

Reading is an argument

Althusser's commandment, conjecture and contradiction

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For many years, Louis Althusser (1918-1990) has been considered a 'dead dog', both theoretically and politically, his writings left to the gnawing criticism of the mice.¹ He is better known today for the murder of his wife and his internment in psychiatric institutions than for his ideas. His project is often attacked theoretically for its alleged determinism and all-pervasive vision of ideology, and dismissed politically for being motivated by the needs of Stalinism.² Althusser's central preoccupation was the renovation of communist political practice by a renewal of Marxist theory. According to a far from uncritical study, its practical effects were in fact 'theoretical destalinisation' rather than theoretical Stalinism.³

In stressing the permanence of ideology, Althusser, "follows the path which was opened up to men by the great revolutionary thinkers who understood that the freedom of men is not achieved by the complacency of its ideological *recognition*, but by *knowledge* of the laws of their slavery, and that the 'realisation' of their concrete individuality is achieved by the analysis and mastery of the abstract relations which govern them."⁴

As a reading of Marx, Althusser's method is sometimes accused of being "a form of subjectivism" which permits readers "to project whatever they imagined to be the case onto a particular text."⁵ Althusser's "symptomatic reading" considers that what is left unsaid in a text – in other words its silences and absences – to be just as significant as what is said. If we want to appreciate the magnitude of Marx's theoretical contribution and draw out the real implications of Marxist thought, a simple or "innocent" reading of Marx is not enough, rather a symptomatic reading which takes into account silences and contradictions is necessary. A reading which reveals what Paul de Man calls "the dialectic of blindness and insight" at work in Marx's text has more to offer than a surface reading.⁶ Marx's text, as Derrida would put it, has "sufficiently surprising resources" so that when Marx wrote, he said "more, less, or something other than what he would mean."⁷

For Derrida "the reading must always aim at a certain relationship, unperceived by the writer, between what he commands and what he does not command of the patterns of the language that he uses... To produce this signifying structure obviously cannot consist of reproducing, by the effaced and respectful doubling of commentary, the conscious, voluntary, intentional relationship that the writer institutes in his relationship with the history to which he belongs thanks to the element of language. This moment of doubling commentary should no doubt have its place in a critical reading. To recognise and respect all its classical exigencies is not easy and requires all the instruments of traditional criticism. Without this recognition and this respect, critical production would risk developing in any direction at all and authorise itself to say almost anything. But this indispensable guardrail had always only *protected*, it has never *opened* a reading."⁷ As to projecting whatever one wants onto the text, for Paul de Man, on the contrary, "reading is an argument... because it has to go against the grain of what one would want to happen in the name of what has to happen; this is the same as saying that reading is an epistemological event prior to being an ethical or aesthetic value. This does not mean that there can be a true reading, but that no reading is conceivable in which the question of its truth or falsehood is not primarily involved."⁸

Regarding the accusation of denying the 'continuity' of Marx's thought, Althusser can be criticised for 'bending the stick' too far in the

direction of the mature Marx. However this is not a matter of projecting something he imagined; he is right in arguing that there is a new problematic. Alienation as a category is epistemologically not equivalent to concepts like 'relations of production' or 'surplus value'. However textually tendentious and theoretically contentious Althusser's position, the post-1845 research programme of historical materialism is, according to Gregory Elliot, "theoretically superior to and politically more significant than what preceded it."⁹ For Althusser, the question of discontinuity in Marx's thought is not brought up as part of an academic history of ideas or of some intellectual argument about an alleged 'incoherence' in Marx's thought; it reconstitutes the Marx who was *most revolutionary* in a *scientific* sense and hence in a *political* sense. This is where the political relevance of Althusser's reading lies.¹⁰ In the process of analysing the 'epistemological break' in Marx's writings, Althusser developed an anti-empiricist and non-positivist philosophy of science which gave primacy to the conceptual elaboration of scientific discoveries. His distinction between the 'object of knowledge' and the 'real object' encapsulated a simultaneous commitment to the specificity of scientific practice (the historical production and transformation of theoretical concepts) and epistemological realism (the independent extra-scientific existence of the objects of which knowledge is produced). It bears some comparison to Roy Bhaskar's transitive and intransitive objects of science.¹¹

