The "Last Instance" as Deconstruction?
Revisiting the Derridean Critique of Althusser's Early Structuralism *via* Spinozist Immanence

Giorgos Fourtounis

Warren Montag 's already seminal *Althusser and His Contemporaries: Philosophy's Perpetual War*, has left its mark on Althusserian studies, to the renewal of which he himself has contributed enormously. There, he undertakes a dual positioning of Althusser's philosophical intervention: in the "theoretical conjuncture" of his own time, without an understanding of which we would be unable to comprehend it, as well as in the present, foregrounding its potential for new theoretical alliances and confrontations, demarcations and appropriations. I felt that I needed much more space if I were to do full justice to the whole scope and wealth of this most erudite study; instead, I'll endeavor a more focused approach to it, following its direction: siding with Montag, I'll question the widespread view regarding the relation between Althusser's first period and early Derrida's problematic and method of deconstruction, which are still largely viewed, as Montag points out critically, "as essentially separate from and often opposed to one another, each endeavoring to think, even if about remarkably similar questions, in a way that was fundamentally incompatible."[1] Partly responsible for this reception, as I will suggest, was Derrida's own critical reading of Althusser's early "structuralism." Accordingly, I will offer a Derridean critique of Derrida's critique of Althusser's texts on structure which, I argue,

[1] Warren Montag, *Althusser and His Contemporaries: Philosophy's Perpetual War*, 8.

anticipate his own deconstructive strategy, a fact that eluded Derrida himself as well as many others following him. I strongly believe that Althusser's theoretical relation with this major figure among "his contemporaries", and the retroactive elaboration of a possibility for the philosophical alliance between them that was missed at the time, is of great importance for what is at stake both philosophically and politically today. This discussion will inevitably involve Spinoza whose contemporaneity then and now is intimately linked to its most important questions.[2]

1.

Montag reminds us that Althusser begins his discussion on structure by means of his emphatic opposition to the apparently inescapable dilemma between the two general notions allowed by classical philosophy of causality and the whole: first, what can be termed the *atomistic* conception of the "whole" and its origin (let me tentatively call it "materialist"), where the constitution of the whole is reduced to the transitive, analytic, quasi-mechanical causality of its elements; and second, the *holistic* conception (which might more appropriately be called "idealist"), where both the elements and their totality are governed by an essentialist, expressive and teleological causality.[3] According to Althusser, the entire problematic of classical Political Economy is to be classified in the former,[4] while the latter "dominates all Hegel's thought."[5]

Althusser sought a way out of this dilemma: while he dismissed from the outset the atomistic conception (for its inability to account for, among other things, the "complex and deep space" of "economic phenomena," he also questioned the classical holist notion of the whole.[6] This questioning buttressed his critique of both the economist and the Hegelian (or *hegelianisant*) understandings of Marxism and was itself based on the critique of the category of *expressive totality*, in which a central and privileged element, representing the whole's essence, is expressed in all the elements and determines their totality.[7] These elements then become the essence's phenomena, essentially homologous (despite any epiphenomenal diversity and differentiation), inherently relative and articulable, determined as mutually articulated within the whole. According to Althusser's critique, for this scheme to function, the ontology of this central, determinant element is in principle irrelevant. This in turn entails the critique of the classical Marxist idea, Feuerbachian in origin, of the *inversion* of the Hegelian totality and dialectics: if the expressive totality is essentially idealist, Althusser will say, it cannot be rendered materialist

[2] On a personal note: a conversation with Warren that started more than 20 years ago has largely determined my ways and means of positing and handling the cluster of questions regarding structure in Althusser and beyond. The fact that I return to them, now, picking up again the thread of that conversation from, in a sense, where we left off has a great symbolic and emotional significance for me.
[3] Montag, *Althusser and His Contemporaries*, 85.
[4] Louis Althusser, "The Object of Capital" in *Reading Capital*, 182.
[5] Althusser, "The Object of Capital," 186.
[6] Ibid, 182.
[7] Montag *Althusser and His Contemporaries*, 85.

merely by "inverting" it and placing the material element of production in the determinant position, in place of an ideal or spiritual principle.

Althusser then proposed a new concept of the whole, incompatible with both the atomistic and the holistic notions and, more specifically, irreducible to the notion of expressive totality: the concept of the *structured whole*, a whole determined by its structure, on the basis of the latter's distinctive causality, *structural causality*; in short, the concept of *structure*.

At this point, Montag points to a tension traversing Althusser's discourse on structure, which becomes somehow encapsulated within this very term: "what appeared … as a single, unified notion of structure was … the site of division between two antagonistic conceptions."[8] Montag, meticulously reading Pierre Macherey's correspondence with Althusser, concludes that Althusser himself, driven by the critical remarks of his younger student and collaborator,

> drew a line of demarcation within his own work … making visible, if only through the void of a distance taken from certain statements*, the coexistence of two concepts of structure* whose antagonism, whose irreducible difference, had before remained concealed.[9]

According to Montag, then, in the first of these antagonistic conceptions, structure is understood as an organizing principle hidden in the depths of the structured social reality, as its "deeper grammar generating surface phenomena," latent beneath the individualities it comprises, a structure totalizing its elements and thus akin to a genuinely holistic whole: this conception of structure amounts to a recovery of the expressive totality within the very argument that was meant to refute it.[10] A dualist notion thus re-emerges, which opposes the structured to its structure, surface to depth, phenomena to essence and, ultimately, materiality to ideality. The second notion corresponds to Althusser's concept of *overdetermination*: an irreducibly complex relation of unequal and heterogeneous elements, relationally and differentially constituted, within a historically variable architecture, where *each time* one of these structural elements is *dominant*, that is, a *structure in dominance*. Now the structured field should be understood as a "surface without depth," the elements of which do not express a deep and hidden essence.[11] Contrary to the essentialist and teleological notion of expressive totality, the elements here are inherently heterogeneous and divergent; they are not related, complementary and articulable by origin; they do not seek one another and all together their prescribed whole. Within this structure, the intrinsic inequality, individuality and "incommensurability" of the elements are preserved.[12] Structure now is just what, exercising its own peculiar causality or

[8] Ibid, 83.
[9] Ibid, 80; emphasis added.
[10] Panagiotis Sotiris, *A Philosophy for Communism: Rethinking Althusser*, 63.
[11] Warren Montag, "Althusser's Nominalism: Structure and Singularity (1962-6)," *Rethinking Marxism*, 69.
[12] Montag, *Althusser and His Contemporaries*, 85.

"effectivity," holds together or articulates these irreducibly centrifugal elements, making up a genuinely complex individuality.

Now, if the elements are not articulable by nature, then the structure that actually articulates them has to exercise some "violence" on them, namely, its specific kind of causality, in order to *make* them *structural elements*, to integrate them in the network of differential structural relations.

But how should this articulation and its cause, the structure, be conceived? How (and from where) does this structure exert its causality and contain its elements, which are incongruent in principle? To begin with, what holds these elements together cannot be interior to the structured individual: it cannot belong to the series of the elements, for then it too would have to be contained along with the others. But neither can it be exterior to the structured whole: neither simply an external constraint, which would trivialize the concept of structure, nor radically or ontologically exterior, acting from "below" or from "above" of the dimension of the elements – that is, it cannot be *transcendent* to them. What are thus critically questioned, as Montag points out, are the "spatial metaphors [that] are crucial here: inside/outside and surface/depth, which are both in turn related to the theme of appearance /essence."[13]

