelty that is at stake. What they tell us about the forces of the real is foreign to these names themselves.[7]

These statements bear an important if also curious relation to *Althusser and His Contemporaries* and the contributions to the symposium. For it is not a mute identity, a rote repetition of a dogma, that binds these statements to Montag's book or the symposium's contributions. On the contrary, the contributions show how *Althusser and His Contemporaries* demonstrates the many ways that Althusser's writings do not tend to lend

[5] The text serves as the introduction to the book *La Situation actuelle sur le front de la philosophie* (Maspero, 1977).
[6] Alain Badiou, *The Adventure of French Philosophy* (Verso, 2012), 1.
[7] Ibid.

themselves to such sloganeering as we can find here in this 1977 writing ('Philosophy thoroughly summoned by history'). And yet we can also affirm how this text is in tune with the tactics and strategies animating many of the theses of *Althusser and His Contemporaries*. This 1977 text says, in essence, almost nothing besides: 'Althusser and his contemporaries: Philosophy's perpetual war.'

With this we can see that *Althusser and His Contemporaries: Philosophy's Perpetual War* points to a certain 'paradigmatic' conceptual problematic – What is 'Althusser'? What is the meaning and effect of 'his contemporaries'? What is 'philosophy's perpetual war'? – that 'lasts a long time.' For while the statements of Yenan Philosophy Group/Badiou are neither entirely identical nor antithetical to the ones elucidated in *Althusser and His Contemporaries* as well as the contributions to this symposium, they are instructive for orienting this introduction, for they indicate a certain ongoing-ness to the problematic of 'Althusser and his contemporaries' and 'philosophy's perpetual war.' In particular, the phrase 'the weight of interestedness' serves as a particularly useful clause to orient the aforementioned 'drawing lines of demarcation' that animates the symposium's contributions.

Montag concluded his review article cited at the opening of this introduction with the following observation:

> To take these recent studies seriously is to see Althusser, not as a ghostly presence hovering at the margins of the world, haunting it like a bad memory, but rather as an indispensable part of the process by which the present may become intelligible to itself, his work in its unevenness and its conflictuality returning upon the present to furrow a hole in its walls, a hole through which something new, a future, may pass.[8]

The essays gathered here attest to the role *Althusser and His Contemporaries* has played in helping us to reread and rethink, that is, to trace in Althusser's writings the emptiness of distance taken, the lines of force that prevent from present from closing in on itself.

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Natalia Romé's essay, "Althusser and Foucault: Characters of the Authorless Theater. On the Imaginary, the Scenic, and the Phantasmatic," examines "a materialism of the imaginary" that is developed in the seventh and eighth chapters of *Althusser and His Contemporaries*. In order to chart a path through the "conceptual space that both unites Althusser and Foucault," who, along with Lacan, are the focus of these chapters, Romé attends to the visual and theatrical metaphors, and the "semantics of staging and optics," that permit us to return to "the critical force that *opens* up between the developments of these two great philosophers." Beginning with Montag's suggestion that Foucault, in

[8] Montag, "Spectres," 155.

*Discipline and Punish*, develops that which is only intimated—that is, the body and its individualization—in Althusser's ISAs essay, Romé argues that the individual body is ultimately an imaginary body, insofar as the body is nothing other than the "encounter of a heterogeneous plexus." As Romé suggests, such a reading of the body entails a turn towards Balibar's conceptualization of the transindividual, which is what permits us to grasp "the history of individuals" as "the history of the efficacy of the imaginary." Further, this turn to the imaginary, or rather the materialism of the imaginary, makes it necessary to take seriously the theoretical metaphors that appear across the texts of Althusser, Foucault, and, of course, Marx. And it is here that, if it is the case that this reading is possible on the basis of Foucault's oblique development of certain Althusserian themes, Romé also shows the instances of an Althusser "beyond" Foucault. For Romé, Althusser's metaphors, such as that of the authorless theater, as read by Montag, have a profoundly epistemological function: the author who "discovers" that he or she is "nothing but the character of another scene" will encounter "the solitude of the real."

Davit Galashvili's essay, "Mind, Body, and Politics: Spinoza contra Liberalism," articulates how Spinoza's philosophy develops a materialist philosophy or materialist practice of philosophy that specifically differs from sundry idealisms and idealist practices of philosophy at the level of concepts and categories. Against a liberal notion of a transcendent equality of individuals beyond the material world which determines the political interaction of 'individuals,' Galashvili's essay shows how Spinoza articulates concepts of bodies, minds, and politics without recourse to the dualism of an idealist "constitutional illusion." Galashvili shows that Spinoza's notion of right and power is concerned with the category of necessity rather than the formalization of possibility. Galashvili writes, "Right for Spinoza is always actualized; it exists in the ability of an individual to act." The essay shows how Montag's work demonstrates the particular antecedence and significance of Spinoza for Althusser, for Althusser can be said to develop the materialist practice-theory of Spinoza such that the question of politics is not of liberal speculation regarding possibility, but rather the necessity of minds and bodies.

