Althusser's Self-Criticism About Structuralism Revisited. The Importance of Warren Montag's Reading

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One of the most widespread criticisms of Althusser concerns his relation to structuralism. The leitmotiv of this critique is well known: Althusser basically imported into Marxism a conception of an idealism of social structures according to which abstract structures are dominant, creating an inescapable social grammar that eliminates the space of human agency and praxis. In the words of E.P. Thompson:

> If there is a 'Marxism' of the contemporary world which Marx or Engels would have recognised instantly as an idealism, Althusserian structuralism is this. The category has attained to a primacy over its material referent; the conceptual structure hangs above and dominates social being.[1]

For Thompson, Althusser offers a version of structuralism, despite his subsequent clarifications, and consequently a philosophy of *stasis,* a system that leaves no space for actual social and historical movement:

> Very clearly, Althusser's system is more than a "flirtation" with structuralist terms. It does not matter at all whether or not this system qualifies as a structuralism according to certain recent Parisian notations

[1] Thompson, *The Poverty of Theory,* 13.

> in linguistics, anthropology or psycho-analysis. What constitutes a structuralism, in a more general sense, is, (i) that however many variables are introduced, and however complex their permutations, these variables maintain their original fixity as categories: with Smelser, the "value-system", the factors of production, "political arrangements", and (the motor) "structural differentiation"; with Althusser, "the economy", "politics", "ideology", and (the motor) "class struggle." Thus the categories are *categories of stasis,* even if they are then set in motion as moving-parts. (ii) Movement can only take place *within the closed field* of the system or structure; that is, however complex and mutually-reciprocating the motions of the parts, this movement is enclosed within the overall limits and determinations of the pre-given structure.[2]

For his part, Ted Benton offers the canonical version of treating Althusser as structuralist thinker:

> How can Althusser, a self-professed Marxist philosopher, ally with structuralism to the extent of complementing its already effective assault on Marxist positions? By the single tactic of denying that those positions were, all along, Marxist positions. Marxism had been conquered from within by alien ideologies, and so, by implication, the weaponry now on offer from the structuralists justifies a tactical alliance with them to enable a recapture of Marxism for itself.[3]

In a certain way, Althusser's own self-criticism seemed to partly substantiate this critique about the structuralist leanings of his earlier texts. Even though not fully admitting to being a structuralist of course, he stated that he only flirted with a certain structuralist terminology and vocabulary:

> It must be admitted that it thus became tempting to flirt (*kokettieren*), not with the structure and its elements, etc. (because all these concepts are in Marx), but for example with the notion of the "effectivity of an absent cause" -- which is, it must be said, much more Spinozist than structuralist! -- in order to account at one and the same time for Classical Political Economy's "mistakes", for the Relations of Production, and even for fetishism (but I did not do so: the theory of fetishism always seemed to me ideological) -- and to herald, by the term *structural causality* (*cf.* Spinoza), something which is in fact an "immense theoretical discovery" of Marx but which can also, in the Marxist tradition, be termed dialectical *materialist* causality. Provided that their critical effects are kept under control, these notions are not entirely useless -- an example is the notion of the "absent cause". But we were not always able to restrain

[2] Ibid, 83.
[3] Benton, *The Rise and Fall of Structuralist Marxism,* 15.

> ourselves, in certain pages of *Reading Capital*, in that Spring of 1965, and our "flirt" with structuralist terminology obviously went beyond acceptable limits, because our critics, with a few exceptions, did not see the irony or parody intended. For we had in mind quite another Personage than the anonymous author of structuralist themes and their vogue![4]

The use of the phrase 'flirt (*kokketiren*)', is an obvious nod to Marx and his description of some of the Hegelian overtones in *Capital*. In a certain manner, Althusser wants to suggest that he used structuralist terminology to some extent, but he avoided the essential aspects of structuralism. This enables him to offer his own definition of structuralism:

> Structuralism is not a completely worked-out philosophy, but a jumble of vague themes which only *realizes* its ultimate tendency under certain definite conditions. According to what you "understand" by structuralism (*e.g.*, anti-psychologism), according to what you see in it when you come up against concepts which it has in fact borrowed, and according to whether you follow the extreme logic which inspires it, either you are not a structuralist or you are one more or less, or you really are one. Now no-one can claim that we ever gave way to the crazy formalist idealism of the idea of producing the real by a combinatory of elements. Marx does speak of the "combination" of elements in the structure of a mode of production. But this combination (*Verbindung*) is not a formal "combinatory": we expressly pointed that out. Purposely. In fact this is where the most important demarcation line is drawn.[5]

This is a criticism of structuralism as formalism that is already present in his 1966 text on Lévi-Strauss. There the anthropologist is accused not of dealing with forms – since Althusser insists that every proper social science deals with forms – but for the absence a theory of the mode of production that makes it impossible for Lévi-Strauss to actually explain kinship structures. Althusser writes:

> One of the most spectacular results of his theory is that it is *totally incapable* of accounting for the fact that kinship structures in primitive societies are neither everywhere nor always the same, but manifest important variations. These variations are for him no more than *variations* of a purely formal, tautological *mode of combination* which explains nothing. When you postulate a mode of combination that permits an infinity of *possible* forms in its combinatory matrix, the pertinent question is not that a given reality (a given observable structure of kinship) is truly included as possible among the variations of the combinatory (for it is tautological to argue

[4] Althusser, *Essays in Self Criticism,* 126-127.
[5] Ibid, 129.

> that the real is *possible*), the pertinent question on the contrary is this: Why is it that this reality and no other that has become and therefore is real?[6]

Althusser insists that when dealing with structuralism and its crucial opposition between form and process, a certain 'Hegelian' structuralism, a formalism of the process was conceivable. But this raises the question of the efficacy of class struggle at the heart of theoretical production. Hence Althusser shifts to the self-criticism of his early theoreticism. And from this comes the crucial reference to Spinozism:

> If we never were structuralists, we can now explain why: why we seemed to be, even though we were not, why there came about this strange misunderstanding on the basis of which books were written. We were guilty of an equally powerful and compromising passion: *we were Spinozists.*'[7]

Moreover, Althusser argues that instead of an idealist structuralist approach it was possible to envisage both a different Marxist topography and a non-idealist conception of the Whole:

> The conclusion is obvious: *the position of the Marxist Topography protects the dialectic against the delirious idealist notion of producing its own material substance* : it imposes on it, on the contrary, a forced recognition of the material conditions of its own efficacy. These conditions are related to the definition of the sites (the "spheres"), to their limits, to their mode of determination in the "totality" of a social formation. If it wants to grasp these realities, the materialist dialectic cannot rest satisfied with the residual forms of the Hegelian dialectic. It needs other forms, which cannot be found in the Hegelian dialectic. It is here that Spinoza served us as a (sometimes direct, sometimes very indirect) reference: in his effort to grasp a "non-eminent" (that is, non-transcendent) not simply transitive (á la Descartes) nor expressive (á la Leibniz) causality, which would account for the action of the Whole on its parts, and of the parts on the Whole -- an unbounded Whole, which is only the active relation between its parts: in this effort Spinoza served us, though indirectly, as a first and almost unique guide.[8]

Interestingly enough, the notion of the *topique*, which plays a role in Althusser's manuscript on *Reproduction*[9] seems like a partial answer to the question of how to conceive of a non-structuralist conception of the social whole, and moreover it seems to be tainted with a certain functionalism, at least in terms of vocabulary.