Althusser responds to this difficulty of situating the structure in relation to the structured field, whose coherence it effectuates, with the theoretical insight to conceive the concept of overdetermination in *Spinozist* terms (and conceptualize the structure accordingly): neither interior, nor exterior (in any conventional sense), the structure is *immanent* in the whole it structures; it is the *immanent cause* of the structural elements, of their relations and their whole, "a cause immanent in its effects in the Spinozist sense of the term."[14] Thus, the relation of the structure to the structured social reality becomes analogous to that of the Substance to the universe of the modes in Spinoza. The main argument in *Reading Capital*, indeed, rests largely on (and culminates in) the claim that *immanent causality* is the secret of what Althusser had previously identified as the key concept of the philosophy presupposed and entailed by *Capital*: "*the concept of the effectivity of a structure on its elements,*"[15] or that of the "determination of the elements of a whole by the structure of the whole,"[16] a radically novel concept that had been prefigured, according to Althusser, only by Spinoza. Althusser himself correlated, if not identified, this Spinozist concept of structure with that of overdetermination, as two equivalent attempts to account for the same "phenomenon."[17] The immanence of the structure/cause in its elements/effects undermines the dualism between the structuring and the structured, and with it the structure's transcendence to the social reality whose structure it is. As Montag remarks, in the context of this Spinozist conception, the

[13] Ibid, 77.
[14] Althusser, "The Object of Capital", 189.
[15] Louis Althusser, "From *Capital* to Marx's Philosophy," in *Reading Capital*, 29.
[16] Althusser "The Object of Capital," 187.
[17] Ibid, 188.

structure, being what holds together, in its characteristic relations, its divergent elements, stands for the "'conatus' of every singular being, its 'actual' essence, an essence entirely coincident with its actual state."[18]

This being said, the question remains of what to do with what Montag identifies as Althusser's first conception of structure, "irreconcilable" with the above, immanentist one. What is to be done with the tension, or even antinomy, between those two "structures," in Althusser's structuralism? Trying to tackle this question, I will first go through Derrida's discussion of the concept of structure.

2.

Almost immediately after the publication of Althusser's major "structuralist" texts, Jacques Derrida criticized the concept of structure that, according to him, traversed the whole of Western metaphysics.[19] Derrida's critique was directed at the "classical thought concerning structure"[20] as *closed* and *centered* system, where a central, ontologically privileged element organizes the structure and at the same time closes and totalizes it. In this sense, the centered structure can be seen as a version, or perhaps the generic concept, of the holistic whole or expressive totality. Derrida though emphasized the ineluctable *necessity* of this very center that he criticized: "By orienting and organizing the coherence of the system, the center of a structure permits the play of its elements inside the total form. And even today the notion of a structure lacking any center represents the unthinkable itself."[21] At the same time, nevertheless, the center transcends the play it determines and makes possible:

> At the center, the permutation or the transformation of elements (which may of course be structures enclosed within a structure) is forbidden … [T]he center, which is by definition unique, constituted that very thing within a structure which while governing the structure, escapes structurality.[22]

The center sets a limit, an *end* or an *origin*, to the structure's network of differential references, alternations and permutations, ensures a final reference to a referent that is not constituted by those structural references *between* the elements, but refers exclusively to itself, enfolds its identity in itself, being *present* to itself. In terms of semiotics, the attribution of a center to the signifying structure attaches it to a transcendent and, according to Derrida, a *transcendental signified*, both transcending and constituting the condition of possibility of any process of signification. The signifying chain would reach

---

[18] Montag, *Althusser and His Contemporaries*, 92.
[19] Jacques Derrida, "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences," in *Writing and Difference*, 351-370.
[20] Ibid, 352.
[21] Ibid.
[22] Ibid.

then an original or final meaning, a pure ideality, free from any linguistic determination, "a *concept signified in and of itself,* a concept simply present for thought, independent of a relationship to language, that is of a relationship to a system of signifiers."[23]

Hence the inevitable antinomy of classical structuralism, according to Derrida: the center has its place within the structure, precisely at its center, but at the same time it is excluded from the structure; it is not strictly speaking a *structural element*, to the extent that it is not an effect of structural causality: "the center is, paradoxically, *within* the structure and *outside it*. The center is at the center of the totality, and yet, since the center does not belong to the totality (is not part of the totality), the totality *has its center elsewhere*."[24] Once again, the spatial metaphors inescapably involved in the notion in question are subverted.

Derrida's critique of this antinomic yet necessary relation of the center to the very structure it governs allows us to move from the tension that Montag locates in Althusser's discourse on structure to another, analogous or correlative one, introduced by the insistent clause of the *determination in the final instance*[25] of the social structure by its economic element, always appended by Althusser to his argument. This obstinate addendum engendered widespread critique, according to which we can discern here another opposition between two apparently incompatible conceptions within Althusserian structuralism, this time between the logic of overdetermination, the logic of structure as immanent cause, and the logic of a "final" economic determination: on the one hand, we have the *dominance* of one structural element over the others, a relation entirely internal to the structure and under its auspices; on the other, a relation of *determination*, the determination of the *structure itself* by *one of its elements*. On the one hand, the structure is understood as *cause* and, on the other, as an *effect*. On the one hand, there are the historical displacements of the *dominant* structural element and, on the other, the transhistorical identification of the economy as the always *determinant* element of the structure. Thus, the critique would continue, the category of "determination in the final instance" restores economy as the structural *cause*, reintroducing economism, economic essentialism, and a metaphysical "materialism," invalidating the very argument of overdetermination which was supposed to criticize them. The invalidation of overdetermination by the "final instance," the critique continues, reestablishes expressive totality, the only difference being that the central, determinant position is now occupied by the "economy," the element of material production: ironically, Althusserian

[23] Jacques Derrida, *Positions*, 19.
[24] Derrida, "Structure, …", 352.
[25] The French expression used by Althusser is *en dernière instance*, which also has the meaning of resorting to the highest judicial authority for pending disputes, whose verdict is final. It has been translated in English also as "final analysis," "last instance," "last analysis," etc. In what follows, all these formulations found in quotations will be considered equivalent and interchangeable.

structuralism, due to the clause of "final instance," appears as a (merely more complex) version of the inversion of Hegelian totality.

This generic critique of *Althusserian* structuralism, focused on the above discrepancy between overdetermination and economic determination in the final instance, comes close to (and may receive feedback from) Derrida's critique of the classical structuralism's antinomy. In fact, as we shall see, Derrida himself gives in to this temptation. The point of articulation for these two critical attitudes is the apparent possibility of conceiving the economy as the element in *Althusserian* structure that corresponds to the structure's center in classical structuralist thought, according to Derrida's critique: in short, the possibility of considering Althusser's concept of the structured whole as just a version of closed and centered structure. Once again, Althusser's argument would have been short-circuited and returned to what it has set out to criticize: the Derridean critique would suggest that Althusser has fallen into the very trap of "inversion" which he was attempting to dismantle, to the extent that the economy would be directly equivalent, as far as its position and function are concerned, to the transcendent (and "transcendental") center of the closed and metaphysically burdened structure at which Derrida's critique was aimed. The "materiality" of the economic element wouldn't change anything: after all, as structuralism itself has taught us even in its classical version, what matters is not the "substance" of an element but precisely its relations to the other elements of the structure: therefore, what matters here is not the qualification of the center as material, but precisely its position and function *as center*.

3.

As the counterpart of this critique, Derrida announces the "event" (as he qualifies it) that was to be widely codified as *post-structuralism*. As is often the case with the use of the prefix post-, however, it does not imply a simple rejection of what it refers to, in this case, the concept of structure: while Derrida rejects the holism entailed by the postulation of the structure's center, he nevertheless (in a sense identical to Althusser when he defied the relevant dilemma) does not fall into the other pole of the dilemma, the atomism of a trivial notion of "structure" reducible to its elements. On the contrary, as Montag remarks,[26] he relies on what structuralism has contributed, the very notion of the structure's *structurality*, defined as "*the principle of difference*, such as Saussure himself recalls it," which "compels us not only not to privilege one substance … but even to consider every process of signification as a formal play of differences."[27] What Derrida does question is the limitation always-already imposed on this differential principle by the *necessary* assumption of a center of the structure, and he investigates the precarious possibility of conceiving a centerless structure. Thus, Derrida's initial post-structuralist gesture nods towards "a new meaning [or] concept" of structure, unreconcilable with

[26] Montag, *Althusser and His Contemporaries*, 71.
[27] Derrida, *Positions*, 26; emphasis added.

