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Althusser and Contingency

Candidate

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Abstract

This thesis argues that the concept of contingency plays a central role in Althusser's recasting of Marxist philosophy and in his attempt to free the Marxist conception of history from concepts such as teleology, necessity and origin. It is critically placed both against those readings that see the emergence of the problematic of contingency only in the late Althusser, and to the most recent attempts to establish a straightforward continuity in Althusser's work. Drawing on published and unpublished material and covering the entirety of Althusser's philosophical itinerary, the thesis seeks both to unearth the latent presence of this problematic, and its various implications, at each stage in the development of his work. It seeks to clarify, in a systematic way, the conceptual consequences of Althusser's commitment to contingency to the received understanding of his conceptions of structural change, ideology and political action. In particular, it argues that the standpoint of contingency allows us to locate in Althusser's 'Structural Marxism' the emergence of a 'logic of irruption' and structurally under-determined development or becoming. By emphasising this logic of contingency, it then seeks to produce a more nuanced assessment of his theory of ideology through the introduction of the concept of 'overinterpellation'. It finally attempts to distinguish two moments in the emergence (from the early 1970s onward) of a materialism of contingency, first political and then philosophical; the problematic coexistence of these two aspects helps to account for the unstable character of Althusser's late philosophical project.

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Introduction

This thesis is concerned with the notion of contingency in the work of Louis Althusser (1918-1990). It is today widely recognised that the question of contingency stands at the centre of Althusser's late and posthumously published writings, in which he argues for the existence of a 'completely unknown materialist tradition', which he calls 'aleatory materialism'. This aleatory materialism is conceived by Althusser in terms that allow him to oppose it, point by point, to the 'principle of reason', and thus to a more conventional or established materialism that relies on notions such 'origin', 'subject' and 'end'. As such, the question of contingency, or of the 'aleatory', is mobilised by Althusser to criticise the belief – for a long time central to orthodox Marxism – that history was a process inevitably directed towards a goal, and to reject the presupposition that 'materialism' has to do with discovering the 'laws' that govern the unfolding of this historical process and its inevitability.

The guiding presumption of my thesis is that Althusser's engagement with 'contingency' cannot be confined only to the last phase of his work, to his explicit concern with the so-called 'aleatory materialism', but constitutes on the contrary one of his major and abiding preoccupations. Althusser draws on the concept and implications of contingency at each stage of his life-long attempt to reinterpret Marxism and to clarify the philosophical bases that might sustain this reinterpretation. As such, this thesis takes as its immediate background what might be called 'the second reception' of Althusser's philosophy, triggered by the publication of many posthumous writings after the philosopher's death in 1990. Since then, some twenty volumes have been released over the years (corresponding to more than 5,000 pages of notes, quasi-finished texts almost ready for publication, an autobi-

ography, letters), opening up an entire new perspective in Althusser's scholarship. The enormous amount of materials that has been published, and which is almost annually being published to this day, calls for an attentive reconsideration of Althusser's philosophical production from the point of view expressed in the late writings. Today it is becoming clearer that what Althusser wrote in the eighties stands in a complex relationship with what he wrote all along his life.

To put it bluntly, and anticipating on what I will try to argue more substantially in the rest of the thesis, the writings produced by Althusser in the eighties are at the same time both an innovation with respect to what he attempted to do during the preceding years, and also a reorganisation of what was *already* present as a marked tendency in his own earlier work. As Warren Montag, one of the leading scholars on Althusser in the Anglophone world, nicely puts it, the publication of the writings of the eighties has the effect of changing what is visible also in the previous philosophical production of Althusser, allowing a new reading more attentive to the nuances present in his work¹. Notwithstanding Montag's suggestion, however, so far a systematic study of Althusser's philosophy that takes as its guiding principle the notion of contingency has not been produced, even if in recent years, since I began working on this project, several significant new books have been published that deal more substantially with Althusser's engagement with the notion of contingency. This thesis shares a lot with especially one reading of Althusser, at least in spirit if not in the arguments that it puts forth, De Îpola's short but very compelling book entitled *Althusser, l'adieu infini*². De Îpola, himself an old 'Althusserian', is one of the few to have attempted a more or less systematic re-reading of Althusser's philosophy from the point of view of contingency, from the 'classical' Althusser of the sixties to the 'late' one. Going against the usual practice in the academic field, which consists in saying 'however, what De Îpola misses is....', I want to stress that I share with De Îpola the idea that the issue of contingency represents a thread in Althusser's work, and that it allows us to reread his 'classical works' in a new way³. Furthermore, De Îpola's book captures pre-

1 W. Montag, 'Althusser's Nominalism: Structure and Singularity (1962-66)', *Rethinking Marxism*, 10: 3 (1998), p. 64.

2 E. De Îpola, *Althusser, l'adieu infini* (Paris: PUF, 2012).

3 Of course this does not mean that I agree with all his arguments; here I just wanted to remark

cisely the idea of a possible enduring heritage of Althusser's work today, and of a reactivation of another Althusser (not the 'structuralist', not the 'scientist') that can help us develop our understanding of the present state of affairs and elaborating new philosophical perspectives.

One of the prevailing positions in Althusser scholarship is that the 'late' Althusser apparently dropped any faith in Marxism as a 'science', recanting his own views elaborated in the '60s, in order to embrace a philosophy of contingency which is the correlate of a political despair. My point of view is that this interpretation is far too simplistic, and it does not account for the complexity of Althusser's relationship with the issue of contingency. According to the thesis that I will try to flesh out in the course of this work, there is not sudden shift between a 'structural' Althusser and a 'contingentist' Althusser. Rather, there is a constant reworking of the relationship between the classical logic categories of 'necessity' and 'contingency', which constitutes the background of the major steps of Althusser's philosophy: from the attack to the philosophy of history inspired by Hegel in the late forties and fifties, to the question of the dialectics in the sixties, to his theorisation of ideology and the subject, to the issue of politics and finally to the idea of an entirely new philosophy 'for' Marxism in the eighties.

I do not intend to argue that, since there is no 'break' between the 'first' and the 'late' Althusser, so then the 'late' Althusser is already and entirely present in earlier stages of his philosophical career. Rather, my aim in this research has been to trace the progressive elaboration of a *problem*, which emerges and surfaces in different places and in different times, and the temporality of which is not at all simple and progressive; and at the same time, to re-read some of the much debated issues in Althusser's scholarship according to the dynamics of this problem. I have refused, in other words, to project the 'late' Althusser back onto the early Althusser, attempting to follow the intricacies of his confrontation with the issue of contingency throughout the years. The problem of contingency traverses all Althusser's work, first implicitly and later on more and more explicitly, including his reading of Marx, Machiavelli, Rousseau, Freud. The problem is both *elabor-*

that I found his reading valuable as an attempt to open new paths through the intricacies of Althusser's philosophy. I will signal my disagreement on specific points when relevant.

ated through these readings and opens out onto *different* problems. As a result, in order to trace the development of this problem and its implications, it was impossible to choose between a simple chronological order and a thematic one.

The aim of the thesis, consequently, is two-fold. On the one hand, it seeks to trace the emergence and the progressive elaboration of Althusser's notion of contingency by unearthing the very 'vocabulary' of contingency - i.e., the set of notions and terms that are proper to Althusser's investigation of contingency - that Althusser develops in the different phases of his work. On the other, it attempts to draw the effects of this presence for some of the most important aspects of his thought, such as his conception of the historical dialectics and his theory of ideology, attempting to show the productivity of the standpoint of contingency for a reassessment of these much debated issues in Althusser's scholarship. It goes without saying that Althusser was a Marxist philosopher, or at least that he wanted to be one. The methodology of my reading of his work, however, does not consist in measuring his elaborations on the background of Marx's thought, or of Marxist thought, or of some more or less heretical Marxism. I was never particularly attracted by this (dogmatic) way of interpreting philosophy, which nonetheless inspired most early readings of Althusser's works when these were first published and immediately after (a circumstance that is, evidently enough, understandable, given that Althusser wanted his own reading of Marx to re-orient the politics of the PCF by a theoretical intervention in the 'doctrine' that was supposed to guide the practical activity of the Party). Yet reading Althusser in this way today would entail inevitably a perspective that might be called 'antiquarian', without necessarily attributing to it a negative appreciation, as Nietzsche did. Also, it would mean, in today's circumstances - when there is no such thing as an 'official' Marxism, when, like it or not, no 'classical' anti-capitalist revolution is in sight - to assume a historical distance and to recognise that Althusser's philosophical enterprise is definitively relegated to the proverbial dustbin of history.

The rationale sustaining my work is that reading Althusser today can indeed still be productive, and that the viewpoint of contingency can be one opportunity (certainly not the only one) to read his works as valuable for our present. Because

there is no need to deny the fact that Althusser *does* belong to an epoch that is not our own, especially for younger generations who never experienced the prospect of a proletarian revolution or that witnessed, without realising it, the beginning of the neoliberal counter-revolution (which is still a revolution). But also it is impossible to deny that the question of contingency represent today one of the questions of contemporary materialism, not least in thinkers that were influenced by Althusser himself (Badiou, Rancière and Žižek most notably).

As the title of the thesis suggests, this work is not about Althusser's conception of contingency per se. It is rather about Althusser *and* contingency, about his relationship with this notion that was expelled from the field of historical materialism and from the field of philosophy of history, both dominated by the question of 'necessity'. In this thesis, I will follow Althusser's problematisation of 'necessity' and his attempt to include contingency as an essential dimension of the historical dialectics and of materialism. It is well known that 'contingency', in the history of philosophy, is opposed to necessity, as what is non-necessary. In Althusser, the meaning of contingency is not the object of enquiry as such, either from a logical or metaphysical point of view. What constitutes the originality of Althusser's philosophy is the fact that he tried to establish a new relationship between the two classical modalities, that the history of thought normally opposes, generally in order to dismiss 'contingency' as the modality of what is merely disposable, accidental or unessential. Althusser proposes to think of history through the inversion of this valorisation, by asking, first quasi *sotto voce*, and then more openly: what happens if we think the primacy of contingency over necessity? What happens to Marxist dialectics? What happens to politics? What happens to 'materialism'?