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[6] Althusser, "On Lévi-Strauss," in *The Humanist Controversy,* 26.
[7] Althusser, *Essays in Self-Criticism,* 132.
[8] Ibid, 140-141.
[9] Althusser, *On the Reproduction of Capitalism. Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses.*

However, one might say that Althusser's real self-criticism is the way the whole conceptual framework of the encounter starts to emerge after 1966-1967 and then in the early 1970s. It seems that Althusser attempts to think of social forms as encounters. This adds a strong sense of anti-teleology and singularity to the very relationality to which the notion of structure pointed, with material rituals and apparatuses adding the element of reproduction and durability of such encounters. We know that the notion of the encounter emerges partly as a way of rethinking questions of historical materialism and that it is already present in the second half of the 1960s for Althusser. In 1967, he would insist that:

> I think Marx's text indicates that capitalism is a result, and that, like any result, it is the result of a *historical process*. In everything that we have written, it has never been a question of anything other than History, which 'They' call, in their language, *genesis*. But capitalism is the result *of a process that does not take the form of a genesis*. The result of what? Marx tells us several times: of the process of an *encounter* of several distinct, definite, indispensable elements, engendered in the previous historical process by different *genealogies* that are independent of each other and can, moreover, be traced back to several possible 'origins': accumulation of money capital, 'free' labour-power, technical inventions, and so forth.[10]

This idea of social relations (and structures) as encounters, and in particular encounters that last, is more evident in the 1969 manuscript *On Reproduction*:

> It is easy to see that, if a mode of production lasts only as long as the system of state apparatuses that guarantees the conditions of reproduction (reproduction = duration) of its base, that is, its relations of production, one has to attack the system of the state apparatuses and seize state power to disrupt the conditions of the reproduction (= duration = existence) of a mode of production and establish new relations of production. They are established under the protection of a new state and new state apparatuses which ensure the reproduction (= duration = existence) of the new relations of production, in other words, the new mode of production.[11]

In a sense, what Althusser suggests is that what we tend to treat as structures are in fact encounters that last by means of the existence of material apparatuses (and the practices and rituals they entail, the forms of misrecognition they induce, and the forms of power they help articulate). This new emphasis on practices, rituals, the material and practical character of ideology, and its effectivity on material apparatuses is necessary to this crucial theoretical shift from structures to encounters. This particularly addresses the question of

[10] Althusser, "The Humanist Controversy," in *The Humanist Controversy and Other Essays,* 296.
[11] Althusser, *On the Reproduction of Capitalism,* 151.

how the inherently contingent character of the encounter can be combined with the reproduction of relations of productions and social forms.

In this sense, the completion of Althusser's self-criticism lies inthe notion of the 'structure of the encounter,' a syntagm that by itself seems to point to a different and antagonistic problematic:

> Whence the form if order and the form if beings whose birth is induced by this pile-up, determined as they are by the structure of the encounter; whence, once the encounter has been effected (but not before), the primacy of the structure over its elements; whence, finally, what one must call an affinity and a complementarity [*complétude*] of the elements that come into play in the encounter, their 'readiness to collide-interlock' [*accrochabilité*], in order that this encounter 'take hold', that is to say, 'take *form*', *at last give birth to Forms*, *and new Forms* -just as water 'takes hold' when ice is there waiting for it, or milk does when it curdles, or mayonnaise when it emulsifies. Hence the primacy of 'nothing' over all 'form', and *of aleatory materialism over all formalism*. In other words, not just anything can produce just anything, but only elements destined [*voués*] to encounter each other and, by virtue of their affinity, to 'take hold' one upon the other - which is why, in Democritus, and perhaps even in Epicurus, the atoms are, or are described as, 'hooked', that is, susceptible of interlocking one after the other, from all eternity, irrevocably, forever.[12]

This is one way to read Althusser's self-criticism about structuralism, a reading that more or less accepts the idea that Althusser indeed was a structuralist in the 1960s and not simply a Spinozist. We might, however, revisit the Althusser of 'High Althusserianism, considering it a way of thinking that was already beyond structuralism, which was itself more complex than is currently assumed..

And I think that the way in which he offers a much more complex description of both 'structuralism' and Althusser's relation to it is one of the great and important contributions of Warren Montag's book.

Firstly, Montag stresses the complexity of the history of what we now call structuralism, including its dialogue with phenomenology, something often underestimated in the relevant debates.