(though, as we shall see, in a specific way inseparable from) the classical one, a *new* concept that would nevertheless still be a concept *of structure*, an essentially unstable "concept" (in the sense that it could never recover from its instability, which would be the unsurpassable condition of its (im)possibility): the concept of an *open* structure, without a center and without a transcendental signified.[28] As Derrida himself writes, the event of post-structuralism came about when

> it became necessary to begin thinking that there was no center, that the center could not be thought in the form of a present-being, that the center had no natural site […]. This was the moment […] when, in the absence of a center or origin, everything became discourse …, that is to say, a system in which the […] transcendental signified is never absolutely present outside a system of differences. The absence of the transcendental signified extends the domain and the play of signification infinitely.[29]

And if, as we have just seen for Derrida himself, a centerless structure represents the unthinkable itself, his project regarding the concept of structure posits as its horizon the possibility of the impossible, of an inconceivable concept, the task of thinking the unthinkable.

The project in question is a token of Derrida's general *deconstructive* strategy in relation to metaphysics, or what he calls *logocentrism*, and the hierarchical, binary oppositions that constitute its concepts and signify them (particularly those on which Derrida often focused: signifier/signified, writing/speech, nature/civilization, practice/theory, etc., but also, I might add, the opposition I started with: atomism/holism, in defiance of which Althusser developed a new concept of structure). In all these metaphysical dualisms, according to Derrida, "we are not dealing with the peaceful coexistence of a *vis-a-vis,* but rather with a violent hierarchy. One of the two terms governs the other (axiologically, logically, etc.) or has the upper hand."[30] Derrida's strategy rests on the thesis that a frontal attack on metaphysical binary oppositions is in a sense self-refuting, as we shall see in more detail. Deconstruction, on the contrary, as the only viable challenge to metaphysics, involves not the abolition of metaphysical and hierarchical dualisms (which of course it subjects to its specific, deconstructive critique), but in a peculiar preservation of the relevant dualities within the very project of their deconstruction: deconstruction does not transcend them (dialectically or otherwise), but neither does it subordinate itself to their dilemmatic logic.

Very schematically, then, deconstruction consists in a strategy of two movements or "phases," structurally interdependent (which means that they are not successive, with

[28] Derrida, *Dissemination*, 6.
[29] Derrida, "Structure, …", 353-354.
[30] Derrida, *Positions*, 41.

the one replacing or evicting the other, but always simultaneous, in a sense that will be discussed shortly):

The *first phase* is the *inversion* (in one way or the other, including the reduction or even the elimination) of a binary opposition, which has always been the field not only of the subordination of one of its poles to the other, but also of the constant resistance to this subordination: "the history of this opposition [is] one of incessant struggles generative of hierarchical configurations."[31] The inversion, then, is an inexorable moment in this history, an essentially political, emancipatory, literally subversive moment, an "overturning," since it "brings low what was high":[32] the hierarchy is overturned and the hitherto hegemonic pole is placed (ineffectively, as we shall see immediately) in a relation of subordination to the hitherto subordinate. Derrida will not stop repeating that this phase of inversion is a necessary instance of deconstruction that cannot be circumvented or transcended; in this sense, it is a rather peculiar "phase":

> When I say that this phase is necessary, the word *phase* is perhaps not the most rigorous one. It is not a question of a chronological phase, a given moment, or a page that one day simply will be turned, in order to go on to other things. The necessity of this phase is structural.[33]

On the other hand, though, as inescapable and unsurpassable as this moment is, it is in itself self-undermining: to remain in this phase is to remain within the deconstructible field and its dualistic logic—which also means that the traditionally hegemonic pole will eventually take its revenge. The emancipatory movement will remain incomplete.

Therefore, a *second phase* is needed: the elaboration of a *new concept* (for instance, of structure), inherently precarious, i.e. such that it can neither remain in the previous field and operate within it, nor can it be transferred to another field (in the sense of an "epistemological break"), and therefore *cannot transcend the first phase* of inversion or overturning.[34] It is often necessary for this concept to retain the same name (even within quotation marks), to retain the same signifier for a displaced signified: Derrida will refer indeed to "the 'strategic' necessity that may require the occasional preservation of an *old name* in order to launch a new concept,"[35] in order for that new concept to be reinscribed in the field under deconstruction, so that it would bring dysfunction within it, but also, through this very dysfunction, would have deconstructive effects within this field and on it. Thus, the new concept coexists with the inverted original, in an unresolved tense relation.

---

[31] Derrida, *Dissemination*, 4.
[32] Derrida, *Positions*, 65.
[33] Ibid, 41-42.
[34] Ibid, 26.
[35] Ibid, 71. Translation modified.

4.

I propose here to think of the above oppositional dipoles of metaphysics as instantiations of what I call the dualism of transcendence, or *transcendent dualism*: the originary oppositional distinction, with innumerable variations, between what belongs to the world given to our practices and "an additional dimension, …supplementary to the dimensions of the given,"[36] two poles which conventionally can be termed "material" and "ideal," respectively, where the pole of ideality is structurally hegemonic over that of materiality. Transcendent dualism, then, constitutes an archetypical metaphysical opposition, that distinguishes, and by distinguishing defines, the material and the ideal, and by the same token *subordinates* the former to the latter. In this sense, Derrida will claim that "logocentrism is also, fundamentally, an idealism. It is *the matrix of idealism*."[37] Hence, Derrida's deconstructive endeavor can be seen as a philosophical program countering idealism: "what I have attempted can *also* be inscribed under the rubric of the 'critique of idealism'."[38] In short, deconstruction can be understood also as a *materialist project*, and the question, of course, arises as to what notion of "matter" is involved here.

It follows from the previous account of the deconstructive method, that the implicated materialism *cannot* be reduced to the *mere* inversion of transcendent dualism, in a move that would simply assign the decisive role to "matter" as found in the context and under the aegis of its constitutional opposition to the ideal, that is to say, a matter constructed and delivered by the (inherently idealist) dualism of transcendence: as the *negative oppositional pair of the ideal*. Materiality within transcendent dualism is essentially subordinate to ideality, so that any attempt to deem it hegemonic (or even determinant) is from the outset undermined: its matter is still constitutionally deprived of all the vital, cognitive, productive and organizational powers that are by default endowed to the ideal pole, to which the former is inevitably subjugated, owing to it its coherence, rationality, understandability and normativity. Within this "matrix of idealism," then, matter is constructed as *metaphysical* and, by the same token, an ultimately *idealist* category; it is an inert matter, identical to itself and present to itself, essentially non-structural, unaffected by any differential play, always-already transcendent to any "principle of difference," susceptible to function as a transcendental signified: "the signifier 'matter' appears to me problematical only at the moment when its re-inscription cannot avoid making of it a new fundamental principle which, by means of theoretical regression, would be reconstituted into a 'transcendental signified.'"[39] A "materialism" that would proclaim the primacy of *this* matter, *simply* inverting the relation of subordination, would be an abortive materialism, a metaphysical or even an idealist materialism, if the paradox is permitted.

---

[36] Gilles Deleuze, *Spinoza: Practical Philosophy*, 128.
[37] Derrida, *Positions*, 51; emphasis added.
[38] Ibid, 62.
[39] Ibid, 65.

This materialism of inversion, then, which includes the traditional self-understanding of Marxism as a Hegelianism "stood on its head," is correlative with a centered, closed, essentialist totality or structure, produced by the self-refuting replacement of an (ideal) center by another ("material") one; it would amount to an "inverted" expressive totality (if something like that has any meaning at all, which of course is part of the problem with this notion of inversion).

Now, if the reversal of transcendent dualism constitutes an aborted materialist project, it is because it represents a "mutilated"[40] deconstruction of transcendent dualism: what would constitute its *first phase* of inversion, necessary but ineffectual on its own, is here cut off from its second one, i.e. the production of a new concept of *matter*, unsuitable for occupying the central position in a closed structure and operate therein as a transcendental signified. In this sense, this second move would be correlative, if not coincidental with, the second phase of the deconstructive endeavor of classical structuralist thought, i.e. the production of a new concept of *structure*, centerless and without a transcendental signified: we wouldn't have to deal then with a structure which would allow "a series of substitutions of center for center, as a linked chain of determinations of the center," where "successively, and in a regulated fashion, the center [would] receive different forms or names" (including that of a matter apposite for this substitution, I could add), whose "matrix [would be] the determination of Being as *presence* in all senses of this word."[41] In short, the new "matter" would be consistent with the open and centerless structure, the very one posed by Derrida's critique of classical structuralism as its horizon.