As we shall see, 'contingency' in Althusser has many names: beginning, rupture, encounter, displacements and condensations, 'taking hold' being some of them. They do not appear in his writings at the same time, nor they are always used rigorously. I will try to detail stage by stage the construction of this vocabulary, and to interpret the above mentioned issues according to this vocabulary.

* * * * *

The thesis is divided into five chapters. The goal of the first chapter is to situate Althusser's problematic in the framework of a deep confrontation with Hegel, produced in his master's thesis in 1947, and to follow the first problematisation of the question of 'necessity' in history throughout the fifties. Whilst it has been argued that Althusser's early writings shows that he has been Hegelian at the beginning of his career, I argue that his relationship with Hegel is from the beginning one of criticism, and that such criticism is motivated by the refusal of the theme of the 'end of history' and of the 'necessity' of the development of the Idea, which affects Hegel's comprehension of history. The last part of the thesis, which is normally neglected in the recent accounts of Althusser's philosophy, is particularly significant, insofar as Althusser clearly distinguishes between a 'metaphysical necessity', derived from Hegel and embraced by the young Marx, and a new concept of necessity that should be put at work by a science of history. This new 'necessity', which is called by Althusser '*de facto* necessity', is encapsulated in the tentative concept of 'empirical transcendentalism', which points to the necessity of breaking with an ontological separation between essence and phenomena, the empirical and the transcendental, necessity and 'event'. By following Althusser's lessons at the École Normale in the 1950s, along with another article on the 'objectivity of history' (1955), the rest of the first chapter follows Althusser's confrontation with orthodox Marxism and with the attacks on the metaphysical necessity of which Marxism was accused in the post-war years, especially by thinkers such as Aron and Ricoeur. Finally, the chapter unearths the first occurrence of the term 'encounter' in the book on Montesquieu (1959), reading Althusser's first effort to re-conceptualise the structure of Marxist dialectics as an attempt to respond to the attacks levelled against Marxism in the French context by including a degree of contingency aimed at dismantling the monolithic conception of an economic causality governing the progression of the modes of production.

The second chapter deals with much more familiar writings, i.e. with *For Marx* (1965) and *Reading Capital* (1965), but it also takes into account some other posthumously published materials, such as Althusser's letters to his psychoanalyst René Diakine and a course on Rousseau delivered at the *École Normale* in 1965-1966. My aim in this chapter has been to argue that, whilst normally this period is regarded as the moment of the 'structuralist' Althusser, it is in these years that the initial core of Althusser's theory of contingency is fleshed out, and that it is here that the concept of 'necessity of contingency' is for the first time proposed. The chapter does not address some central but well-worn issues of Althusser's philosophy (epistemological break, science/ideology), but instead attempts to read systematically, following some apparently marginal suggestions made by Althusser, the concepts of 'overdetermination' and 'structural causality' in terms of his rather obscure insistence on the 'necessity of contingency'. In this way, against what remains the most widespread reading of Althusser in the anglophone world, I argue that Althusser does not substitute, for a teleological necessity of Hegel's derivation, a Spinozist logical conception of timeless necessity, but rather constructs a concept of causality which incorporates the moment of contingency as a structural dimension. However incomplete Althusser's reflections on contingency are at this stage, it seems to me quite fair to locate the first substantial engagement with it at this point, i.e. in the middle of what is normally referred to as Althusser's structural Marxism. I substantiate this point by referring to some letters to his psychoanalyst written in 1966, and to a course on Rousseau delivered at the *École Normale* in the same year. In them, Althusser argues for a conception of dialectics organised around what he calls logics of 'irruption', wherein 'irruption' is the contingent moment of the 'taking hold' of different 'elements' and tendencies at issue in a situation. Althusser further tries to invert the classical logical relation between accident and essence in his reading of Rousseau, where the idea of the 'necessity of contingency' is for the first time fleshed out in some depth.

The third chapter moves to Althusser's theory of ideology and of reproduction, which is definitely one of his most enduring legacies and also one of the most debated and rejected aspects of his philosophy. The polemic background of my

reading of Althusser's theory of ideology is the widespread criticism levelled against him of having deprived the 'subject' of any agency, and to have produced a functionalist account of the reproduction of the social formation. My interpretation aims to disentangle Althusser's theory of ideology from the idea that individuals are totally dominated by the ideological subjection that makes them function as submissive 'subjects'. While admitting that Althusser pays too little attention to the process and means of possible liberation from ideological domination, I argue that his work also offers some elements of a theory of what I call 'disinterpellation'. I first try to demonstrate that Althusser, around 1966, rejects the idea that ideology is unconscious, by showing that the articulation between ideology and the unconscious is for Althusser never guaranteed, but always dependent upon a 'contingent encounter', and that he thinks of this articulation as an always unstable one. I then argue that Althusser's concept of 'rupture' has an existential dimension, one that is very similar to Brecht's conception of the 'V-effect', and that Althusser's writings on theatre can help us understand the way in which for him individuals may in fact break with their own interpellation. However, in the second part of the chapter I argue for the insufficiency of the concept of interpellation per se, and I attempt to extract from Althusser's long manuscript *Sur la Reproduction* (published in 1995, but written in 1968-69) theoretical indications to develop the concept of interpellation itself in the direction of a theory of what I call 'overinterpellation', which takes into account the multiplicity and complexity of the ideologies, in the plural, that are involved in the constitution of the 'subject'.

Chapters four and five deal almost entirely with posthumous writings. Chapter four is dedicated to Althusser's relationship with Machiavelli, which stretches for more than 20 years, beginning in 1962 and lasting until the very last days of Althusser's philosophical activity. In this chapter, I first take into account the 1962 course, in order to flesh out the development of Althusser's vocabulary of contingency through Machiavelli since very early on. Then I move to a close reading of the *Machiavelli and Us* (published in 1995, written in the seventies), which was written (and rewritten) by Althusser during the seventies. The reason I decided to read Althusser's engagement with Machiavelli in a separate chapter, in-

stead of dealing with it together with the writings of the eighties on 'aleatory materialism', in which Machiavelli figures prominently, is not only chronological. Althusser's engagement with Machiavelli in the seventies, and the development of the theme of contingency through it, is more directly political than the writings on aleatory materialism, and is not concerned with the problem that is instead at the centre of the later texts, i.e. the idea of a 'philosophy for Marxism'. As such, the reading that Althusser produced of Machiavelli during the seventies constitutes an autonomous moment of his theoretical elaborations, with specific themes that will not remain present in the eighties. The main hypothesis of my reading is that Althusser, by arguing that in Machiavelli there would be a 'vacillation of theory', produces a vacillation of his own previous theory which condense in the problematic introduction of the question of the 'subject'. I argue that it is possible to read the *Machiavelli and Us* as Althusser's attempt to flesh out the idea of a 'political interpellation', the status of which remains in the end quite problematic.

Chapter five, finally, proceeds to a reading of Althusser's proposal of an 'aleatory materialism' as a 'philosophy for Marxism', attempting to interpret it as a 'materialism of practice'. The focus of the chapter is two-fold. On the one hand, I investigate the meaning of 'philosophy' in Althusser's idea that 'aleatory materialism' could be a 'philosophy for Marxism', by linking it to the concept of 'philosophy-effect' elaborated by Althusser in the sixties and to Dominique Lecourt's idea of a '*surmaterialism*', which was in my view a decisive influence on Althusser between the end of the seventies and the beginning of the eighties. Then I move to a close reading of the texts, concentrating mostly on Althusser's relationship with Epicurus, which is summoned by Althusser as the '*assiette*' for a new materialist philosophy and can be considered the prism through which Althusser reorganises his previous insights on contingency. By arguing that 'aleatory materialism' should be read as a 'materialism of practice', my aim has been to attempt a different interpretation of Althusser's late philosophy than some of the current ones, which read in these writings either a philosophy of the subject and of the body (Negri), or a philosophy of the 'void' as an origin (Montag), or as a simple surrender to the power of the event as a 'miracle' (Garó, Tosel).

Chapter 1.

From Hegel to Montesquieu

1. Introduction

In the renewal of interest in Althusser's philosophy that followed the publication of his posthumous writings, no attention comparable to the one devoted to late Althusser has been paid to what F. Matheron, the editor of *Écrits Philosophiques et Politiques*, called 'Althusser avant Althusser', that is, the Althusser before the publication of the articles that would later be collected in *For Marx*⁴. This period in Althusser's production is normally perceived as the least original, one in which Althusser was first under the influence of Hegel and then of the official doctrine of the communist parties, that is, in a word, Stalinism.