Althusser did not see himself as a 'Marxist philosopher' but rather a 'Marxist in philosophy'. Philosophy is the under-labourer, rather than the queen of sciences. Its purpose is to clarify and develop the theoretical framework of historical materialism.¹² In his philosophical under-labouring, Althusser seeks to make Marxist epistemology and the fundamental axioms for the study of social formations – concrete analysis of concrete situations – explicit. These exist in a 'practical state' throughout the writings of Marx. They can also be found in Lenin's analysis of the revolutionary situation in Russia in 1917 or Mao's distinction between the primary and the secondary aspects of contradiction.¹³ Althusser seeks to present explicitly and systematically the methodological and epistemological assumptions underlying such analysis in a generally accessible form so that it can be developed in the concrete analysis of other concrete situations. In doing this Althusser is not a structuralist, as he emphasises the primacy of contradictions whereas structuralism negates the clash of discrepant structures that generate historical change. Structuralism postulates no articulated hierarchy of levels and no conception of contradictions between them so it cannot provide a theory of history. However in reality it is not possible to think of social structure without taking account of social conflicts, change and revolutions; that is, without accounting for the constant mutation of structures which are unstable and constituted by forces in conflict. For Althusser then structures are in fact constituted by the very conflict of those forces – an idea totally alien to structuralism.

For Althusser, materialist dialectic reality



is a pre-given, complexly structured totality, characterised by disjunctions, irregularities, uneven development and movement. It is the notion of contradiction, called by Lenin the kernel of the dialectic, which enables one to understand reality simultaneously as process and structure. Althusser has given the most adequate exposition of the materialist dialectic: "If every contradiction is a contradiction in a complex whole, structured in dominance, this complex whole cannot be envisaged without its contradictions, without their basically uneven relations. In other words, each contradiction, each essential articulation of the structure, and the general relation of the articulations in the structure in dominance, constitute so many conditions of the existence of the complex whole itself. This proposition is of the first importance for it means that the structure of the whole and therefore the 'difference' of the essential contradictions and their structure in dominance, is the very existence of the whole; that the 'difference' of the essential contradictions (that there is a principal contradiction, etc. and that every contradiction has a principal aspect) is identical to the conditions of existence of the complex whole."¹⁴

The kernel of materialist dialectics is the primacy of contradiction over identity with the concomitant emphasis upon the irreducibility of struggle, movement and transformation of one thing into another, on antagonism and non-antagonism. The theory of contradiction is therefore central to any elaboration of the theoretical bases of Marxism. In this respect Althusser was among those who promoted Marx's understanding of class as a shifting set of structural antagonisms, resisting the reduction of "the working class" to the sort of social object produced by colonial minded anthropology.

Therefore, a specific social formation is a complex and uneven relation of determinate economic, political and ideological practices in contradiction with each other within one historical mode of production. Althusser was able to provide a reconceptualisation of the structure of social formations which respected their constitutive complexity through the assignment of relative autonomy to irreducible political and ideological regions. It is no longer a matter of politics and ideology being superstructures which are being supported and produced by an economic base, forced to undergo revolutionary change when the economic base is in revolution. It is rather a matter

of seeing the articulation of the three practices, dependent on historically specific conditions. For the contradiction within each practice weighs upon the specific contradictions of the others; the whole historic situation impinges upon each moment. As Althusser wrote:

“The capital-labour contradiction is never simple, but is always specified by the historically concrete forms and circumstances in which it is exercised. It is specified by the forms of the superstructure (the state, dominant ideology, religion, politically organised movements and so on), specified by the internal and external historical situation which determines it on the one hand as a function of the national past... and on the other as functions of the existing world context.”¹⁵

According to the specific historical conditions a crisis can occur within or between political, economic and ideological practices; their specific contradictions are overdetermined by other contradictions, so that they become the arena of crisis, the principal contradiction, the contradiction whose struggle determines the future direction of the social formation as a whole. Why is the above crucial for militants? Because the analysis of the specific ‘conjuncture’ of conditions is the foundation of Marxist politics, as the possibilities for revolution are dependent upon the particular conditions created by the uneven relations constituting a social formation. To illustrate this point, Althusser takes Lenin’s writings from 1917, which reveal that it was the unevenness of the Russian social formation’s development – the combination of industry with a semi-feudal monarchy and agrarian system, confronted with the imperialist war—which made a socialist revolution possible there before the West. The process of overdetermination articulates how the ‘weakest link’ becomes the ‘decisive link’. Althusser has done more than any other contemporary theorist to clarify the concept of the ‘conjuncture’, the prevailing and determining set of material conditions, and to locate it within the science of historical materialism.