But, once again, the unwavering condition of the whole project is that this second movement will not leave behind the first, ineffective phase of inversion. In particular, the new concept of "matter" must not be able to transcend or to expel the matter of the first materialist movement, the rebellious matter that revolts against the ideal, the matter that struggles to overturn its subordination to the idea, to which it is nevertheless inherently subordinate within the logocentric structures of the deconstructible field. The new concept will still be a *concept of matter*, an irreducibly dislocated concept of what the signifier "matter" historically has stood for, claiming thus "what 'materialism' has represented as a force of resistance in the history of philosophy,"[42] in touch with "its

[40] "Mutilated," in a sense analogous to that with which Spinoza characterized the imagination and the (first) kind of knowledge proper to it (Spinoza, *Ethics* II, P. 29, Cor. [Matthew J. Kisnert (ed.), Michael Silverthorne and Matthew J. Kisnert (transl.), Cambridge University Press 2018, p. 71]. The analogy refers to the fact that, in Spinoza, the 'flaw' of an idea of imagination does not lie in itself, as a "positive" characteristic of the idea. The idea is not untrue in itself; it is not true because, in the context of imagination, it is cut off from other ideas that would make it adequate and true. I have argued elsewhere for the connection between Spinozist imagination and the metaphysics of presence (see Giorgos Fourtounis, *Deconstruction in the "Final Instance": The Spinozist Structuralism of Althusser (1960-1969) and the Early Derrida* [in Greek: Γιώργος Φουρτούνης, *Αποδόμηση σε «τελική ανάλυση»: ο σπινοζικός δομισμός του Αλτουσέρ (1960-1969) και ο πρώιμος Ντερριντά*], Nissos, Athens 2023.

[41] Derrida, "Structure, …," 353.

[42] Derrida, *Positions*, 66.

negative, atheistic face (the insufficient but indispensable phase of inversion)."[43] The materialism of inversion, in short, constitutes an unsurpassed and untranscendable phase of the "materialist insistence."[44]

Seen *in both of* these inseparable phases or movements, the deconstruction of transcendent dualism constitutes the project of emancipation of materiality not merely from ideality but *from its dualist opposition to ideality*, without pretending however to transcend the opposition that always has subjugated it. On the contrary, the new concept of matter must continuously reinscribe itself in the opposition that hegemonized it and from which it insists on emancipating itself, remaining dysfunctional within it, a liminal "concept" within the field it opposes. In short: it will be a materialism which, to serve in a viable way its opposition to idealism, will not be its opposite.

5.

However, Derrida gives the impression that he forgets this complex and sophisticated strategy when he discusses Althusser's structuralism and the latter's tense notion of social (overdetermined) structure determined in the final instance by its economic element, stating emphatically that "the concept of last instance would be the general concept of the *deconstructible itself*, if something like that existed. This is why I saw in it the metaphysical anchoring *par excellence*." And he concludes: "Everything interesting and fruitful in the logic of overdetermination becomes compromised, reduced, crushed by this discourse on the 'last instance' which I have always been tempted to interpret as a concession to the economist dogma of Marxism if not that of the Communist Party."[45] Thus, the above-mentioned tension between overdetermination and the "final instance" disappears in favor of a pure antithesis, with the latter just cancelling (or even "crushing") the former: if these two conceptions are indeed in a sense "irreconcilable," as Montag argues, according to Derrida *here* they cannot in any way coexist. They annul each other and, when together, Althusser's whole intervention.

I might discern two aspects of what I consider Derrida's inconsistent application of his own method to Althusser's argument. First, he does not conceive of the determination *in the final instance* by the economy as anything other than a complication of the *simple* determination by the economy, a complication that leaves intact the core of the notion of an "external," determinant economy, and which, if not in practice at least in principle, can be analyzed *all the way down*, reaching what would be the *last analysis*; in short, a complication that can ultimately be untangled and finally bypassed. In this sense, Derrida reads Althusser's argument as reiterating Friedrich Engels's famous letter to Joseph Bloch, of 1890, in which the category in question appeared for the first time in

[43] Derrida, *Dissemination*, 54.
[44] Derrida, *Positions*, 66.
[45] Michael Sprinker, "Politics and Friendship: An Interview with Jacques Derrida" in *The Althusserian Legacy*, 205.

Marxist literature. Engels argues that "the determining factor in history is, *in the final analysis,* the production and reproduction of actual life."[46] History is regarded as a highly complicated and multifactorial process, where

> it is in the interaction of all these factors [of the superstructure] and amidst an unending multitude of fortuities (i.e. of things and events whose intrinsic interconnections are so remote or so incapable of proof that we can regard them as non-existent and ignore them) that the economic trend ultimately asserts itself as something inevitable.[47]

In other words, in Engels (and, according to Derrida's reading, in Althusser), the "final instance" would stand for an *inessential* (and thus ultimately ignorable) intricacy of economic determination, without which "the application of the theory to any particular period of history would, after all, be easier than solving a simple equation of the first degree;"[48] in these terms, the determination in the final instance by the economy would be reducible (through an equation admittedly much more difficult, even beyond our factual capacities, but still *theoretically solvable*) to determination by the economy, *sans phrase*. Hence, according to Derrida, the final instance does not do much more than the economic determinism of the traditional, metaphysically "materialist" Marxism: "[t]o say 'last instance' instead of infrastructure doesn't make much difference and it destroys or radically relativizes the whole accounting for overdeterminations."[49] In short, we find here again the common place of a criticism, reinforced now by Derrida's own questioning, according to which Althusser succumbs to the double deterministic sin of a rigid structuralism and an economist Marxism (or simply Marxism, for many).

Secondly, Derrida's theoretical neutralization of the "final instance" directly corresponds with the fact that he himself is doing exactly what he warned us not to do: the theoretical "mutilation" of what is, I argue, the deconstructive subversion of transcendent dualism *and* classical structuralism. What should have been considered as the first, necessary yet insufficient, instance of the relevant deconstruction, is here severed from the second one, and it is precisely under this condition that it appears as merely an inverted instantiation of the metaphysical concept of the centered structure. Derrida does not treat this "materialist" reversal according to his own method, that is, as the insurmountable condition and the first "structural" phase of a possible deconstructive movement but considers it unilaterally as the primary *target* of it, as "the *deconstructible itself*." What reduces the determination in the last instance of the (overdetermined) structure by the economy to the simple economic determination of a structure (which, *ipso facto*, ceases to be overdetermined), is the fact that it is considered as detached from

---

[46] Karl Marx & Frederick Engels, *Collected Works*, Vol. 49, 34.
[47] Ibid, 35.
[48] Ibid.
[49] Sprinker, "Politics and Friendship…," 205.

the biphasic scheme of deconstruction. Derrida unexpectedly takes this materialism of inversion as standing on its own and not as structurally intertwined (in an insolubly tense coexistence) with the second instance of it, concerning the production of a new concept.

6.