While this chapter can be seen as an attempt to fill a gap in Althusser's scholarship, its primary goal is not to trace the history of Althusser's philosophical youth⁵. My aim here is to conceptually isolate, in the writings that go from 1947 to 1959, the emergence of Althusser's problematic through his confrontation with Hegel and the tradition of the philosophy of history. What is significant for a global interpretation and comprehension of Althusser's philosophy is that it is over these years that some important problems of his subsequent philosophy are elaborated. Firstly, we have an investigation of the structure of Hegel's dialectics on the basis of concepts such as 'void' and 'origin' and a discussion of the relationship between Hegel and Marx on the issue of 'necessity' in history; secondly, we have a first attempt to counterpose, to a dialectic inspired by Hegel, another dialectic that

4 L. Althusser, *For Marx*, trans. B. Brewster (London: Verso, 2005). Henceforth FM.

5 A task that is beyond the scope of this study and that would require a wider knowledge of the pre-war philosophical context than the one that I have.

introduces the notion of 'encounter'. For a general assessment of Althusser's philosophy, the attention paid by Althusser to the problems of 'necessity' in Hegel and in Marxism, together with the consistent presence of concepts such as 'void', 'origin' and 'encounter', that would later on play a central role, is highly significant, and renders at least problematic a dismissal of this period as merely Hegelian or Stalinist⁶. Surely Althusser does not show in these years a degree of inventiveness in his theoretical elaborations comparable to the works of the sixties; yet the long confrontation with Hegel and the problems his conception of history pose to Marxism are not questions that can be chronologically dismissed as belonging to Althusser 'avant' Althusser, but are on the contrary foundational for his problematic as a whole.

The first part of the chapter focuses on Althusser's 1947 master's thesis on Hegel, titled 'On content in the thought of G.W. Hegel'⁷. In the light of this some 200 pages long text on Hegel, a great deal of references to Hegel that can be found in the later writings – sometimes apparently quick and always without textual references – find their solid background; and the idea that has been sometimes suggested that Althusser had only a superficial acquaintance with Hegel's texts loses any serious pretence. The thesis shows that Althusser as of thirty years old already knew pretty much the totality of Hegel's writings, from the early texts to the more famous ones⁸. When, later on, he refers to Hegel's texts, it will be in such a way that the rationale for his remarks can be found in this seminal work.

The second section follows the further problematisation of the question of

6 Cf. the judgement of F. Matheron in the presentation of the first volume of L. Althusser, *Écrits philosophiques et politiques*, Vol. I, ed. F. Matheron (Paris: STOCK/IMEC, 1994), p. 13, p. 17. Henceforth EPP I.

7 L. Althusser, 'On Content in the Thought of G.W. F. Hegel', in Id., *The Spectre of Hegel*, trans. G. M. Goshgarian (London: Verso, 2014 [1947]), pp. 17-172. Henceforth OC, followed by the page of the English edition and, when the translation has been modified, by the page of the French edition in round brackets. The French text is in EPP I, pp. 59-246.

8 A circumstance that is remarkable for a time when many of the writings were not even translated, let alone studied, in France. Althusser read them in German soon after the return to France after the war, when he studied Hegel with his friend Jacques Martin, who also translated the early Hegelian writings for the first time. For the situation of Hegel's studies in France at the time, see C. Lo Iacono, 'Paesaggi post-Hegelian', introduction to L. Althusser, *Il contenuto in Hegel*, trans. C. Lo Iacono (Milano: Mimesis, 2015), pp. 8-35; for a more comprehensive history of French Hegelianism from the 18th century to World War II, A. Belantone, *Hegel in Francia (1817-1941)*, 2 Voll. (Soveria Mannelli: Rubbettino, 2006).

'necessity' over the fifties, in light of some notes from a course delivered by Althusser in 1956 at the ENS on 'the problems of the philosophy of history'⁹. My aim is to show how the problem of 'necessity' is related to the status of political action in history within the Marxist framework, and how Althusser is at odds with the reduction of historical dialectics to the determinism of the laws of history propounded at the time by the official doctrine. It is his failure to resolve this tension, that he nonetheless perceives, that led Althusser in the following years to focus on Montesquieu and to his idea of 'dialectics of history'. It is in his 1959 book on Montesquieu that Althusser for the first time attempts to twist the conception of dialectics towards an incorporation of contingency. This crucial fact allows us to situate the birth – if still a tentative one – of Althusser's reflection on dialectics and contingency between 1956 and 1959, and to consider the problem of the political action as the more immediate background for Althusser's quest for another dialectics.

2. Althusser's Hegel. The Concept between Void and Plenitude

The rationale of Althusser's study of Hegel's philosophy is the 'decomposition', in the aftermath of Hegel's death, of his system. The problem, as Althusser himself recognises, is by no means new; on the contrary, it is very much the problem of Hegelianism itself after the death of Hegel, the core of the debates between left-wing and right-wing Hegelianism¹⁰. The point of departure of Althusser's enquiry is already internal to Marxism. Significantly, he refers to Engels' idea of the division between the system and the method as a possible line of interpretation for explaining the conservative, yet at the same time potentially revolutionary, charac-

9 This course is now published under the title 'Les problèmes de la philosophie de l'histoire' in L. Althusser, *Politique et Histoire de Machiavel à Marx. Cours à l'École normale supérieure de 1955 à 1972*, ed. F. Matheron (Paris: Seuil, 2006), pp. 33-206.

10 Cf. K. Löwith, *From Hegel to Nietzsche: the Revolution in Nineteenth-Century Thought*, trans. D. E. Green (London: Constable, 1965).

ter of Hegel's thought¹¹. But if Althusser refers to the Marxist interpretation of the problems of Hegel's dialectics, his position is from the beginning different. In a move that will be distinctive of his later attack on Hegel, he refuses the idea of an externality between system and method, on which the opposition between the 'revolutionary' character of the dialectics and the conservative character of the system was based in Engels and Marx. Althusser frames the problem in another way:

the development of Hegelianism points us to what *its beginnings concealed* [...] Hegel's thought must furnish us the truth by itself, appear in its profundity or its formalism, resolve, at last, the debate that divides the commentators, by teaching us whether the *dialectic* represents a form which is imposed from without, or one which emerges from its content¹².

Althusser attempts to find directly in the structure of Hegel's dialectics the internal reasons for his decomposition. The problem of 'content', to which the title of the thesis refers, is at the same time the problem of the dialectics: is this dialectics capable of attaining 'the very soul of things', or is it only a pure 'formal schematism'¹³?

It is perhaps useful here to spend a couple of words on the term 'content', which in itself is never really defined by Althusser. The German term for 'content', '*Inhalt*', is one of the terms that appears most frequently in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, where it designates the 'content' of the reality that consciousness discovers in its journey towards 'Absolute Knowledge'¹⁴. As such, for consciousness, the 'content' is the structure of being (or, in Hegel's terms, of the Idea) that it discovers stage after stage; but it is also what it misses in every stage until it gets at the end of the journey. It is therefore the 'actual' structure of being that consciousness seeks to know, progressively overcoming the limitations of its certainty, and what

11 See OC, p. 18.

12 OC, p. 19.

13 OC, p. 19.

14 Cf. OC, p. 65. A discussion of the term *Inhalt* can be found also in G. Rametta, 'Il contenuto è sempre giovane. La tesi su Hegel del giovane Althusser', in G. Rametta, *Metamorfosi del trascendentale. Percorsi multipli da Kant a Deleuze* (Padova: Cleup, 2008), pp. 85-114.

is laid bare in the *Logic*. In 'On Content', however, Althusser's attention is not so much on any specific category (of consciousness, or of the Idea), precisely because his problem is Hegel's way of constructing the system of categories and his preoccupation is to work out the functioning of Hegel's 'concept', in particular with respect to history. Here there emerge, definitely, a characteristic of Althusser confrontation with Hegel and with the dialectics: the refusal of taking it as a method distinct from the 'content'. For Althusser, the way in which Hegel thinks of Being, and then of history is rooted in his method itself¹⁵.

Even if Althusser's thesis is far from having the clarity of the later writings¹⁶, it is in it that Althusser outlines the structural limits of the Hegelian dialectics that will form, later on, the basis of his interpretation of Hegel. Four conceptual sets can be distinguished. First, we can find in it a reading of Hegel's dialectics on the basis of the notions of 'void' and 'plenitude'¹⁷, terms that later on will be used to oppose ideology to science, and also to define philosophy¹⁸. Secondly, Althusser insists on the relationship between Hegel's concept and the notion of 'origin', in its connection with the theme of 'necessity' within the framework of the Hegelian dialectics. Thirdly, Althusser refers to psychoanalysis to outline a theory of ideology, already implicitly rejecting the idea of ideology as mere false consciousness. Furthermore, there is a first, and in a sense definitive examination of the young Marx's relation to Hegel, precisely on the issue of the 'necessity' stem-

15 Quite a striking anticipation of what he will say in the sixties, when he will attack the 'overturning' of the Hegelian dialectics refusing precisely the idea that it is possible to 'extract' the dialectics as a method from the 'system', on the presupposition that the two stand in an extrinsic relationship. This is at the core of the essays 'Contradiction and Overdetermination' (FM, pp. 87-128) and 'On the Materialist Dialectics' (FM, pp. 161-218).

16 Its style and its structure render often difficult to distinguish the mere paraphrase from Althusser's thoughts.

17 The presence of this concept in the study of the concept of 'content', as well as its recurrence within the whole Althusserian corpus was for the first time noted as early as 1997 by F. Matheron, editor of the posthumous oeuvre. See F. Matheron, 'La récurrence du vide chez Louis Althusser', *Futur Antérieur*, 'Lire Althusser Aujourd'hui' (1997). Matheron argues that Althusser refers to the void every time he faces a philosophical difficulty, so that the void cannot be considered as a concept – such is Matheron's conclusion – but the 'index of a difficulty'. If it is not definitively possible to interpret all the occurrences of the 'void' in Althusser's texts as a well-defined concept, throughout this thesis we will see that the somewhat polymorphous and heteroclitic notion of the 'void' finds its rationale in the anti-Hegelian function that Althusser attributes to it in different circumstances.