Secondly, he stresses the fact that the 'schematic' opposition between structure and genesis in fact pointed to a much more complex articulation of theoretical positions.

Thirdly, certain aspects of 'structuralism' tended to incorporate a conception of continuous historical time that had more affinity with a Hegelian conception of time than was generally acknowledged and this was something that Althusser indeed stressed:

[12] Althusser, *Philosophy of the Encounter: Later Writings 1978-1987*, 191-192.

> The synchronic is contemporaneity itself, the co-presence of the essence with its determinations, the present being readable as a structure in an 'essential section' because the present is the very existence of the essential structure. The synchronic therefore presupposes the ideological conception of a continuous-homogeneous time. It follows that the diachronic is merely the development of this present in the sequence of a temporal continuity in which the 'events' to which 'history' in the strict sense can be reduced (cf. Lévi-Strauss) are merely successive contingent presents in the time continuum. Like the synchronic, which is the primary concept, the diachronic therefore presupposes both of the very two characteristics I have isolated in the Hegelian conception of time: an ideological conception of historical time.[13]

Montag also stresses that Derrida already in 1959 attempted to problematize the opposition between Structure and Genesis:

> In a very important sense, Derrida's text is an intervention, an attempt from within the problematic of Husserl's phenomenology to call into question the two nominally opposing forms in which it was actualized in France: on the one hand, a philosophy of consciousness and, on the other, a formalism.[14]

And as Derrida stressed one could already find in Husserl a critique of a certain structuralism:

> In Husserl's eyes the structuralism of the *Weltanschauungsphilosophie* is a historicism. And despite Dilthey's vehement protests, Husserl will persist in thinking that, like all historicism, and despite its originality, the *Weltanschauungsphilosophie* avoids neither relativism nor skepticism.[15]

But Montag also shows how things were more complex than that. It is also interesting how for example he stresses Cavaillés's critique of the transcendentalism that survived in of phenomenology's emphasis on consciousness. In a sense, it is Cavaillès who offered, for the first time, this combined critique of both a philosophy of consciousness, in the then traditional sense, and the new emerging logical formalism:

> Progress is material or between singular essences, its motor the demand that each of them must be surpassed. It is not a philosophy of consciousness but a philosophy of the concept that can yield a doctrine

[13] Althusser and Balibar, *Reading Capital,* 96.
[14] Montag, *Althusser and His Contemporaries,* 33.
[15] Derrida, 200.

> of science. The generative necessity is not that of an activity, but of a dialectic.[16]

Montag also examines Althusser's critique of Lévi-Strauss. He indicates that although Althusser obviously distanced himself from that version of structuralism, while acknowledging its importance, he still avoided proceeding with the kind of symptomatic reading that Derrida actually performed on Lévi-Strauss.

However, there is also another important contribution by Warren Montag on what constitutes Althusser's actual "flirting" with structuralism or at least with some form of structuralist ideology. And it is also important that Montag stresses that it was Pierre Macherey who actually criticized Althusser for this "deviation." Montag shows how Macherey actually points to the main problem in Althusser's theorization of the social whole, the notion of the latent structure and the "theatrical metaphors." And indeed, Althusser decided to get rid of some of these phrases in the second edition of *Lire Le Capital*.

And Macherey indeed was a critic of structuralism already in his *Theory of Literary Production*:

> The idea of structure, which seems to come from linguistics, where it is justifiably applied to literary objects, is actually used in literary analysis in a sense remote from its original one. It goes back to the entirely unscientific hypothesis that the work has an intrinsic meaning (though this does not imply that this meaning is explicit); paradoxically, this enables it to be read before it has even been written.[17]

In contrast to structuralism, Macherey points to the possibility of a highly original materialist deconstructionist approach:

> A different hypothesis, more fruitful though hardly ever used, might be offered: the work exists above all by its determinate absences, by what it does not say, in its relation to what it is not. Not that it can conceal anything: this meaning is not buried in its depths, masked or disguised; it is not a question of hunting it down with interpretations. It is not in the work but by its side: on its margins, at that limit where it ceases to be what it claims to be because it has reached back to the very conditions of its possibility. It is then no longer constituted by a factitious necessity, the product of a conscious or unconscious intention.[18]

[16] Cavaillés, *On Logic and the Theory of Science,* 136.
[17] Macherey, *A Theory of Literary Production,* 141.
[18] Ibid, 154.