Banu Bargu's essay, "Underneath Harlequin's Cloak: Reflections on Aleatory Materialism," elucidates the theoretical discrepancies and conceptual struggles *within* the writings of Althusser, particularly regarding the notions of materialism and the void (*le vide*). Bargu shows how Montag's symptomatic reading of Althusser demonstrates that these discrepancies are "inner conflictualities," not facile, at-hand concepts or slogans that can be deployed to "defend a rigorous Marxism." Bargu's essay distinguishes between an "ontological" notion of the void, of an original nothingness against the notion of an end or origin, whereby the "*object*" of this materialist philosophy is such void, and what she calls the void that is an act, "a practice of 'intervention,'" a "*philosophy that voids*." The 'ontological' thesis of the void leads to the question of a deviation, of the world as a result of encounter, rather than the dissemination of an originary form. Bargu shows that

Montag outlines a shift from this 'ontological' conception of (the) void to one that is an intervention, the '*philosophy that voids*' and can facilitate the emergence of a new theoretical practice. Bargu's elucidation of the inner conflict regarding (the) void bears particular and significant consequences for 'Althusser and his contemporaries: Philosophy's perpetual war.' For as Bargu writes, "In Montag's acute formulation, Deleuze presents 'a philosophy of the encounter without the void.'" Bargu's essay thus identifies that the materialist practice of philosophy for Althusser constitutes a conjuncture of (the) void: ontology sive intervention, structure sive encounter.

Panagiotis Sotiris' essay tracks the relationship between the notions of structure and encounter in Althusser's work. Taking up the issues raised by critics of Althusser (above all, E. P. Thompson and Ted Benton) as well as Althusser's self-criticism, Sotiris argues against the idea that Althusser was in fact the structuralist that he would later come to renounce. As Sotiris argues, it is possible to "revisit the Althusser of 'High Althusserianism'" as "a way of thinking that was already beyond structuralism." Such a reading is possible, Sotiris argues, on the basis of Montag's intervention into the "structuralist moment," which highlights the "complexity" of this moment: this complexity is registered in the relationship between the concepts of structure and genesis as well as structuralism's incorporation of "a conception of continuous historical time that had more affinity with a Hegelian conception of time than was generally acknowledged." Following Montag, Sotiris shows how the most powerful critique of Althusser's "flirtation" with structuralism came from a theorist within the Althusser camp itself, Pierre Macherey, whose forceful critique of structuralist literary theory produced effects within Althusser's own work. But this critique did not simply cause Althusser to abandon structuralism; rather it allows us to see the critique of structuralism already present in texts like "Contradiction and Overdetermination" and *Reading Capital*. Sotiris' article thus demonstrates that Althusser's self-criticism is not simply a single moment in Althusser's work, but "a constant tension" that appears throughout his work.

In "The Adventures of Interpellation: on Montag's Materialist Reading of Althusser's Theory of Ideology," Stefano Pippa reconstructs Montag's intervention in what the former calls the "second reception" of Althusser. According to Pippa, this second reception allowed for both the reposing of "old questions in an entirely new way" and the recognition that Althusser was a philosopher who "still had much to say in our present conjuncture." After reconstructing what he calls the three steps of Montag's retheorization of Althusser's theory of ideology (a critical and "non-teleological" reading of the relationship between "Marxism and Humanism" and the ISAs essay; the role of Spinoza in the theory of ideology; the division within the very concept of interpellation), Stefano investigates the problem of the individual and individualization by turning to a theorist whose name does not appear in *Althusser and His Contemporaries*: Nicos Poulantzas. For Poulantzas, notwithstanding certain of his misreadings of Althusser's theory of ideology and the imaginary, "makes individualization a strategy *of the State*," and thus his

work "could be fruitfully used to develop Althusser's (or, more precisely, Montag's) theory." In a final movement, Pippa explores the problems of the subject raised by Montag's reading of interpellation, problems that touch on and, in some sense, complicate the functionalism of the ISAs essay: Pippa here refers above all to Montag's allusion to the potential for "a rigorously anti-humanist" form of "resistance and revolt *within* ideology and the ideological state apparatuses." For Pippa such a theory of resistance and revolt remains an "important field of investigation, both theoretically and politically."