18 For instance: philosophy will later be defined as the 'void of a distance taken', ideology will be said to have 'horror of the void'. See *infra*, ch. 3.

ming from the structure of Hegel's dialectics.

The thesis 'On Content' is usually interpreted as a proof of Althusser's early Hegelianism¹⁹, or at least of his Hegelian-Marxism²⁰. By contrast, my reading argues that this thesis should be read as a critique of Hegel's dialectic and of its necessarily ideological character, and as the place where the need for a non-Hegelian relationship to Marx is for the first time expressed. What Althusser appreciates in Hegel is definitely Hegel's attempts to overcome any dogmatic philosophy and to think of history as a development. However, it is precisely the result of this attempt that is the focus of Althusser's criticism. It is this double register that recent interpretations fail to grasp, a failure that ensued in a repetition of Matheron's judgement according to which Althusser was indeed Hegelian. On the contrary, what I want to bring to the fore is that this early writing possesses a foundational – and not only chronological – role in the development of Althusser's philosophy, as it is here that his reading of Hegel as an 'ideological' thinker takes shape.

2.1 The Horror of the Void

To see how Althusser constructs his interpretation of Hegel, let us refer again to the above quoted passage, where Althusser says that the decomposition of Hegel's system 'points us to what its beginnings concealed'. Althusser's interpretative move is to locate in the very beginning of Hegel's philosophical career the matrix of his dialectics or, as Althusser says, of the structure of the 'concept'. Such structure is identified by Althusser with a specific relationship between 'void' and 'plenitude':

19 Matheron set the protocols of this interpretation in EPP I, p. 13. There is not much on the early Althusser in the second literature, but the little that there is in line with Matheron's judgment. See Lo Iacono, 'Paesaggi post-Hegelian', cit., and G. Rametta, 'Il contenuto è sempre giovane. La tesi su Hegel del giovane Althusser', in Rametta, *Metamorfosi del trascendentale*, pp. 85-114. The title of the English translation of Althusser's early works – *The Spectre of Hegel* – evidently follows (and reinforces) this idea.

20 This circumstance has led to periodisation of Althusser's thought centred on the idea that a break with Hegel occurs in the years immediately after the thesis, when Althusser underwent a double transition – from Hegelianism to Marxism and from Catholicism to communism – with the result of untying this writing from the rest of his philosophy.

The *plenitudo temporum* is accomplished with Hegel [...] it is both that by virtue of which the whole is accomplished, *vollzogen*, full, that which constitutes the whole as such – but, at the same time, it is that through which the lack [*manque*] it serves to fill is exposed [...] at every instant, more or less clearly, the void which has been revealed calls for a content. [...] It is the appropriation of its own *genesis as a fulfilment*, in the very consciousness of the void, which the meditation of the young Hegel already put before us. [But] for Hegel's phenomenological consciousness, considered as an event, it is initially only the experience and horror of the void²¹.

In this passage, Althusser basically sums up his interpretation of all Hegel's philosophical enterprise as a sort of need for the accomplishment of a plenitude rooted in the phenomenological experience of Hegel as an individual. For Althusser, Hegel thought of himself as the one capable of exposing the 'void', term by which Althusser initially refers to the lack of 'meaning' (historical, religious, political) that he saw in his contemporary world²². If such an interpretation might seem extrinsic, Althusser grounds it on a detailed textual analysis²³ in which the pair 'void/plenitude' demonstrates a heuristic fecundity. The texts used by Althusser to elaborate this interpretation are Hegel's early political and religious writings: it is here that he finds the emergence of the basic structure – which is political and theological at the same time – of the 'concept' as an answer to the 'horror of the void'.

Amongst the texts examined, the first – *The Constitution of Germany* – is particularly significant, as Althusser will refer to it again nearly 30 years later when writing on Machiavelli²⁴. Commenting on this writing, where Hegel criticizes the political fragmentation of the German states and bemoans the lack of a unity conferring them 'truth' (i.e., for Hegel, the truth that only a state can give),

21 OC, pp. 23-24 (67).

22 Althusser correctly points out that Kant is for Hegel the proper name of the lack of meaning, of the incapacity of an entire historical epoch – the Enlightenment – to go beyond the finite categories of the understanding. Cf. OC, p. 37 ff.

23 As Rametta has noted, we are here presented with an original interpretative move. See Rametta, 'Il contenuto è sempre giovane', p. 85.

24 L. Althusser, *Machiavelli and Us*, ed. F. Matheron and trans. G. Elliott (London: Verso, 1999), p. 9.

Althusser points out that Hegel reads it in terms of absence, detecting in the void the absence of plenitude:

an implicit reality is already beginning to come into view here, which alone makes it possible to conceive absence as absence, the void as void – the reality of a plenitude that resides in the totality²⁵.

Such absence is, as Althusser recognizes, initially only a nostalgia of a lost totality, of an organic totality that Hegel identifies with the Greek *polis*. What Althusser isolates here is the movement of the constitution of a horror of the void that becomes the principle of organization of Hegel's reading of his present through the idea of a *lost* totality. What interests Althusser, however, is not such a nostalgic and regressive moment in itself, which Hegel shares with Schelling and Hölderlin in the years of Tübinga; but rather the moment in which Hegel's relationship with the void passes from the idea of an irretrievable totality, lost in the past, to a conception of a totality which is 'conquered'. It is in this 'overturning' that Althusser locates the origin of the *Aufhebung*, of which he stresses the religious provenance. Commenting on Hegel's theological writings, Althusser writes:

here the notion of a totality informed by love [brought about by Christ] comes into play; the totality is, however, no longer represented as a given, but as something gained through effort [...] whereas the organic totality of Greek religion has, in some sort, no past, and is reflected less as a result than as an origin [...] Love is the end result of a process, the overcoming [*résolution*] of dismemberment [...] Love is *Aufhebung* [...], a term that is the equivalent of the word *pleroma* in the Greek text²⁶.

It is here that we can find the first characteristic of the Althusserian understanding of dialectics. The origin of the 'Aufhebung' lies in the idea, revealed to Hegel by Christianity, that 'plenitude', the *plenitudo temporum* as the plenitude of sense, is the end result of a process in which dismemberment is an essential stage. In terms

25 OC, p. 25.

26 OC, pp. 32-33 and fn. 28, trans. mod. (77).

of Althusser's reading, this means that Hegel, via Christianity, understands now the 'void' as lack of fullness, and not as something that has consistency per se; 'void' is never the last world, so to speak, but only a *necessary* moment of the process of the 'overcoming' of such dismemberment, and a moment that 'hints' towards its own plenitude. Althusser sees here the moment in which Hegel posits a relationship between void and plenitude that is not merely regressive, but takes the form of a progressive vector (we will write: ' $v \rightarrow p$ ' to account for this aspect) which forms for him the basis of the *Aufhebung*, where the void as such is *subsumed* by plenitude. Althusser's understanding insists particularly on the reconciliatory character of this vector, which passes through dismemberment to heal it and to turn it into a moment of (religious) fullness; but unlike, for example, Marx's or Feuerbach's critique, he discovers as the heart of *Aufhebung* not so much the subject-predicate inversion, but a more fundamental movement, i.e., the inversion between the beginning and the end that is characteristic of the vector ' $v \rightarrow p$ ':

Here it appears to Hegel for the first time that the totality is not primary, but ultimate; that it cannot be in the beginning but must be at the end; and that it is therefore necessary to pass beyond consciousness of the void as the mere consciousness of a lost content, *in order to attain to the consciousness of the void as a content that must be conquered*. [...] we can already detect the emergence of the idea that dismemberment is necessary to ultimate fulfilment; we can discern something like a *necessity of the void*²⁷.

This passage makes clear that for Althusser Hegel derives the structure of his dialectics from a (phenomenological) consciousness of the void. The central sentence is crucial here: from a consciousness of the void as object, as a given that is dismemberment, there is the deduction of the void itself as a structurally *necessary* moment of the content; at this point, in Althusser's reading, the void is grasped by Hegel not only as a phenomenological experience, but at the same time: 1) as what hints towards a plenitude; 2) and as an objective 'reality'; we could say that it is now grasped at an ontological level, that is, at the level not of consciousness,

²⁷ OC, p. 33 (77). My emphasis.

but at the level of the 'concept'²⁸.

2.2 The Hegelian Concept as an Ideological Concept

In the central part of his thesis, Althusser investigates what he calls 'the cognition of the concept', i.e., the following problem: what is the knowledge produced by the Hegelian concept?

To begin with, Althusser stresses what he considers a positive achievement on the part of Hegel. The basic structure of the vector ' $v \rightarrow p$ ' identified in Hegel's early writings is responsible, in fact, for two fundamental consequences: on the one hand, Hegel posits the conditions for overcoming the philosophies of the (finite) subject and of intuition; on the other, he frees up the space to consider being as a process.

In effect, Althusser's appreciation of Hegel is due to the fact that he sees him as the philosopher who – by retrieving the inspiration of ancient philosophy – posed the need to think of the subject and the object without opposing them, as was the case in Descartes and in Kant. In some pages that retrospectively may well surprise, Althusser argues that Hegel overcomes both the philosophies of the subject (in the sense of the finite subject) and dogmatic philosophies such as Spinoza's, where, argues Althusser (after Hegel), totality is immediately given as an origin, and there is no production of substance but only a deduction of what is already present in the first intuition of it. 'Content', in such philosophies, is already there: it is posited as an absolute origin²⁹. The point is, however, that as far as Althusser's judgement on Hegel is concerned, we must not stop at this admittedly positive appreciation of Hegel's intention to get rid of the presupposition, as such an appreciation is in fact the point of departure that serves to highlight another

28 As is evident – and this is another point on which Althusser will always insist – there is perfect continuity between the dialectics of the consciousness and the 'objective' side of the dialectics. The second is for Althusser the transposition of Hegel's phenomenological experience.