The concept of ‘structural causality’ means that the results of history are never decided in advance.¹⁶ The structural causality differentiates the Marxist from any mechanistic position and, “introduces in the determination an array of different instances, which supposes that society is a differentiated whole, complex and articulated, such that the last instance (economic) fixes the real limits of all the others (political and ideological), their relative autonomy and the performance of the base itself, as well as the efficiency of this action.”¹⁷

A social formation is understood simultaneously as a concrete whole and as a multiplicity of determinations. To affirm that the economic is the determining structure in the last instance as it introduces a hierarchy of determinations is a materialist position. To indicate that it is only a determination ‘in the last instance’ amounts to a rejection of mechanical determinism, and an adoption of a dialectical position. For a long time, the specificity of Marxist determinacy had been forgotten and fell upon an evolutionist interpretation of historical events, a ‘transitive’ or ‘expressive’ causality closer to (interpretations of) the mechanistic causality of the natural sciences than to the new type of causality discovered by Marx. The concept of structural causality allows a break with evolutionism. Althusser’s thesis that ‘history is a process without a subject or without a goal’¹⁸ enables a break with voluntarism and teleology. This was not a denial of historical agency. Althusser never doubted that there are subjects or historical agents, men and women who make their own history. This avoids objectivism. But they do not make it just as they please, but out of circumstances encountered and given from the past. This is why Marx noted in his ‘Marginal Notes On Wagner’, “My analytical method does not start from man, but from the economically given social period.”¹⁹ This avoids voluntarism. It is nothing



other than this which Althusser wants to express in his thesis about history being a process without a subject.

For Althusser there was such a thing as ‘science’ which is outside ideology, for its discourse is precisely subjectless. This is why he did not take issue with humanism as such: only with theoretical humanism. The problem is not with practical humanism but with humanism as a problematical philosophical category.²⁰ Theoretical humanism, such as that of Sartre, ends up becoming a poetics of history, whereas Althusser’s anti-humanist problematic results with the science of historical materialism.²¹ Althusser’s theoretical interventions have been accused of falling into mandarism and academicism. But there is a clear danger in reducing a theoretical itinerary to the vicissitudes of immediate political concerns. How can the relation of his theoretical work to his political practice be conceived?

Michael Sprinker argues, “the correct mode for conceptualising the relation of theory to politics is not, in an Althusserian view, to read off from theory the transparent evidence of a determining political practice, nor to translate immediate political commitments into a theory of political action and historical agency; rather, political practice and theoretical practice are two instances of a complex structured whole in which the development of each instance may proceed according to different historical rhythm... Theoretical practice can, as Lenin observed, be one step ahead of political practice; the only error is to believe that theory can move forward on its own, that it can be several steps in advance of political practice. Althusserian theory stands at the horizon of Marxist theoretical practice, providing the instruments with which Marxist political practice can advance.”²²

But how can this be realised? Perhaps at a theoretical level, it will help militants avoid the very real pitfalls of economism and evolutionism, objectivism and voluntarism which all find their translation into bureaucratic thought and anti-democratic practice. At the level of practical political intervention, Blackburn and Stedman Jones have shown the relevance of Althusser’s mode of analysis: “The logic of Althusser’s Marxism encourages us to study the given complexity of contradictions both within any one country and in the world as a whole... If these different struggles are not correctly located at the theoretical level, it will be impossible to coordinate them at the level of political practice. Such diverse struggles would then inhibit rather than strengthen each other. A stress on the intercalation of overdetermined contradictions and a rejection of the false simplicity of the ‘expressive totality’ would seem to provide the correct epistemological starting point for an internationalist politics. This is equally true of revolutionary struggle within a single country, where political practice is posed with the same inescapable complexity. Within the decisive revolutionary class, the proletariat, it is necessary to achieve a proper combination of economic, political and cultural practice. It is also necessary to unite the revolutionary struggle of the working class with the parallel struggles of particular oppressed groups... Althusserian categories seem particularly apt for establishing the connections between the diverse forms of repression in modern capitalist social formations, without at the same time collapsing one form of struggle into another... No revolutionary... can afford to ignore the weapons of scientific criticism put at his disposal by Althusser.”²³

