



Book Reviews

Philosophy of the Encounter: Later Writings 1978–1987

Louis Althusser

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In 1975 Louis Althusser published an essay titled ‘Is it Simple to be a Marxist in Philosophy?’ the title of which reveals the conflict which animated most of his intellectual and political career, the struggle to be both a Marxist and a philosopher. In the early years, in which *Reading Capital* and *For Marx* were published, Althusser saw his task as supplementing Marx’s political and economic analyses with the philosophy he never had time to complete. As Althusser writes, summarizing this position: ‘The biggest gap in Marxism, the work of Marx and even Lenin included, was philosophy’ (p. 210). In the latter years Althusser began to wonder if the exigencies of philosophy and Marxism were compatible at all, or if philosophy, which always aspires to universality, to a system, and Marxism, which is based on the analysis of a concrete historical situation, were opposed. This is another way of saying that in these later years Althusser occupied himself with the specific problem of ‘materialist philosophy,’ a philosophy that is oriented not on the primacy of thought or the concept, but on the primacy of material conditions over thought, and thus the irreducible gap that separates thought from reality.

The problem of materialist philosophy constitutes a central theme running through the various writings collected in the *Philosophy of the Encounter*, which includes the manuscripts posthumously published in the two volumes of *Écrits Philosophiques et Politiques* ‘Marx in his Limits’ and ‘The Underground Current of the Materialism of the Encounter’, as well as the interviews and letters to Fernanda Navarro previously published (in French) as *Sur la philosophie*.

In ‘Marx in his Limits’ Althusser returns to the texts of Marx under somewhat different conditions than those under which he wrote the texts that made his reputation, a decade earlier. Whereas his early writings were situated against the backdrop of the critique of Stalinist dogmatism and the rupture between China and the Soviet Union, tremors within the communist movement, at this point in the late 1970s the full-blown ‘crisis of Marxism’ had become unavoidable (p. 10). These different conditions lead to different conclusions. It is no longer enough to defend the ‘true’ or mature Marx against the deviation of interpretations or the limitations of his earliest works, the



limitations of Marxism must be traced back to the internal limits of *Capital* itself. Althusser argues that *Capital* is burdened by idealism, by the idealist categories of origin, necessity, and end. This can be seen in the way in which Marx begins with the fundamental kernel of capitalist society: the commodity form, and extracts the logic of capitalism from this starting point, arriving at the concepts of use value, exchange value, and surplus value. However, *Capital* cannot be reduced to this quasi-Hegelian logic. There are other chapters, most notably the chapters on the struggle over the working day, the factory conditions, and primitive accumulation, which interrupt this logic with dense historical and political analyses; these chapters are outside the 'order of exposition' (p. 40). The tensions between these tendencies within Marx's thought are not merely philosophical, they do not simply relate to the question of Hegel's influence on Marx, but deal with the nature of exploitation itself. Marx's forays into historical and political material illustrate the point that there is no exploitation in general (understood as a simple quantitative difference between the price of labor and its productivity), but exploitation is always an effect of concrete forms, such as laws, ideologies, and technology (p. 43). The historical and political passages underscore the point that there is no logic of capital in general: there are only specific cases, exceptional situations.

The tension that Althusser finds in Marx's writings ultimately has to do with the limitations of philosophy or thinking itself. Against Lenin's assertion that 'Marx's ideas are omnipotent because they are true', Althusser argues that it was Marx who illustrated that ideas, true or otherwise, have to be disseminated, believed, and acted upon before they can have effects. This is the lesson that Althusser draws from Marx's topography, the schema of base and superstructure, which for Althusser is less a definitive picture of society than an assertion of the relation between ideas and their limits and conditions. Every idea, even a theory of the total structure of society, occupies only a small space in that totality, and as such is dependent upon material factors for its survival and dissemination. As Althusser writes: 'Hence the distance (which is considerable at first) between the "truth" of the ideas that cover the whole of their object, and the efficacy of these ideas, which are situated in a small part of the "space" of their "object"' (p. 48). Marx's limits then are nothing other than the limits of philosophy itself, limits that are exacerbated by the tendency to take any philosophy as definitive and complete. The 'crisis of Marxism' opens a rift between two tendencies of Marx's thought: the idealist tendency to present a definitive theory of capitalism and a materialist tendency to recognize the specific material conditions and effects of any theory, any philosophy.