I propose, in contrast, to read Althusser's structuralism as a double deconstructive critique of metaphysics *and* idealism, the *first phase* of which could be (if not "mutilated") the *classical* Marxian and Marxist *inversion* of Hegelian totality and the determination of the social by its "material production," itself a token of materialist inversion of transcendent dualism in one of its multiple variations. As such, it represents the indispensable (for the whole project, from which it would draw its full meaning) "moment" of overturning, whose necessity is "structural" and whose "time … is never a dead letter,"[50] bestowing the whole project with a subversive meaning, with which Marxism was historically associated, and which deconstruction cannot afford to renounce. Of course, according to Derridean deconstructive protocols, this phase of inversion must be questioned *per se*, so as to explore its limits, i.e. its inability to escape by itself the deconstructible context, and consequently its re-subordination to the "matrix of idealism." And, indeed, much of Althusser's work in the 1960s focused precisely on this critique of the reversal taken in itself: Althusser's whole intervention was based on his strategic demarcation from the logic of the mere inversion of Hegelian essentialist expressive totality; yet Derrida, in order to be able to articulate his critique, had to overlook this constitutive frontline of Althusser's philosophical intervention, omnipresent in his discourse and directly linked to the argument of overdetermination, or to consider it nullified by the clause of "final analysis" (which is the same thing). In both cases, the end result was the suppression of the question of another possible relation between Althusser's critique of a reversed Hegelianism and the obstinate clause of the "final analysis" beyond that of a "theoretical regression," or the cancelling of the former by the latter.

It is worth noting, in particular, that Derrida does not discuss Althusser's analysis of Engels's letter referred to above,[51] which, according to him, contains "Engels's theoretical solution to *the problem of the basis* for the determination 'in the last instance' by the economy [problème de fondement de la détermination « en dernière instance »],"[52] and thus necessarily ignores the conclusion of his argument, formulated already in the very beginning of the Appendix: "we should not conceal the fact that the argument for the *basis* [l'argumentation du *fondement*] will no longer answer to our critical needs."[53] Thus, Derrida overlooks what is clearly implied by Althusser here: the theoretical possibility of a determination "in the final analysis" by the economy without *fondement*, without a

[50] Derrida, *Positions*, 42.
[51] Louis Althusser, "Appendix" to "Contradiction and Overdetermination" in *For Marx*, 117-128.
[52] Ibid, 117; emphasis added. The French original in Louis Althusser, *Pour Marx*, 117.
[53] Ibid, translation modified.

foundation (or an "infrastructure"), without a "metaphysical anchoring," that is, of a "final analysis" as a complement—and not invalidation—of overdetermination.

This very concept of *overdetermination* is, precisely, the second phase of the whole endeavor: the limitless, inexhaustible, reciprocal determination of all the elements of the structure, through their differential relations. This is, I argue, Althusser's rendering of Derrida's principle of structurality, *avant la lettre*; and it is in this sense that Althusser's overdetermination tends towards the new notion of an open and decentered *structure*, whose theoretical possibility Derrida will explore a few years later. Trying to corroborate this assertion, let me begin from Derrida's discussion of the production of a "new concept of writing,"[54] in line with the problematization of the dominant "logocentrist logic":[55] Derrida will call it "*gram* or *différance,*"[56] clarifying immediately that it refers to "a *structure* and a movement no longer conceivable on the basis of the opposition presence/absence."[57] It is a kind of structure that, through its play of differences, "forbid[s] at any moment, or in any sense, that a simple element be *present* in and of itself, referring only to itself,"[58] that is, it excludes the possibility of a transcendental signified. In it, "no element can function as a sign without referring to another element *which itself is not simply present*. This interweaving results in *each 'element'… being constituted on the basis of the trace within it of the other elements of the chain or system.*"[59] And he concludes: "Nothing, neither among the elements nor within the system, is anywhere ever simply present or absent. There are only, everywhere, differences and *traces of traces*."[60] This is, I argue, what Althusser describes as the "mutual conditioning" of the structural elements (or "contradictions" according to the philosophical vocabulary of his earlier essays) within the overdetermined structure, where "*every* [emphasis added] contradiction appears in Marxist historical practice and experience as an *overdetermined contradiction*"[61] or, in another rendering of the same thesis, "*every* contradiction is a contradiction in a complex whole structured in dominance."[62] In this "mutual conditioning" there is not any fundamental "conditioning" that would not be conditioned itself by the other elements within the structure, and thus would put an end to this "mutuality," to this unrestricted relationality or structurality. And Althusser concludes:

> *this reflection of the* structure *articulated in dominance that constitutes the unity of the complex whole within each contradiction*, this is the most profound

[54] Derrida, *Positions*, 26.
[55] Ibid.
[56] Ibid.
[57] Ibid, 27; emphasis added.
[58] Ibid, 26.
[59] Ibid; emphasis added.
[60] Ibid; emphasis added.
[61] Althusser, "Contradiction and Overdetermination," 107.
[62] Louis Althusser, "On the Materialist Dialectic" in *For Marx*, 204-205; emphasis added.

> characteristic of the Marxist dialectic, the one I have tried recently to encapsulate in the concept of "overdetermination."[63]

Thus, *each* structural element "reflects" within itself the other elements and their differential relations: "it reflects in itself, *in its very essence*, its relation to the unevenness of the complex whole."[64] Everything reflects everything, and their structural relations, so that there is nothing that exceeds or precedes these mutual reflections. Thus, each element is constituted on the basis of the "reflection" or the imprint on it of the other elements, so that there is no prior "something" within which something else would be reflected, and there are no other prior "somethings" reflected on it. There is no something like an originary substance of the elements; no element is (or ever was) "simply present": they are all, always-already and all the way dawn, reflections of reflections, imprints of imprints, or (in Derrida's account) *traces of traces*.

This inexhaustible complexity of mutual determinations between the structural elements, reflected in each one of them, entails that not one of them can be primary and therefore simply determinant; none, including the mode of "material production," can be deemed the cause of the structure and the other elements. That is, the cause involved here, the *structural cause*, is *the structure itself*, the structure's *causa sui*, as it were, and not some supposed privileged *element of it*, nor a transcendent principle or essence. Now the economy, being a structural element, is constitutively subject to structural causality; it is an *effect* of the structure: the "economy" is not an independent datum but depends on each historical social structure, on the mode of production *in the widest sense*. As Althusser provocatively asserted, in a passage that didn't escape Montag's attention:[65]

> the economic cannot have the qualities of a *given* (of the immediately visible and observable, etc.), because its identification requires the concept of the structure of the economic, which in turn requires the concepts of the structure of the mode of production […] The concept of the economic must be constructed *for each mode of production*, as must the concept of each of the other 'levels' that belong to the mode of production: the political, the ideological, etc..[66]

That is, it is not the "economic" that makes the structure, but the other way around.

Once again, then, overdetermination stands for a limitless "structurality," an unrestrained structural play, without a totalizing center, without metaphysical fastening, without a transcendental signified (even a "material" one). No ontological privilege can exempt the so-called "material production" from this rule of structurality: as Althusser writes,

---

[63] Ibid, 206.
[64] Ibid, 209; emphasis added.
[65] Montag, *Althusser and His Contemporaries*, 85.
[66] Althusser, "On the Materialist Dialectic", 183.

> it is impossible to delve down to the birth or origin of the simple universal, "production," since [according to Marx] "when we talk of production we always mean production at a determinate stage in social development of the production of individuals living in society," that is, in a structured social whole.[67]

And, as if to directly refute Engels's explication of the "last instance" as an abbreviation of a perhaps practically insurmountable difficulty of our cognitive or calculative limits to solve an *in principle* solvable problem of determination, he adds: "and this denial [to delve down beneath this complex whole] is a denial on principle: it is not ignorance which prevents us, but the very essence of production itself, its concept."[68]

7.