29 Althusser's criticism of Spinoza (a Spinoza read to a large extent through Hegel) can have us think that Althusser then endorses Hegel's philosophy. And this is in fact the basis for the interpretation of the young Althusser as Hegelian.

problem in Hegel's conception of the concept.

The key point is Althusser's treatment of Hegel's conception of origin. The importance of 'origin' in Althusser's philosophy is crucial, as we shall see over the course of this study; for this reason, this question is of the utmost importance both for countering the Hegelianizing interpretation of the young Althusser, and for a general assessment of Althusser's relationship with Hegel. Althusser deals with this problem referring both to the *Phenomenology* and the *Logic*, but the latter is far more important for our argument. As the immediate aim of Althusser, at this point of the text, is to argue that Hegel's thinking is an attempt to conceive of the 'generation' of the content of being without presupposing anything, his attention goes to the very place where Hegel has to produce the greatest effort to rule out any presupposition: the beginning of the *Logic*³⁰.

G. Rametta – to whom we owe, to my knowledge, the most thorough and comprehensive interpretation of the young Althusser as Hegelian – maintains that, here, Althusser adopts – and endorses – the position of an anti-ontological interpretation of the *Logic*, correctly (for Rametta) arguing against an interpretation that flattens Hegel on a 'metaphysical' stereotype as a thinker of close and compact totality³¹. The crucial passage, in Althusser's thesis, that can ground this interpretation is the following:

did he himself [Hegel] not claimed to have made the *Logic* the *Darstellung Gottes*, a representation of God's understanding 'as he is in his eternal essence before the creation of nature'? Is his *Logic*

30 For the later development of Althusser's philosophy, this focus on the beginning of *Logic* is crucial, as he here deals with the problem of the *beginning from the void*: we will encounter this problem again in the following chapters.

31 From Rametta's point of view, which is a Hegelian one, this means that here Althusser's reading is more faithful to Hegel than in the 1960s. For Rametta, Althusser's image of Hegel in *For Marx* and in *Reading Capital* is reductive and one-sided. He is not the first to say this, of course. However, he is one of the few who has attempted to produce a serious argument which is not interested in demonstrating that Marx is not anti-Hegelian – and that therefore Althusser is wrong – but rather to demonstrate where Althusser's understanding of Hegel is flawed. See G. Rametta 'Darstellung in Hegel e Althusser', in *L'ombra di Hegel. Althusser, Deleuze, Lacan e Badiou a confronto con la dialettica*, ed. G. Rametta (Monza: Polimetrica, 2012), pp. 13-56. I have to say that I find Rametta's attempt to demonstrate that Hegel's speculative proposition functions as a materialist 'Generality I' (in Althusser's sense) quite interesting, but rather problematic, if anything because I do not see the where the materiality of the theoretical means of production would lie.

not, on his own description, what the *alethèia* of Greek dogmatism was – the *Warheit ohne Hülle* in its eternal truth? Passages suggesting this abound. They authorize a theological interpretation of the *Logic*: it is itself the original, primordial content out of which all truth [...] has proceeded. [...] The *Logic*, it would follow, is clearly an ontology, an absolutely constituted content, the original kingdom of the truth. Yet, if this were indeed the case, it would be hard to understand the development of this content³².

Here, Althusser takes a position against the theological or 'metaphysical' interpretation of the *Logic* - there can be no doubt about this. However, this passage does not allow us to infer that Althusser embraces Hegel's overall position. It is important, in fact, to consider the context in which this positive appreciation appears: here, Althusser is interested in establishing the power of Hegel's thought against a 'static' ontology where totality is given in the beginning as an origin. The crucial remark is the last phrase of the quotation: if we were to interpret *Logic* only as a theology, we would miss the specific difference between Hegel's philosophy and the philosophies of origin as given: we would miss, that is, the idea of 'development'. But this means only that Althusser's appreciation lies in Hegel's capacity to free a conceptual space to put a certain concept of 'origin' – i.e., as it is thought of in the philosophies of the given or the subject, two variants that Althusser gathers together as philosophies of presupposition – into question. This seems to be confirmed by another remark added by Althusser slightly later on, which validates our hypothesis of the need to read this passage in the context of Althusser's polemic with a certain thinking of origin:

It is Hegel's merit to have conceived the positivity of the void [...] which enabled him to rule out every 'substantialist' conception of the in-itself, and to attend to its generation. Hegelianism is often characterized as a philosophy that regards the world *sub specie aeternitatis*, as an a-priori system of reference. We shall see later in what sense this judgement is valid. Here, however, it must be understood that Hegel's aim is to abolish every system of reference, to do away with every pure given whether a-priori or a-posteriori, by exposing its abstract nature³³.

32 OC, pp. 58 and 60 (104-105).

33 OC, p. 62 (108).

The 'positivity of the void' does not refer, in this passage, to the question of the *consciousness* of the void. Rather, Althusser turns the dialectics of the void of consciousness into an ontological initial void, which corresponds, in the passage above, to the ruling out of every 'substantialist' conception of the thing itself (the 'in-itself'). By this transposition of the void from a phenomenological to an ontological dimension, the void comes to mean now, above all, the absence of presupposition, rather than the 'dismemberment', as it was initially. Such absence of presupposition is definitely praised by Althusser; he makes it the precondition of the 'attendance' of the generation of the content itself. But this is not the last word: this appreciation is *limited* to the effects that such an attempt produces against other philosophical positions (e.g. the 'static' ontology of Spinoza), and it does not exclude that another judgement on Hegel is necessary ('we shall see later...').

In fact, soon after Althusser exposes the limits of Hegel's enterprise as to the very concept of the 'origin'. Two passages are decisive to grasp this deeper critique of Hegel. In the first, which regards Hegel's *Phenomenology*, Althusser maintains that the 'productivity' of consciousness (its dialectical journey) is guided by the plenitude to be conquered, arguing against Hartmann's idea that there is no totalizing dialectical movement in that book³⁴. In the second, which focuses on the *Logic*, he argues that the concept functions as a recursive positing of an origin that is *more originary* of the origin itself:

The Hegelian concept is pure interiority [...] it is sprawling: any grasping of the concept in whatever form is nothing but the grasping of the Self by itself. 'The self has no outside' [...] The Hegelian concept is the movement through which the result recovers its origins by internalizing them; by revealing itself to be the origin of the origin. This process of envelopment implies that the initial term and the reflected term are *aufgehoben* in the result: that is, preserved and justified [*conservés et justifiés*]³⁵.

34 OC, p. 117 ff. Hartmann's interpretation to which Althusser refers is the one set out in N. Hartmann, *Die Philosophie des deutschen Idealismus*, II (Berlin-Leipzig: De Gruyter, 1929), pp. 38 ff.

35 OC, p. 82-84 (129-130), trans. mod. In the English translation some words are quite strangely omitted, with the result that Althusser's emphasis on the justifying and conservative character of *Aufhebung* gets lost.

Now, here Hegel's attempt to do away with the origin is evidently criticised for its failure: in reality, in Hegel, the 'origin' is, for Althusser, only displaced. It is crucial to read this passage together with the basic structure identified by Althusser, the vector ' $v \rightarrow p$ '. The 'result', in fact, is the plenitude that is at the end, as it is the end itself that guides the unfolding of the concept. The important point of Althusser's interpretation is precisely this, i.e., the *displacement of the origin at the end and the incorporation* of this displacement in the working of the concept.

But in the above quoted passage, we also find another important idea, which represents the other side of Althusser's understanding of Hegel's concept. The key point is his insistence on the 'envelopment', which he refers to also by the figure of 'circle'. His reading of the concept as 'interiority' is, therefore, positioned along two axes: the first is the vector that we already know; the other is the 'circle', i.e. the envelopment, a systematic recuperation of the given in the movement of the concept. What we need to stress is that, for Althusser, Hegel's concept is at the same time both: a vector and a circle, two figures that apparently stand in contradiction to each other. However, Althusser's point is precisely that the Hegelian concept exists only as both a vector and a circle³⁶. The first point to note is, in fact, that Althusser does not assign to the Hegelian concept a veritable productivity, but only one that justifies and preserves the given, subtracting from it the status of origin only to return to it by way of a conservative movement that leaves the given unaltered³⁷.

The second point is that which becomes apparent when Althusser describes Hegel's relationship to Napoleon in the *Phenomenology*, which is the moment when Althusser moves back to the plan of real history to show the consequences of Hegel's 'concept' on the apprehension of history³⁸. Althusser argues that Hegel

36 Let us note, by the way, that in *Reading Capital* Althusser will also say that Hegel is a thinker of contemporaneity and, at the same time, a thinker of linear time – exactly the double characterization that we find here. Cf. L. Althusser and É. Balibar, *Reading Capital*, trans. B. Brewster (London: Verso, 2009), pp. 101 ff. We will return to this.

37 Here Althusser is in line with Marx's criticism of the speculative abstraction. He reads the verb *aufheben* in the sense of 'raise', 'elevate', leaving the element that is raised unmodified.