One would expect that as Althusser develops his critique of what he terms 'the philosophy of the philosophers', the confidence that the world can be grasped in terms of concepts, laws, origins and ends, he would depart from



philosophy altogether, turning to history, sociology, or political economy (p. 271). However, the strength of Althusser's thought lies in the fact that he takes this assertion of philosophy's limits into the very heart of philosophy; that is, he is committed to thinking through the implications of the paradox of 'materialist philosophy'. This can be seen in 'The Underground Current of the Materialism of the Encounter', a collection of provocative, scandalous, and at times cryptic assertions on philosophical figures as diverse as Epicurus, Wittgenstein, and Derrida. Through this survey of the history of philosophy Althusser develops an idea of materialism that takes as its starting point not a concept of matter, or of the mode of production, but the contingent fact of the encounter. Precisely what encounters what varies throughout history: in Epicurus it is the swerve that brings atoms into contact; in Machiavelli it is the encounter between *virtú* and fortune that determines the fate of the prince; in Rousseau it is the encounter between people living in isolation that gives rise to language and the state, the list goes on. What matters to Althusser is that in each case the encounter is primary to what it constitutes, contingency is prior to necessity. This is a departure from what is generally considered materialism.

This materialism is opposed, as a wholly different mode of thought, to the various materialisms on record, including that widely ascribed to Marx, Engels, and Lenin, which, like every other materialism in the rationalist tradition, is a materialism of necessity and teleology, that is to say, a transformed disguised form of idealism (p. 168).

As Althusser remind us the conflict between idealism and materialism is as old as philosophy itself, dating back to Plato. In this history, however, materialism has always been defined by idealism, idealism is the 'primary' term in the contradiction (p. 216). This is because the idea of materialism, of the heteronomy of thought, must always be a paradoxical idea. It entails thinking against the primacy thought. Althusser has demonstrated that despite its paradoxical status it can still be thought rigorously.

Althusser is best known as the person who argued, quite scandalously, for a division that ran through Marx's texts, making possible a demarcation between the young Marx (burdened with Hegel and Feuerbach) and the mature Marx of *Capital*. While this division is put into question by the current collection, which argues for internal and irresolvable tensions even in the mature works such as *Capital*, it is still possible to ask if this collection constitutes a 'break' in Althusser's thought. Is there a 'young' Althusser (burdened with structuralism and Bachelard) and a mature Althusser of the paradoxical thought of the materialism of the encounter? It is possible to view things in this way, and Althusser himself makes many assertions that support this point of view. What comes to light in the texts here is not a clean break but a continuation, and radicalization of not only Althusser's early investigations into the nature of



‘materialist philosophy’, and the paradoxical status of Marx’s philosophy, but his investigations into the ‘conjuncture’ and the nature of the event as well. The texts collected in the *Philosophy of the Encounter* make it possible to excavate the philosophical problems and provocations underlying the edifices of Althusser’s all too familiar assertions. The problems that Althusser deals with: the relation between thought and material reality, and the nature of the event, of radical change, remain absolutely contemporary.

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Out of this World: Deleuze and the Philosophy of Creation

Peter Hallward

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It is beyond question, I think, that Deleuze is one of the most remarkable philosophers of the post-war period. And yet, in spite of the ever-growing literature on him, one has the distinct impression that very few people have any real clue as to the kind of philosopher Deleuze is. Peter Hallward’s book goes a long way towards making a genuine comprehension of Deleuze’s philosophy possible, and in this respect it is a significant achievement (forthcoming studies by Christian Kerslake and Daniel Smith will also do much to improve the quality of our understanding and reception of his work). However, on account of the fact that Hallward feels little affinity for Deleuze’s philosophical project, anyone looking for an adequate and genuinely incisive assessment will be disappointed. Hallward is too distant from Deleuze’s project and the thinkers that provide it with its inspiration to make this possible. There are two widespread misconceptions of Deleuze, and Hallward’s study helps to correct both. The first is that Deleuze is first and foremost a Nietzschean thinker. While Deleuze published in 1962 a fine, if tendentious and one-sided study of Nietzsche, there are core elements of Nietzsche’s project that never figure in Deleuze’s writings. As Hallward shows, Deleuze’s fundamental inspiration in fact comes from two main sources and influences: Spinoza and Bergson. The second misconception is that Deleuze belongs to the so-called post-structuralist