Notes

1. Robert Paul Resch (1992) *Althusser and the Renewal of Marxist Social Theory* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press) provides a significant exception to this trend.
2. The most famous example of this criticism is E.P. Thompson (1978) *The Poverty of Theory*, (London: Merlin). More recently, see John Rees (1998) *The Algebra of Revolution: The Dialectic and the Classical Marxist Tradition* (London and New York: Routledge).
3. Gregory Elliott (1987) *Althusser: The Detour of Theory* (London and New York: Verso), pp.336-8
4. Louis Althusser (1970) *For Marx* (London and New York: Verso), p. 240
5. Paul Smith, Letter, *Weekly Worker*, Issue 703, 9 January 2008
6. Paul de Man (1983, 2nd ed.) *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism* (London: Methuen). In the last years Paul de Man was alive, he laid plans for a detailed study of Marx, Adorno and Althusser. See Paul de Man (1986) *The Resistance To Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press), p. 121
7. Jacques Derrida (1976) trans G. C. Spivak, *Of Grammatology* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press), pp. 157-158. From his interview with Michael Sprinker, it is clear that Derrida owes a lot to Althusser’s work: see Sprinker (1993) ‘Politics and Friendship: An Interview with Jacques Derrida’, in E. Ann Kaplan and Michael Sprinker (eds) *The Althusserian Legacy* (London and New York: Verso), pp. 183-233. See also Warren Montag (1999) ‘Spirits Armed and Unarmed’, in Michael Sprinker (ed) *Ghostly Demarcations: A Symposium on Jacques Derrida’s Specters of Marx* (London and New York: Verso), pp. 72-75
8. Paul de Man (1978) ‘Preface’ in Carol Jacobs, *The Dissimulating Harmony: Images of Interpretation in Nietzsche, Rilke and Benjamin* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press), p.xiii. Michael Sprinker has related de Man’s insistence on the non-subjective humanly eccentric properties of language to the Althusserian project. See Sprinker (1987) *Imaginary Relations: Aesthetics and Ideology in the Theory of Historical Materialism* (London: Verso)
9. Gregory Elliott, p.328
10. For a more recent overall analysis of Marx’s thought, influenced by Althusser, see Etienne Balibar (1995) *The Philosophy of Marx* (London and New York: Verso)
11. Roy Bhaskar (1989) *Reclaiming Reality* (London and New York: Verso), pp. 142-143 and 187-188
12. Alain Badiou (1966) ‘Le (re)commencement du materialisme dialectique’, *Critique*, issue 240
13. Slavoj Žižek has recently underlined the importance of Mao’s essay on contradiction. See Žižek (2007) ‘Introduction’, in Mao Zedong, *On Practice and Contradiction* (London and New York: Verso), pp.1-28. For an approach to Mao that problematises his current demonisation, see Mobo Gao (2008) *The Battle For China’s Past: Mao and the Cultural Revolution* (London: Pluto Press).
14. Althusser, *For Marx*, p. 205
15. Ibid, p. 106
16. An idea that Althusser will later radicalise in his ‘aleatory materialism’ or ‘materialism of the encounter’, which amounts in Alex Callinicos’s words to ‘an extreme rejection of a teleological conception of the historical process’. Alex Callinicos (1995) ‘Lost Illusions’, *Radical Philosophy*, Issue 74, pp. 42-44. See also Gregory Elliott (1998) ‘Ghostlier Demarcations: On the posthumous edition of Althusser’s writings’, *Radical Philosophy*, Issue 90, pp.20-32
17. Louis Althusser (1975) *Positions* (Paris: Editions Sociales), p.153
18. Louis Althusser (1976) *Essays in Self-Criticism* (London: New Left Books) p. 99
19. Marx-Engels, *Werke*, Bd. XIX, Berlin: Dietz Verlag, 1968, 370
20. See Martha Harnecker (1995) ‘Althusser and the “theoretical antihumanism” of Marx’, available at <http://www.rebellion.org/harnecker/althusser251102.pdf>
21. It is difficult to see how a multiplicity of individual acts can give birth to structures which have their own laws discontinuous from the acts which gave rise to them. The most obvious example is language, which cannot be described as a simple totalisation of all the speech-acts of linguistic agents. The subject who speaks never totalises linguistic laws by his own word. Contrary to what Sartre argues, the laws of grammar or relations of production are not intentional objects, they are discontinuous from linguistic utterances or the political and historical actions of individuals.
22. Michael Sprinker, *Imaginary Relations*, pp.204-205
23. Robin Blackburn and Gareth Stedman Jones (1972) ‘Louis Althusser and the Struggle for Marxism’, in Dick Howards and Karl Klare (eds) *The Unknown Dimension: European Marxism Since Lenin* (London: Methuen), pp 383-384