38 OC, pp. 103 ff.

interprets the figure of Napoleon as the moment in which plenitude is attained, as the moment of Freedom, and therefore as the moment when circularity is attained: it is on this absolute premise, i.e. that the plenitude is actual and attained, that the concept finds its basis and is thought by Hegel as the coincidence of the subject and the object. The point is that here Althusser is not, as some have suggested, saying that Hegel is capable of thinking about the content (which would make him a 'Hegelian'); on the contrary, he is saying that the very act of positing plenitude *as accomplished in the present* (when Napoleon nearly crashed the windows of his maisonette) is what makes the coincidence between the vector and the circle possible (or real). In non-Althusserian jargon, what he is saying is that Hegel's concept is *structurally* premised upon the presupposed coincidence between epoch and system. It is the absolutely paramount theme of the contemporaneity of history: Hegel's comprehension of history can only be contemporary in the specific sense that the present is, for Hegel, always the attained plenitude. What Althusser shows here is that, in Hegel, the 'end of history' is *constitutively* inscribed in the form of the concept, that the latter is constituted in Hegel as a folding back upon itself of a vector ' $v \rightarrow p$ ' in which 'p' is the *contemporary* given, which is 'elevated' to the rank of plenitude and at the same time thought of as a result.

We have seen, so far, that Althusser is not endorsing Hegel's position, but only that he recognises his power to criticise certain other philosophical positions, that Althusser certainly considers negatively. But the question of the 'origin' has clarified that Hegel is not at all exempt from criticism on the part of Althusser.

Now, in order to further understand Althusser's real assessment of the structure of Hegel's thought, it is necessary to refer, at this point, to the role that psychoanalysis plays in his thesis. By referring to it, it becomes possible to tie together Althusser's reading of the 'origin' and ' $v \rightarrow p$ ' vector, relating them to the question of 'ideology'. It is from this point of view that we can place in the right perspective Althusser's twofold judgement on Hegel, his positive remarks that run throughout the thesis, and the overall anti-Hegelian position taken up by him.

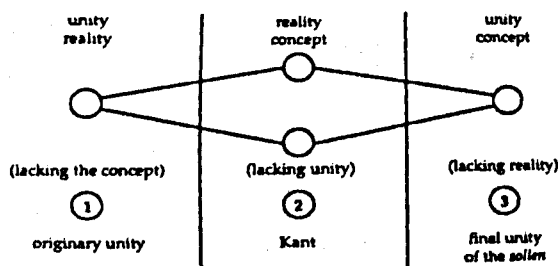
The reference to Freud is confined to a footnote, thus appearing to be unessential to the overall argument. Yet the way in which Althusser uses it is para-

mount, as it is through psychoanalysis that Althusser interprets the Marxist notion of ideology. In this footnote, what is at stake is Hegel's critique of Kant. Althusser argues, following Hegel's critique of *Sollen*, that *Sollen* is the 'prototype' of ideology. Commenting on the figure below³⁹, Althusser points out two things. The first is that ideology is a loss of reality; the second is that ideology is related to totality. The conclusion can be thus formulated: ideology belongs to the realm of the imaginary and is an operation of totalization. Soon afterwards, Althusser (always commenting on the figure) advances a psychoanalytic explanation:

two points appear here: 1) that the totality is always, if obscurely, present even in a system of thought limited to externality; it has to find a point of fixation (just as in Freud the totality of the libido persists forever, seeking an outlet in morbid or traumatic symptoms when it is not fully occupied and fully recognized) to make up for its mutilation and represent the spurned totality, if only symbolically (origin of myth and ideologies); 2) that in Kant this mythic reconciliation comes about at the price of a slippage [*glissement*]. Here we see the very origin of ideology in the suppression of the category of reality⁴⁰.

This is in itself a remarkable anticipation of Althusser's later usage of psychoanalysis for the re-elaboration of the Marxist concept of ideology, one that shows that Althusser was already well acquainted with Freud at the end of the 1940s. What is important for us, however, is that here Hegel is opposed to Kant, who is considered to be the 'philosopher of ideology'. Because of this opposition, the natural conclusion seems to be that Hegel is not: Hegel would be the one who managed to

39 Althusser's schema, OC, p. 292:



40 OC, fn. 56, p. 292.

think about the content 'scientifically'. We have already seen, in the case of 'origin', that it would be a mistake to isolate a passage from the general argument. The point, in fact, is that to conclude that Hegel is the one who thought 'scientifically' would be to underplay the link that Althusser is establishing between totality and ideology, and the concomitant fact that 'plenitude' – which must be taken as the other name of totality – plays a central role in the whole text. The question is: is it really a matter of opposing Hegel to Kant, as 'thought of the content' (science) to ideology? Were this the case, we should conclude that the question of totality/plenitude does not regard ideology as such; yet the textual evidence forbids this conclusion: ideology is an imaginary compensation that restores a totality. Let us read the passage carefully: Althusser is arguing that, in Kant, we can see the origin of ideology in the suppression of the category of reality, and that in Kant this suppression 'comes about at the price of a slippage', the slippage that originates Kant's concept of *Sollen*. Reading this passage through the categories deployed in the reading of Hegel would produce the following: plenitude (totality) is *consciously* posited as non-realizable. Does the fact that such a slippage does not occur in Hegel suffice to say that, in Hegel, it is not a question of ideology? From a logical point of view, not at all: we could say that ideology is produced without a slippage, which would mean that the slippage is not, for Althusser, a necessary condition of ideology, but only a supplementary one. Soon after, Althusser - enigmatically perhaps - adds:

Kant's merit is to have provided ideology with an awareness of itself as an ideology; Hegel's is to have worked out the meaning of ideology and assigned it its truth, i.e., to have destroyed it by accomplishing it⁴¹.

This does not mean, as Rametta concludes⁴², that according to Althusser Hegel managed to overcome the structure of ideology; this means that the difference

41 OC, fn. 56, p. 292 (229). The original translation reads 'perfecting' instead of 'accomplishing', making it impossible to see the connection between ideology and plenitude that Althusser wanted to stress by using '*accomplissement*'. (Accomplishment, fulfilment, plenitude are all associated with each other around the theme of *plenitudo temporum*. See OC, p. 23.)

42 Rametta, 'Il contenuto è sempre giovane', p. 99.

between Kant and Hegel does not match the ideology/science distinction, but another one: the transcendence/immanence distinction. As such, unlike Kant, Hegel posited the totality (plenitude) in immanence, bringing, so to speak, the structure of ideology into immanence itself (accomplishing it). I suggest, therefore, reading this utterly crucial passage in the sense that, for Althusser, Hegel transposed in immanence what Kant had thought as ideology, making of the concept of ideology the 'concept' itself through its very structure, defined by the ' $v \rightarrow p$ ' vector, where 'p' is always the 'given'. However paradoxical or counterintuitive in the face of a first reading this may appear, we should read in this passage Althusser's preference for Kant over Hegel: Kant's ideology is at least aware of itself as ideology; Hegel's is not. What does it mean, however, to say that Hegel 'destroyed' ideology? Basically, that it is through the 'exaggerated' [*demesurée*] attempt to inscribe in the real the ideological plenitude⁴³ that he allowed us to witness the explosion of ideology through the dismemberment of his system – the effects of distortion that the 'concept', understood as the unity of the vector and the circle (which, far from doing away with the origin, always posits the present itself as a more originary origin), could not avoid producing. It is in this sense that Althusser says that Hegel's truth is his decomposition⁴⁴.

2.3 Necessity in Question (Marx beyond Hegel)

In the last part of the thesis, Althusser focuses for the first time on the Hegel-Marx relationship; from this point of view, it is here that we can find the opening moment of a confrontation that will occupy him for the rest of his career. What interests us here is that Althusser, by dealing with Marx's critique of Hegel, explicitly reflects on the question of necessity in history starting from the structure of the Hegelian concept. I will try to show that Althusser is perfectly aware that Hegelian 'necessity' – deriving from the circular and closed structure of the

43 This 'exaggeration' becomes evident, as Althusser argues in the third part of the thesis, when Hegel substitutes the Prussian State for Napoleon. Cf. for instance OC, p. 138.

44 OC, p. 21.

concept – is inapplicable to Marxism, and that he produces a first attempt to liberate Marxism from such a necessity by way of a critique of the young Marx⁴⁵.

Althusser focuses now, after discussing Marx's critique of Hegel in the texts before *The German Ideology*, on the direct implications entailed by the Hegelian position for a general understanding of history. Althusser's remarks allow us to introduce the problem of the 'event' in history and its relationship with the totality. Quite correctly, Althusser stresses the destiny of contingency in Hegel's system of the concept:

all the moments of universal history take the form of 'free contingent events' when considered in isolation; as far as their content is concerned, however, they are simply moments of the fully accomplished totality. In this sense, history is a ruse, that yields up its secret only at the end⁴⁶.

For Althusser, there is no doubt: in Hegel the primacy goes to the event as a 'moment', and not to the event as a 'free contingent event', because the Spirit – being only a moment of the Idea, hence of the concept – in Hegel has always the same structure: any event is produced by the plenitude that is logically primary. In a following passage, Althusser draws our attention to the consequences that the 'sprawling' nature of the concept entails, as to the conceptualization of history, for the relationship between the concept and its empirical conditions of existence:

the concept is characterized by its triplicity, that is, the movement by which it goes forth from itself, posits its differences, recognizes them as its own, and takes them back into itself. The differences of the concept hold a strange place in this movement: they are simultaneously posited as real and annulled as unreal [...] the concept pretends to externalize itself and posits differences which are, apart from its act of positing them, nothing at all, and which are therefore not real, but accidental [...] in order to grasp the insubstantiality of their substantiality, we need to look at things through the eyes of God, who sees the differences men seek desperately to ex-

45 This should allow us to perceive the complexity of Althusser's position with regard to Marx in these years, and to understand that the critique of Marx in this thesis does not mean at all an endorsement of Hegelian positions.

46 OC, p. 94 (141).

perience disappear even before they have come about. To discover this reassuring [*apaisante*] perspective we have to situate ourselves, by means of philosophy, at the origin of the concept⁴⁷.