Moreover, Macherey seems to suggest that in contrast to a certain structuralist ideology, we need to think of a different conflictual relationality:

> The disorder that permeates the work is related to the disorder of ideology (which cannot be organised as a system). The work derives its form from this incompleteness which enables us to identify the active presence of a conflict at its borders. In the defect of the work is articulated a new truth: for those who seek to know this truth it establishes an original relation to the real, it establishes the revealing form of a knowledge. [19]

Montag points out how the way that Macherey criticizes a certain version of a structural interiority in the literary text is very similar to the way that Althusser, under Macherey's critique and influence, decides to discard any notion of latent or deeper structures and thus of any conception of the structure as a 'social grammar' or essence or even worse "hidden truth."

Does this mean that we should fully treat early Althusser as 'structuralist'? I strongly disagree. One reason would be that in "Contradiction and Overdetermination" we do have the full development of the thesis that when talking about structure, we are always talking about the structure of a conjuncture in its singularity.

The other is the suggestion made recently by Giorgos Fourtounis[20] about the strong relation of Althusser's initial conceptualization of structures and a strongly Spinozist conception of immanence, with immanence being the limit of any conception of metaphysical dualism, including the one inscribed in the notion of latent structures. Moreover, in a highly original manner, Fourtounis revisits the overdetermination in the last instance question, rejecting the position that 'in the last instance' means a return of dualism and some form of economistic determinism. In contrast, Fourtounis insists that for Althusser over-determination is the last instance, and he suggests that this is exactly the point, i.e., it is this radical conception of immanence that makes Althusser's debt to Spinoza more evident.

In sum, I believe that Montag's work has helped us to understand that Althusser's self-criticism should not be treated as an actual intellectual trajectory but rather as a constant tension running through his work. In light of this, Althusser's earlier work appears less as a simple repetition of classical structuralism but rather as a very original attempt towards a thinking of social relationality in all its conflictuality, contingency, and openness, namely a philosophy that attempts to actually think how social transformation can emerge as a potentiality within a certain always uneven, always original, always overdetermined conjuncture.

This doesn't mean that all of Althusser's self-criticism should be discarded. For example, although the Theory of theoretical practice offers a highly original anti-

[19] Ibid, 155-6.
[20] Fourtounis, *Deconstruction 'in the last instance': Althusser's Spinozist Stucturalism (1960-1969) and early Derrida.*

empiricist and in a certain sense anti-rationalist conception of knowledge as a materialist process of production, Althusser was right to self-critically point to the way this was presented as a 'complete' theory in Marx almost ready made, just waiting to be 'extracted' by means of a symptomatic reading. On this point Althusser's subsequent emphasis that theoretical practice is a productive process traversed by class struggle and a never-ending and never complete break with ideology, in indeed an important elaboration and a necessary correction of his initial position. The same goes for Althusser's highly original rethinking of the very notion of philosophy as not a guarantor of truth but as a very specific, political in the last instance, constant intervention. Here again the self-criticism brings forward important insights.

It is in this sense that we can say that Montag's work helps stress the importance of Althusser especially in the contemporary conjuncture. The contemporary return to pages in the history of Marxism, and the constant re-reading of authors in the Marxist tradition by a younger generation has surely enriched our knowledge. At the same time, it is interesting to see how in certain aspects this also tends towards a defense of 'classical' and supposedly 'dialectical' Marxism against 'post-Marxism,' in a genealogy of which Althusser is also mentioned as a precursor. In this sense, bringing forward the originality of Althusser's materialist practice of philosophy can be considered an urgent task.

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