But now, "material production," always-already an element and an effect of the "structured social whole," poses the question of its *materiality*. We touch here on the second direction of the double deconstructive movement that the whole argument of overdetermination stands for: the tentative production of a new concept of *matter*. And we find again here the Spinozist vein of Althusserian structuralism, the essential correlation of the concept of overdetermined structure with Spinozist immanent causality. The recourse to Spinozist immanence, I argue, constituted for Althusser a peculiar *materialist strategy*, whose complexity is strictly relevant to what is philosophically at stake here.[69] On the one hand, Althusser's entire philosophical endeavor can be seen as an attempt to define a philosophical perspective more effective than any other available to defend the materialist philosophical position. In this sense, he necessarily places his intervention within the idealism- materialism opposition, which, according to him, represents the constitutive (and hence unsurpassable) horizon of the philosophical field. On the other hand, however, we find in Althusser hints (or even overt assertions) that he understands this opposition in terms close to Derrida's deconstructive critique of binary metaphysical oppositions, and of transcendent dualism in particular: as an opposition *essentially* asymmetrical in favor of its idealist term, so that in its context idealism is structurally hegemonic over its opponent and over their very opposition, philosophy's very *Kampfplatz*. In this light, although he will never cease to consider the antagonism between materialism and idealism an insuperable condition of philosophy, he will often question the adequacy of the recorded "materialisms" in countering idealism effectively, in a way directly analogous with that of Derrida's critique: "We must therefore treat the term 'materialism' with suspicion: the word does not give us the thing, and, on closer

[67] Ibid, 195-196.
[68] Ibid, 196.
[69] For a detailed exposition of my argument, see Fourtounis, *Deconstruction in the "Final Instance."*

inspection, most materialisms turn out to be *inverted idealisms*."[70] I could even say that one can follow, through Althusser's entire text, the red thread of a genuine and unresolved aporia: the paradoxical *doubt about the sufficiently materialist character of materialism* itself. Consequently, there is a tendency in Althusser to redefine his unconditional "materialist insistence" out of the box of the constraints of materialism, as it were, so as to disrupt idealism's domination over the philosophical battlefield and its opponent therein, and to restructure the perpetual philosophical conflict accordingly.

The strategy of immanence aims precisely at this: I argue that Althusser's philosophical project resorts to Spinozist immanence in order to reformulate the materialist position in a counter-hegemonic way, reconfiguring the opposition between materialism and idealism *in terms of immanence and transcendence*. Of course, this reformulation cannot be limited to a simple name change, which would substitute immanence and transcendence for materialism and idealism respectively, leaving intact the binary logic of the opposition. Rather, complicating the whole issue, it relegates the whole idealism-materialism dichotomy *to the terrain of transcendence* and its logic. Immanence, as a critique of the thought of transcendence, necessarily includes in its scope the entire transcendent *dualism* (and not just its dominant pole) as the condition of the congenital subordination of the material to the ideal, and consequently of the unequal and asymmetrical opposition of materialism and idealism. Once again, if it is to be emancipated from ideality, materiality has to be emancipated *from its binary oppositional antithesis to ideality*, in a move through which it won't be the same materiality: an emancipation that would essentially affect the emancipated.

To substantiate my claim, if only allusively, I suggest that, in Spinoza's architecture of immanence, a *non-causal* immanence between the (causally insulated) attributes and their "corresponding" modes is necessarily implicated with the immanent *causality* between God and the universe of modes. I can only be very cursory here: [71] to the extent that God or Substance is immanently expressed in all attributes and is the immanent cause of their modes, attributes are *immanent in each other*, though without any causal interaction between them. This is the controversial and rather paradoxical "parallelism" of the attributes, where, on the one hand, there is no causal intersection between their ("parallel") networks of transitive causes, the "order and connection" of each one, while, on the other, there is complete coincidence between them, being "the same" order and connection, expressed in infinite ways.[72] Thus, attributes are equally and fully "substantial," each one of them being *the Substance* itself, in one of its infinitely irreducible ways of expressing itself. Differently put, in that level, too, immanence means that there is no transcendence *between attributes*: no attribute can be conceived as transcendent to any

[70] Louis Althusser, "Philosophy and Marxism. Interviews with Fernanda Navarro, 1984-87" in *Philosophy of the Encounter: Later Writings, 1978-87*, 272; emphasis added.
[71] See Fourtounis, *Deconstruction in the "Final Instance."*
[72] See, for instance, Spinoza, *Ethics* II, P. 7, 47.

other; they are all immanent in Substance, and hence in each other. This, combined with the infinity of attributes, of which "extension" and "thought" constitute two among (the infinite) other attributes, removes the condition for any *hierarchical dualism*, where "thought" could be understood as the transcendent and hegemonic other of "extension," which in turn would be identifiable with matter, negatively defined in respect to the former. On the contrary, in Spinoza, each attribute (and of course "extension" and "thought") is characterized by the *materiality that is proper to it*, its specific "substantiality," its *worldliness*; the sign of their materiality is the universal though always peculiar transitive causality that reigns within each one of them, the constitutive, always-already causal interaction of the "things" (modes) in which it is expressed.

It is in the terms of this Spinozist conception, that Althusser's immanentist conceptualization of overdetermination can function as a deconstructive movement and tend towards a new concept of materiality. Crucial in this perspective is Althusser's *concept of practice*, defined in the first place as a process of *production*, an always differentiated and specified *mode of production*, i.e., a socially organized process of *transformation* of a specific raw material into a specific product. In the context of this definition, the connotation of materiality that is obviously inherent in the notion of practice can be initially correlated to the "inertia" of each practice's raw material, its specific resistance to transformation, which always demands for its effectuation human-social labour (in the most general sense), "using determinate means (of 'production')" under determinate relations.[73] Due to the metaphysical understanding of materiality, the concept of practice was always leaning towards the material pole of transcendent dualism and, according to the established, metaphysical grammar of the term, was constitutively opposed (and subordinated) to a non-material term, *theory* among others.[74] Thus it was prone to a particular version of "materialist" inversion: the proclamation of the *primacy of practice* over its transcendent other, especially theory. Applying now his characteristic nominalist stance (also Spinozist) to this concept, Althusser affirms the essential *plurality* and *diversity* of "practice." This is the point where the concept of practice becomes intertwined with that of overdetermination: there are only irreducibly differentiated practices, in the plural, each time articulated in a complex, structured whole, in an overdetermined "global" structure, as seen above.

Based on all this, Althusser will in fact *deconstruct* the dual opposition of practice and theory, or for that matter every other term denoting transcendence, reformulating drastically the materialist primacy of practice:

> We can assert the *primacy of practice* theoretically by showing that all the levels of social existence are the sites of distinct practices: economic

[73] Althusser, *For Marx*, 166-167.
[74] See Althusser, "From *Capital* to Marx's Philosophy", 57-58.

> practice, political practice, ideological practice, technical practice, and scientific (or theoretical) practice.[75]

Once again, the "primacy" of materiality does not lie in the elevation of a material "substance" to a position of dominance over a non-material one (more or less ideal, in the broadest sense), reversing a classical hierarchical dichotomy (though respecting its logic), but in the disturbance of the dichotomy itself, affirming the pervasiveness of the materiality of practice at every instance of "social existence," including those traditionally deemed "ideal." If "practice" retains its material connotation, and if there is always a plurality of practices, then no one among them can be thought of as exclusively or even eminently "material": *they are all material*, fully and equally material, each one in its own way, being characterized by the materiality that is proper and exclusive to it (as all attributes in Spinoza are "substantial," expressing the substance in each one's specific modality).

This conception of practice allowed Althusser to posit, among many other instances, a "theoretical practice" as well as an "ideological practice," both of which are as material as any other practice. In particular, they are *just as material* as *economic* practice, that is, as that which was traditionally referred to as (the) "material production" (where the adjective "material" was supposed to imply the *specific difference* of this particular level of "social existence"). But the implied meaning of matter begins to falter: if the economic practice can still be understood as material production, "the signifier matter" no longer exclusively applies to it. It no longer denotes a "substance" transcending the structural play of differences between the distinct elements of social structure, external to the play of their mutual determinations, fastening the social structure to "a point of presence" through *this* determinant element of "material" production. The materiality of economic production, then, can no longer be understood independently of the inexhaustible overdeterminations by all the others, of which it is always-already the locus. It is not the matter of transcendent dualism, but precisely a *new matter*, which always-already bears, in its very "ontology," in its essential texture, "in its very essence" (as Althusser said above), the indelible "traces" or the irreducible effectivity of all the other practices that are traditionally registered to the so-called superstructure.

8.