Althusser's point, here, is that the concept in Hegel has a necessary structure that leaves no space to contingency; or, that the 'differences' are annulled and appear, from the perspective of the movement of the concept, only as 'unreal'. Hegel's understanding of history is predicated upon the structure of the concept, which remains unaltered through its development, as it is the development of a necessity which is travelling towards its 'accomplishment'. Now, it is precisely this point that Althusser will try to 'correct' in Marxism.

In fact, the very last pages of the thesis contain a highly significant digression about the question of necessity in Marxism. After remarking his agreement with Marx's critique to Hegel's philosophy of state (but for different reasons: Althusser stresses the issue of the circularity, whereas Marx's critique emphasizes the 'subject-predicate' inversion⁴⁸), Althusser notes a problem in Marx's position:

what Hartmann said about the Hegelian dialectic actually applies to Marx: Marxist thought lacks a for-itself. This is perhaps what Engels meant when he declared that what he had retained of Hegel was his dialectic, which is, in Hegel, merely negativity that has succeeded in re-appropriating itself [...] there can, indeed, be no mistake: as soon as we attempt to disengage the for-itself of Marxist arguments, we find Hegelian necessity again, in its most rigorous form – that of the concept⁴⁹.

Two things are noteworthy here: the mentioning of the question of the dialectic in Marxism and the remark that in Marx necessity is the 'necessity' of the Hegelian concept 'in its most rigorous form'. What does it mean, however, that Marxist dialectic lack the moment of the 'for-itself'? It refers to the fact that it lacks the mo-

47 OC, p. 135-136 (184-85).

48 It is here that we can also find the difference between Marx's conception of idealism and Althusser's, which will lead him to see idealism as the position that posits history as a process with Subject and End.

49 OC, p. 142 (191).

ment of plenitude, i.e., the moment of the accomplishment of history, as for Marx history is not, of course, accomplished in his present⁵⁰. But the problem that Althusser sees at the heart of Marxism is precisely that, regardless of this fundamental difference, Marx's critique merely displaced the accomplishment (plenitude) towards the future, keeping the structure of 'necessity' intact. Here Althusser clearly takes side against the concept of alienation as a concept capable of conceptualizing history, by explaining the identification of Marx's concept of alienation with the Hegelian schema:

the socio-economic structure of the capitalist world of nineteenth century, is a contradictory reality. It is given, but is not a being through-itself; rather, it is a result which thus point to its development as its origin [...] *Here Marx transforms the subject into predicate, effecting what is, properly speaking, an inversion of the kind he criticizes in Hegel. The present-subject becomes the predicate of its own past-predicate; what is internal to the content is this posited as its origin.* History, qua real idea, thus re-appropriates its own presuppositions; history is the true subject⁵¹ [...]. The final historical totality, which marks the end of the alienation, is nothing but the reconquered unity of the labourer and his product. *This end is simply the restoration of the origin [...] we need not force the terms unduly in order to identify the fecundity of these divisions with the Passion of Hegelian Spirit*⁵².

In the light of this quote (which can actually surprise, as the ideas expressed here are the ideas to which Althusser will stick throughout his life), it is evident that the problem that Althusser is raising is one that concerns the validity of Marx's critique of Hegel. His point of view is that Marx's critique of Hegel's philosophy of the State does not mean that he freed himself from Hegel⁵³.

Now, Althusser does not say *apertis verbis* that Marxism needs to get rid

50 Let us recall that Hartmann's position, which attempts to disentangle Hegel's concept from the presupposition of plenitude, had been previously contested by Althusser, who said that the problem of the dialectic can be posed only against the backdrop of the absolute content (= plenitude). See *supra*.

51 OC, p. 143 (192).

52 OC, p. 148 and 148 (196-7), my emphasis.

53 The text here is not at all clear, but one may well wonder whether Althusser is in fact suggesting that instead his own critique of Hegel (based on 'circularity' rather than on 'inversion') allows us to get rid of Hegel.

of Hegel's concept of necessity. But his introduction of a *new concept of necessity*, one which does not encompass the whole of history as a grand narrative, is a clear sign that he thinks that it does. By introducing a conception that we can call 'empirical transcendentalism', he openly takes a position that goes against the idea that history is over. Not in the merely temporal sense, but in a philosophical sense: there is no 'absolute knowledge' because there are no eternal meanings. Such a position entails a dropping of the metaphysical structure of history and, by extension, also a different concept of necessity than Hegel's one:

if we abandon the idea of the end of history and the eternal nature of meanings [*l'éternité des significations*], [...] then history becomes the general element in which we move and leave [...] the concrete transcendental [...] that conditions and determines us. But since history is not over, there is no eternal transcendental logic, but rather, *at every instant, an articulated historical structure which dominates the world in the manner of an a-priori, and conditions it*. The reality of history resides, from this standpoint, in the dialectical nature of the structure that *conditions events, but is also transformed by them in its turn*. The historical totality is a concrete, dialectical transcendental, a condition modified by what it conditions⁵⁴.

This is a crucial passage, because *de facto*, even if Althusser does not further develop this point, this is a rupture with Hegel's idea of necessity and with the young Marx. What Althusser does not flesh out, i.e. the anti-Hegelian status of the 'event', is nonetheless clear: it cannot be regarded as something non-essential, but it must be seen as 'something' capable of modifying the empirical-concrete a-priori (which is not an essence at all). Althusser is indeed careful to point out this feature, when he says that the non-Hegelian necessity should be conceived as a '*de facto* necessity'⁵⁵. This means that a definitive transcendental structure does not exist: rather, there is an articulated structure 'at every instant' – that is, that can be *different* at any and every instant. The difference with Hegel's views is all the more apparent when we consider Althusser's careful choice of the words. Whereas, talking about Hegel, Althusser uses the word 'circle' and 'circular', in the above

54 OC, p. 168 (218), my emphasis.

55 OC, p. 167.

quote he uses the word 'articulated structure', which evidently points to counter the close character of the circular process that is in-built in Hegel's categories⁵⁶.

There is another point worth mentioning here, which regards Althusser's assessment of Marx's development. What Althusser considers problematic is the point of view of the *young* Marx; basically, his philosophy: there, we find exactly the 'Passion of the Hegelian Spirit'⁵⁷. But Althusser also says that the new point of view ('empirical transcendentalism' based on *de facto* necessity) is somehow contained in *Capital*, which must be taken, he says, as 'our transcendental analytic' (in the sense of an empirico-transcendental one):

Marx understood that the transcendental was history, but he did not consider it possible to think history *in general*, apart from the concrete content of the dominant historical totality [...] yet he did not posit the categorial totality as eternal (as did Kant, and also Hegel unbeknownst to himself, when he proclaimed the end of history or the validity of the Prussian state in a linear [*continuée*] history). He conceived this totality as dialectical, that is, as modified by the very manifold [*pur divers*] that it conditioned⁵⁸.

As this passage shows, Althusser's preference for Marx's *Capital*, against the persistent Hegelianism of the young Marx, is already clear in this early dissertation. The refusal of Hegel's necessity goes here hand in hand with: 1) the refusal of a philosophy of history, that must be replaced by a positive study of the structure of historical reality; 2) a refusal of the 'end of history' and of a metaphysical structure of historical being; 3) a new conception of the transcendental as an empirical transcendental, from which a new conception of necessity stems. In particular, we may also note that as far as the science of history is concerned, Althusser does not make any room in it neither for a teleological conception of the historical development, nor for the concept of 'origin' or 'plenitude'; these categories are closely tied

56 Again we should point out that 'articulation vs circularity' will be a central opposition for Althusser later on.

57 The following passage holds in fact only for the early Marx: 'Hegelian necessity is so marked as a presence at the heart of Marxist thought that Marx could not simply combat Hegel by occasionally turning his own weapons against him'. In fact, Marx could not criticize Hegel 'without finding himself the prisoner of Hegelian truth'. OC, p. 150 (200).

58 OC, 170-171 (221).

up with the Hegelian concept; for Althusser they are embedded in it.

What remains, then, of the Hegelian dialectics? Basically nothing. Althusser has clearly in mind that Hegel's dialectics cannot be taken as a valid 'revolutionary method' unless it is transformed.

3. The 'Motor of History' and the Dialectics of the Encounter

In the years after the thesis, Althusser's thinking is decidedly oriented towards the conceptualisation of Marx's radical novelty with respect to the entire paradigm of the philosophy of history, of which Hegel is seen as the point of culmination. The documents at our disposal to trace the paths followed by Althusser to pursue this goal - announced in a proposal of a *Grand Thèse* submitted to Hypolite and Jankélévitch at the beginning of the fifties⁵⁹ - are not, to be sure, substantial. Nonetheless, the recent publication of a collection of notes and courses relating to his teaching in these years includes a long course on 'The problems of the philosophy of history'⁶⁰ from Plato to Marx, which allows us to understand the general structure of Althusser's thinking during this time leading up to his mature work.

The pages devoted to Hegel and Marx in this course show quite clearly that the fundamental contours of the idea of an epistemological break (without the term being present) between Hegel and Marx - and therefore between philosophy of history and science of history - are already present, as is present a periodisation of Marx's thought that coincides with the one Althusser would later on propose in *For Marx*. The major difference with the later idea of the break is, however, that Althusser insists much more on the opposition between closure and openness, between open and closed processes, in keeping with the idea expressed in his thes-

59 As Althusser recalled in his 'Soutenance d'Amiens' in 1976. See L. Althusser, 'Is it Simple to be a Marxist in Philosophy?', in Id., *Philosophy and the Spontaneous Philosophy of the Scientists*, trans. G. Elliott (London: Verso, 2011), p. 205.