Giorgos Fourtounis's essay, "The 'Last Instance' as Deconstruction? Revisiting the Derridean Critique of Althusser's Early Structuralism via Spinozist Immanence," proposes a "Derridean critique of Derrida's critique" of Althusser's structuralist moment. Following a suggestive line of argumentation developed by Montag in *Althusser and His Contemporaries*, which challenges the received idea that Althusser and Derrida, even if they asked and in a sense responded to strikingly similar questions, nevertheless carried out their respective philosophical operations "in a way that was fundamentally incompatible," Fourtounis argues that Althusser's philosophical protocol in his texts on structure "anticipate [Derrida's] own deconstructive strategy, a fact that eluded Derrida himself as well as many others following him." Fourtounis constructs his argument by attending to the place of Spinoza, that is, Spinozan immanence, in Althusser's structuralist writings; such an orientation allows Fourtounis to show that Althusser's famous declaration at the end of "Contradiction and Overdetermination" that the "lonely hour of the 'last instance' never comes" can thus be read as "retroactively anticipating Derrida's lesson of *difference*": by reading Althusser *in* Derrida and Derrida *in* Althusser, Fourtounis illustrates the necessary task proposed by Montag of thinking and acting from within the interior of a given "conceptual order" precisely in order to "undermine and destabilize" it.

In the essay "Is Materialist Philosophy an Anti-Philosophy? Althusser on Philosophy's Perpetual War and the Desire for Understanding," Aurelio Sainz Pezonaga asks whether Althusser's materialist philosophy can be considered an anti-philosophy. Taking as his starting point Badiou's contradictory remarks on Althusser's relation to philosophy and anti-philosophy, Pezonaga discerns anti-philosophical moments across Althusser's oeuvre, for "[i]n philosophy's perpetual war, there can be no philosophy that does not entail a specter of anti-philosophy. Therefore, there cannot be a materialist philosophy that does not entail the specter of anti-philosophy." Even if there are such instances of anti-philosophy across Althusser's writings, however, his materialist philosophy is not reducible to anti-philosophy; rather, as Pezonaga argues, materialism is "the philosophy of the desire for understanding, of the philosophy of the communism of understanding." The question of the desire for understanding and its relationship to philosophy as perpetual war and philosophy as class struggle in theory leads Pezonaga to consider the question of liberation in the current conjuncture via Spinoza. As Pezonaga concludes, Althusser's self-critical turn invites us, today, "to propose an additional shift that pluralizes both historical materialism and revolutionary practices." The pluralization

of historical materialism and revolutionary practice coincides with a Spinozist conception according to which heterogeneous and singular desires for understanding can "combine to overcome domination."

In "Co-Operation and Overdetermination: Humor in the Critique of Political Economy," Dylan Fagan teases out the implications of one of Althusser's characteristically humorous lines as quoted by Montag in the third chapter of *Althusser and His Contemporaries*: "Reality has a little more imagination." This litotic formulation is deployed by Althusser to show the "paradoxical" manner in which "non-scientific ideologies" may, under specific configurations or "encounters, give birth to true discoveries – just as one sees fire leap from the impact of foreign bodies." The joke is thus on those who, due precisely to lack of imagination, cannot fathom that "the entire complex reality of history … enters into play in the intelligence of the scientific community itself." According to Fagan, the importance of humor thus lies in its ability to interrupt and displace the "dominations and commandings spoken by the capitalist character-masks, including its so-called scientists," not, to be sure "in the form of a guarantee, but rather as a test or attempt." In the critique of political economy, humor interrupts so that "another form of social relation can take hold."

In "'The Disciple of Machiavelli and Lenin': Montag's Althusser," Joseph Serrano identifies and develops the particular significance of the concept of conjuncture in Althusser's thinking and writing as well as how it impacts Montag's reading of Althusser and the notion of a 'disciple of Machiavelli and Lenin.' Serrano shows that this is a concept for Althusser that does not set out a "pragmatist conception" of a totalized set of finite elements; rather, this concept, conjuncture, is that which brings together that in and for which it acts. This is, Serrano notes, an "activity" in Althusser's readings of Machiavelli and Lenin; it is moreover not a specularly centered process, but rather one which subjects those who are thinking it to certain "abrupt turns." This is not therefore a re-duplication of an at-hand totality, but rather an occasional and inconstant shaking up of prevailing configurations and tendencies of sets and elements. Conjuncture, Serrano articulates, is therefore not a pragmatic object of knowledge for Althusser but rather a theoretical practice and technique – a concept – that names an acting on and by the class struggle.

The symposium concludes with a response from Warren Montag to the contributions and his preface to the Korean translation of *Althusser and His Contemporaries*, as well as his unpublished (in English) essay "Marxism and the Spinozist Turn," in which Montag discusses the importance of Spinoza for Marxists at certain turning points in the perpetual war of philosophy. Taken with the contributions, the publication of this "Lines of Force" symposium constitutes what Montag recalls was for Althusser an 'overriding need,' that is, 'to think and write as closely as possible with others, that is, collectively, producing shared ideas and engaging in a shared evaluation of these ideas on the basis of their effects.'