However, this new conception of matter does not emerge only at the level of the structured *whole* of the distinct practices, that is, by way of the immanence of what was traditionally understood as the instances of the so-called superstructure in the supposedly *par excellence* material "level of social existence." The *materialist* deconstruction of the materiality-ideality opposition does not occur only at the level of overdetermination *between* the practices; its privileged locus is *each singular practice*. It is at this basic level that the materiality of practice is now understood in terms of the *immanent* relation between

[75] Ibid.

the poles of the metaphysical dipole of transcendent dualism, in a *new* relation that modifies both drastically. That is, the immanentist concept of materiality could only entail a correspondingly *immanentist concept of ideality*, a *materialist* concept of ideality. And it is here that Althusser's concept of *ideology* intervenes. Now "ideology" does not apply only to a particular practice, that which Althusser names "ideological practice:" just as the immanentist conception of materiality does not refer primarily to the "material" economic practice, but concerns every practice, so, too, the correlative immanentist and materialist understanding of ideality, the concept of ideology, is not strictly limited to the ideological practice, but is intertwined with the practice "in general," in its essential plurality, that is, with every distinct, singular practice. I refer to a line of thought traversing the whole of Althusser's work, namely, to the interweaving of every practice, *including ideological practice*, with *ideology*. The meaning of ideology should be taken here in the broadest possible sense of what we may call *social thought*: the most general concept of "social thinking" (where the "social" is at the same time the "object" and the "subject" of thinking: the social thinking itself); on the other hand, the practices of the social whole, including what Althusser calls the "ideological practice," constitute the different levels of "social existence," as we have seen, representing the most general concept of the social, existing by producing (itself).

I venture here a kind of analogy, whose legitimacy should be further examined, with the *two* equal and infinite powers of God in Spinoza (according to Gilles Deleuze, among others), the power of existing and producing and the power of thinking all that exists and is being produced. Just as with the conceptual pair of practice and ideology in Althusser, we are not dealing here with a regression to a kind of dualism, which, in Spinoza, would counterpose the different attributes (and in particular that of "extension") against the attribute of "thought." Rather, the power of existing and producing encompasses all and each one of the attributes, including that of "thought," while all existing productions in every attribute, including those of "thought" (the ideas), fall within the range of the power of thought. This means that everything that exists (each mode in each attribute) is *ipso facto* the *object* of a distinct idea.[76] Inversely, every idea has "its" object and, being itself a mode, *is* the object of "its" own idea, of an idea of the idea. But furthermore, and most significantly, every idea is *immanent in its object*, of which it is the thought; ideas are immanent in their objects and are themselves objects of ideas that are immanent in them. Due to that (non-causal) relation of immanence of any idea to its object, any existing mode (including ideas) and the idea of it are "one and the same thing but expressed in two ways."[77] The idea and "its" object, while being together one thing, are not identical or reducible to each other; being "one and the same thing" amounts to their unity, their complete coincidence *and* their irreducible difference.

[76] See Gilles Deleuze, *Expressionism in Philosophy: Spinoza*, 86.
[77] Spinoza, *Ethics* II, 7, Sch., 48.

In an analogous manner in Althusser, every *practice*, being an element of social "existence," is *ipso facto* socially thought through "its" *ideology*; inversely, any ideology is always thinking "its" practice, as it is articulated in the structured whole of the practices. There is a peculiar, two-aspect unity of practice and ideology, a strong and fundamental mutuality between them, which Althusser firstly thematized in the context of his essay on the Ideological State Apparatuses: "an ideology *always* exists in an apparatus, and its practice, or practices. This existence is material"[78] and, conversely, "there is no practice except by and in an ideology."[79] Montag, in his masterful reading of the relevant section of the essay on ideology and the ISAs, explicates the Spinozism implicated in this mutuality: if an ideology is always the ideology *of* an ideological apparatus, it is so in the strongest sense of the *immanence* between them: "ideology is *immanent* in its apparatuses and their practices; it has no existence apart from these apparatuses and is entirely coincident with them."[80] Ideology does not primarily exist as an ideal system, a system of "ideas," so as to be "materialized" in a practice or apparatus in a subsequent time. Ideology is always already material or practical, just as practice is always already ideological, in the sense that they constitute two non-reducible aspects of "one and the same" social reality. Ideology is inseparable from the materiality of a practice's apparatus, in a relation analogous to that of the *non-causal* immanence of idea and its object: "ideology is neither the cause (in any commonly accepted sense of the term) nor the effect of the apparatuses that constitute its material form."[81] Now, given that Althusser keeps the inventory of the ISAs open, and given that the practice of an Ideological Apparatus cannot be in principle distinguished from the general concept of practice, we could say that in Althusser this fundamental mutuality holds for *every practice*: every practice can be thought of as an Ideological Apparatus. This applies equally to *economic* practice and "its" ideology, but also to what Althusser calls "ideological practice:"[82] just as ideas are objects of ideas, so ideological practice is the object of
the particular ideology immanent in it, the "ideology of ideological practice."[83]

---

[78] Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses" in *Lenin and Philosophy and other Essays*, 166; emphasis added.
[79] Ibid, 170.
[80] Montag, *Althusser and His Contemporaries*, 151; emphasis added.
[81] Ibid.
[82] Thus, I disagree with Ernesto Laclau's claim of "a clear line of demarcation between two perspectives" on ideology in Althusser, one that recognizes ideology's materiality, the "radicalization" of which by Laclau himself will lead to his own concept of "discourse" as "the horizon of the constitution of any object," and the other restricting ideology to "a superstructure, a regional category of the social whole -an essentially topographical concept" [Ernesto Laclau, *New Reflections on the Revolution of our Time* (London-New York: Verso 1990), 185] – a demarcation's line which, in the above terms, could be reformulated as between ideology as a ("regional") practice, a specific *topos* in the topography of the social, and ideology as the other aspect of every practice, permeating the whole of social topography. By way of analogy with Spinoza's doctrine of immanence, ideology is both.
[83] Thus, Althusser will speak of the "ideology of ideology" (Althusser, "Ideology …", 165).

Ideology then not only thinks "its" practice, according to modalities that pertain to it (in ways that are often at first sight indecipherably indirect), but it is *immanent in it*, forming with it one and the same social and historical reality, where none of its two aspects is reducible or primary to the other. As in Spinoza there is no mode of extension (or of any other attribute) without its idea, and there is no idea without a mode as its object, so in Althusser there is no practice (including the global "social practice") without its ideology, and there is no ideology without a practice, or a whole of practices, in which it is immanent: there is no ideology not having a "material" existence in a practice or practices, and conversely there is no practice not having an "ideal" or "ideological" existence: there is no practice that is not also an ideology.

In short, ideology is *immanent in the very materiality of social practices*. This cancels transcendent dualism in all of its versions and revokes any possibility of posing an ontological difference, gap and hierarchy between the material and the ideal. Nevertheless, it is still a concept *of matter* what we are dealing with and, accordingly, Althusser's theory of ideology amounts to a *materialist* philosophical position: this is not because of any primacy whatsoever of the material aspect of practice over the ideal, but because *both aspects of it are material*, each in its own way, a network of dynamic relations of bodies (human and non-human) and another one of ideas, the ideas of ideology, two plexuses of worldly things, of "modes" causally interdependent with the others of their kind, two series "parallel" and nevertheless immanent to each other.

It is in this sense that Althusser's overdetermination, in its Spinozist inspiration, can meet Derrida's deconstruction of transcendent dualism, and point to the production of a novel concept of matter and materiality, quasi-unthinkable and non-articulable within the metaphysical conditions of our thought and language, a new meaning that permitted Althusser to put forward his thesis (in a sense contradictory, that is, forbidden by the dominant, metaphysical philosophical grammar) that "'ideas' or 'representations', etc., which seem to make up ideology do not have an ideal or spiritual existence, but *a material existence*. I even suggested that the ideal and spiritual existence of 'ideas' arises exclusively in an ideology of the 'idea' and of ideology."[84]

9.

However, as we have seen, this second phase of the deconstructive materialist project cannot transcend the first, which means that the new concepts of structure and matter cannot merely succeed those that appear in the phase of inversion, in the notion of the determination of social structure by the economy.

My conclusion then is that the persistent, almost obsessive attachment of the clause of determination *in the final instance* by the economy to almost every reference to overdetermination by Althusser suggests, precisely, this necessary and tense, *simultaneous* coexistence of the two incongruent phases of the relevant deconstructive endeavor. The

[84] Althusser, "Ideology…," 165; emphasis added.

incessant reappearance of this phrase in Althusser is not an indication that he could not get over the reassuring determination by the economy: rather he could not *afford* to renounce it or leave it behind. In short, I argue, it is by means of this obstinate recurrence that Althusser's argument of overdetermination anticipates Derrida's peculiar twofoldness of deconstruction regarding matter and materialism, according to which

> the concept of matter must be marked twice (the others too): in the deconstructed field – this is the phase of overturning – and in the deconstructing text, outside the oppositions in which it has been caught (matter/spirit, matter/ideality, matter/form, etc.).[85]

This has nothing to do (at least not primarily) with an internal antinomy of Althusser's argumentation, nor with the external addition of a *sine qua non* Marxist proviso, that would compromise the logic of overdetermination; it has to do with the Derridean "double writing" of both structure and matter, the necessary coexistence of the respective old and new concepts and the maintenance of the tension between them. It is precisely this mutual dependence *and* incompatibility of the two phases that brings Althusser's project of the 1960s very close to the stratagem of deconstruction, as if he were applying Derrida's lesson in advance:

> These two operations must be conducted in a kind of disconcerting *simul*, in a movement of the entire field that must be coherent, of course, but at the same time divided, differentiated, and stratified. The gap between the two operations must remain open, must let itself be ceaselessly marked and remarked. This is already a sufficient indication of the necessary heterogeneity of each text participating in this operation and of the impossibility of summing up the gap at a single point or under a single name.[86]

I think it is worth risking a comment here regarding the materialist dimension and objective of the *Derridean* deconstructive project: Derrida himself will in his turn append a "clause" to the thesis of unlimited structurality and the relevant critique of the "transcendental signified," a clause of demarcation against the endless extension of textuality without a *simple* external limit and the related danger of an "idealism of the text," as he puts it, a clause of "materialist insistence," according to himself; Derrida, in what could be understood as *a "final analysis" of his own*, seems to resort to what deconstruction is meant to criticize, that is, the exteriority of a referent (in a sense "material," as he implies):

[85] Derrida, *Positions*, 65.
[86] Derrida, *Dissemination*, 6.

> …it seems to me that the *materialist insistence* can function as a means of having the necessary generalization of the concept of text, its extension with no *simple* exterior limit (which also supposes the passage through metaphysical opposition), not wind up […]as the definition of a *new self-interiority*, a *new 'idealism,'* if you will, *of the text*. In effect, we must avoid having the indispensable critique of a certain naïve relationship to the signified or the referent, to sense or meaning, remain fixed in a suspension, that is, a pure and simple suppression, of meaning or reference.[87]

Returning now to Althusser, I suggest that perhaps nowhere else does this necessary and irresolvable tension appear so condensed as in his famous phrase, at the heart of his argument on overdetermination: "From the first moment to the last, the lonely hour of the 'last instance' never comes."[88] In just a few words, the "materialist" determination by the economy is simultaneously affirmed and refuted, never being where and when it "ought" to be, structurally *differentiated* from itself and *deferred*, as if retroactively anticipating Derrida's lesson of *différance*. Thus the supposed antinomy between the "final analysis", understood as the attachment of structurality to an external materiality, and the inexhaustible structural interiority of overdetermination, acquires a positive meaning: as if Althusser were claiming both of its terms, or, more correctly, claiming the claim of both, against the system that prohibits it, that is, against the structure of thought of metaphysics and transcendence, by way of Spinozist immanence. In other words, Althusser subjects his text and his entire problematic to this "antinomy" not only to enable himself to inscribe his otherwise heretical and iconoclastic intervention in something that still makes sense to be called Marxism, not only to be able to inscribe his project within historical communism (Althusser's highest political and philosophical objective until the end), but also to inscribe it in a *non-metaphysical materialism*, a materialism that would not be subordinate to idealism by virtue of its metaphysical construction, a materialism that would not be an "idealist materialism." And to do this, as Montag suggests, "[h]e and his colleagues carefully analyzed the concept of structure as it functioned in the work of their contemporaries in order to differentiate within it a materialist element."[89]

In short, to conclude, Althusser takes the risk of this quasi-antinomy to inscribe himself in the multifaceted, heterogeneous, disparate but nonetheless collective endeavor of his great philosophical generation, of the most privileged of "his contemporaries," his "'objective allies' in the struggle against idealism":[90] the necessary as well as impossible task of interrogating the metaphysics of presence and transcendence from the only available ground: the ground of this very metaphysics. "Within and against," I would say,

---

[87] Derrida, *Positions*, 66, emphasis added.
[88] Althusser, "Contradiction and Overdetermination," 113.
[89] Montag, *Althusser and His Contemporaries*, 11.
[90] Ibid, 9

bringing to philosophy a timely political motto that I am sure neither Althusser nor Derrida would have had any problem subscribing to. Or, in Montag's words, "one must operate necessarily from the interior, and the manner in which one inhabits this interior determines whether one can undermine and destabilize the conceptual order."[91]

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Althusser, Louis. "From *Capital* to Marx's Philosophy." In *Reading Capital*, by Louis Althusser and Etienne Balibar. Translated by Ben Brewster, NLB, 1970.

-----. "The Object of Capital." In *Reading Capital*, by Louis Althusser and Etienne Balibar. Translated by Ben Brewster, NLB, 1970.

-----. "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses." In *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*. Translated by Ben Brewster, Monthly Review Press, 1971.

-----. "Philosophy and Marxism. Interviews with Fernanda Navarro, 1984-87." In *Philosophy of the Encounter: Later Writings, 1978-87*, Translated by G.M.Goshgarian, Verso, 2006.

-----. *Pour Marx*, La Découverte, 2007.

-----. "Contradiction and Overdetermination." In *For Marx*, Translated by Ben Brewster, Verso, 2010.

-----. "On the Materialist Dialectic." In *For Marx*, Translated by Ben Brewster, Verso, 2010.

Deleuze, Gilles. *Spinoza: Practical Philosophy*. Translated by Robert Hurley, City Lights Books, 1988.

-----. *Expressionism in Philosophy: Spinoza*. Translated by Martin Joughin, Zone Books, 1990.

Derrida, Jacques. *Dissemination*. Translated by Barbara Johnson, The Athlone Press, 1981.

-----. *Positions*. Translated by Alan Bass, Chicago University Press, 1981.

[91] Ibid, 6.

-----. "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences." In *Writing and Difference*. Translated by Alan Bass, Routledge, 2005.

Fourtounis, Giorgos. *Deconstruction in the "Final Instance": The Spinozist Structuralism of Althusser (1960-1969) and the Early Derrida* [in Greek: Γιώργος Φουρτούνης, *Αποδόμηση σε «τελική ανάλυση»: ο σπινοζικός δομισμός του Αλτουσέρ (1960-1969) και ο πρώιμος Ντερριντά*], Nissos, 2023.

Laclau, Ernesto, *New Reflections on the Revolution of our Time*, Verso, 1990.

Montag, Warren. "Althusser's Nominalism: Structure and Singularity (1962-6)", *Rethinking Marxism*, 10 (3): 64-73, 1998.

-----. *Althusser and His Contemporaries: Philosophy's Perpetual War*, Duke University Press, 2013.

Marx, Karl and Frederick Engels, *Collected Works*, Vol. 49, Lawrence & Wishart Electric Book, 2010.

Sotiris, Panagiotis. *A Philosophy for Communism: Rethinking Althusser*, Brill, 2020.

Spinoza, Baruch. *Ethics*. Translated by Michael Silverthorne and Matthew J. Kisnert. Edited by Matthew J. Kisnert, Cambridge University Press, 2018.

Sprinker, Michael. "Politics and Friendship: An Interview with Jacques Derrida." In *The Althusserian Legacy*. Edited by E. Ann Kaplan & Michael Sprinker, Verso, 1993.