60 See 'Les Problèmes de la philosophie de l'histoire (1955-1956)', in L. Althusser, *Politique et Histoire de Machiavel à Marx. Cours à l'École normale supérieure 1955-1972*, ed. F. Mathéron (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2006), pp. 33-160. Henceforth PH.

is of the circularity of the Hegelian concept; and in this course this opposition is clearly affirmed as the one that sustains, so to speak, the opposition between philosophy and science. The way in which the moment of 'transition' between Hegel and Marx is construed in this course is significant, as it brings to the fore what was at stake for Althusser in such a transition. Clearly retrieving the terms we have already encountered in the thesis, Althusser writes:

at the time of Hegel, history is over [*à l'époque de Hegel, l'histoire est finie*], and this is the reason why its understanding is possible. Can an understanding of history capable of recognizing its openness exist? → Marx⁶¹.

In the pages on Hegel, in fact, Althusser returns to the question of the 'eternity of significations', arguing that Hegel manages to escape the relativism of a reflective history only by grounding it in a 'definitive' ontology. By contrast, Althusser stresses that Marx has indeed elaborated a model capable of explaining history thanks to the discovery of a 'constant relationship', wholly internal to history but independent of the judging consciousness of the thinker (and capable of explaining also the judgement on history). Only by attaining this level it is possible to grasp the 'Archimedean point', or 'the empirical and absolutely determinable element that permits the constitution of the science of history'. In so doing, Althusser seems to argue that the level of immanence is attained, without resorting, as was still the case with Hegel, to the sort of immanent transcendence that guided the unfolding of the Spirit from behind its back⁶².

3.1 Marxism in Question

What is interesting about this course, however, is that is permeated with a kind of tension that Althusser seems to be unable to resolve or to conceptualise in

61 PH, p. 152.

62 PH, for instance p. 173.

a satisfactory manner. Such tension emerges where the question of the 'open process' intersects the one concerning the status of historical action, where the idea of the openness of history (= no end of history) seems to clash with the reference to objective laws of history. In fact, if it is true that Marxism (it must be noted that in this course Althusser refers to Marx often through the prism of Lenin and Stalin, mentioning also Mao) overcomes Hegel's retrospective conceptualization of necessity in history, it nevertheless *posits* the existence of a necessity in history. Without referring back to his idea of a transcendental empiricism, a concept that would never reappear in his philosophy, Althusser notes that in Marxism such a necessity is encapsulated in the contradiction between forces and relations of production:

it is the functional nature of the relations of production that allows us to comprehend the *necessity of the transition* from determinate social conditions to different ones, i.e. revolutions⁶³.

It is, according to Althusser, such a relationship that constitutes the 'objective dynamic law' of history: 'the constant relationship that accounts for the dynamic of history as becoming'⁶⁴. If Althusser at this point does not level any explicit criticism at such a position, so that we might assume that he is embracing it, it is possible to grasp Althusser's criticism by focussing on the displacement that he attempts to introduce with respect to the issue of the laws of history. In fact, whilst insisting on the objectivity of the laws of history, he points out that Marxism operates a displacement concerning the relationship with time with respect to philosophy of history. Whereas the horizon of the former is constituted by the binomial couple past-present, the latter has as its temporal reference the couple present - future⁶⁵. It is at this point that Althusser interrogates the status of the political action. What is, indeed, the conception of political action that stems from the Marxist framing of the issue of objectivity? If we endorse the idea of a 'law' that guides the

63 PH, p. 179, my emphasis.

64 PH, p. 174.

65 PH, p. 169: 'the science of history [...] concerns not only the immediate present, but also the future which can be born out of it'. Cf. also p. 170.

development of social formations by a certain necessity, how are we to think of the status of the relationship between present and future, and therefore of the status of political action? Althusser recognises that in Marxism, given these premisses, it can be conceived only as an 'acceleration' of the historical movement, and in this idea he sees the 'apparent contradiction' of the concept of action. From this point of view, Althusser seems to follow the conceptions of action as a following of the (objective) necessity: *fata nolentes trahunt, volentes ducunt*⁶⁶. The point is, however, that this view seems to be, in Althusser's pages, something more than an 'apparent' contradiction, and it seems to be particularly at odds with his insistence that the science of history is not an 'absolute knowledge'. Not only is there the insistence that a necessity of the transition exists, idea that seems to retrieve the Hegelian idea of a necessity in history that men can follow, but not change; but this very idea stands in sharp contrast to what Althusser attempted to do in the last part of his thesis. We might conclude, as it is tempting to, that during these years Althusser is merely repeating the common doctrine of orthodox Marxism (Diamat). However true this may be, it must be noted that Althusser is to some extent aware of the contradictions between *this* concept of necessity and the idea that Marxism is not an absolute knowledge. Because if the latter is the case, then this must also mean that the relationship between present and future *cannot* be predicated upon a necessity, otherwise we would fall back into a Hegelian-type concept of necessity as a force that guide history, having merely displaced the temporal aspect of theory from the past to the future (exactly what Althusser criticised in the young Marx in his thesis). But it is here that Althusser introduces, soon after having confronted the paradoxical and 'apparent' contradiction affecting the Marxist conception of political action, a point of view that complicates the very concept of the 'necessity of the transition'. Such a solution consists, at a primary level, of limiting the pretences of science:

it is the reference to the immanent and objective laws of historical becoming that endows the scientific action upon history and the transformation of history with its meaning [...] since history as a

66 Conception that is, as is well-known, very much present in the history of Marxism, and that comes from Hegel (and Marx himself).

science is a reflection on the practice, itself oriented towards the historical practice, it inserts itself in the movement of history, i.e. in a process and a reality that surpasses it in profundity and richness – whence the task of history, which like all other sciences is obliged to deepen its theories in order to unrelentingly adapt them to an inexhaustible reality that precedes it and always surpasses it⁶⁷.

This passage must be read as an attack on the idea of absolute knowledge, that is, as a passage levelled against the idea that Marxism is a philosophy of history stating laws that are valid once and for all. But the question is: does it not stand in contrast to, or at least in problematic relationship with, the very idea of the 'necessity of the transition'? Because what Althusser is saying, effectively, is that history is *not fully reducible* to a 'law' and that there is always a sort of 'excess' over the conceptualisation of it. Why it is so, however, Althusser does not say; the result is the impression of a sort of Kantianism, stating that there is an inexhaustible and richer '*Ding an sich*' called 'history'. Yet we should avoid such a conclusion, because the problem here is not, properly speaking, about opposing history as a non-cognizable *noumenon* to a phenomenon that can be grasped in its necessity and universality; what is in question is rather the necessity itself and the limits of its validity in history. What is important is the fact that the logical conclusion that one can draw from here is that, if it is the case that history as *res gestae* is a *movement* – let us say a process – richer than our conceptualisation, then it is quite difficult to argue that the laws elaborated by the science of history state a strong necessity that is ontological in its essence. Now, the fact that Althusser stops here, leaving us with a problem that we cannot say is fully framed, let alone resolved, should not be interpreted as failure on Althusser's part to see the problems. Rather it should be seen as an impasse caused by a model of necessity that Althusser is not prepared to fully endorse, but neither does he want to renounce; hence the attempts to mend the model by adding something to it, just as Ptolemaic astronomers kept adding epicycles to their geocentric model. If he does not want to renounce it, it is probably because at this point he sees only a simple alternative: on the one hand, the philosophy of history, meaning subjectivism and end of history;

67 PH, p. 171.

and on the other, science, meaning objectivity and openness, but also necessity ('necessity of the transition'). The question then is: is necessity, per se, implied by objectivity? And, moreover, what kind of necessity⁶⁸?

Is it possible, at this point, to suggest that such an 'inexhaustible' character attributed to history points to the problem of 'contingency' in history, contingency being the other pole of necessity? From a logical point of view, yes: contingency is that which cannot be subsumed by the necessity posited by the law. Bearing in mind that the relationship between necessity and contingency in Hegel is problematised by Althusser in as early as 1947⁶⁹, we could conclude here that the criticism of 'absolute knowledge' has *already* had the logical effect of freeing some space for contingency, especially when what is at stake is the 'transition' between a present state of affairs and a future one. That Althusser tackles this issue when confronting the flattening of historical action on a historical necessity by Marxism is, moreover, all the more significant. It is not possible, however, to support this conclusion on the basis of the textual evidence provided by this course: the term contingency never appears here. Obviously, words and concepts are not the same, and the absence of the former does not imply the absence of the latter (and the same holds for the presence). But to show that the problems of contingency in history are not foreign to the Althusser of the '50s we can refer to another text, dating a few years before this one, a text that might even explain the Kantianism lurking behind the above quoted passage.

In the 1955 article 'On the objectivity of history'⁷⁰, Althusser criticises Aron and Ricoeur for their inability to ground the objectivity of history as a science, falling prey to relativism (Aron) and to a 'bad' transcendentalism (Ricoeur). Althusser argues that their mistakes are grounded in a misleading appeal to Kant, i.e., in their refusal to take into due account the reality of history as science, as

68 It is quite significant that this problem of necessity is strictly related to interrogation of the status of historical action: a sign that the two issues are related to one another, and that constitute two sides of the same coin.

69 Cf. *supra*, §2.4, especially the quoted passage where Althusser notes that necessity in Hegel does not imply any real difference: the 'differences' posed by the concept are only the 'contingencies' in which its necessity is realised.

70 L. Althusser, 'Sur l'objectivité de l'histoire' [1955], in Id., *Solitude de Machiavel et autres textes*, ed. Y. Sintomer (Paris: PUF, 1998), pp. 17-31.

Kant had taken into due account the existence of Newtonian physics. Althusser's alternative to their failed attempt to ground scientific objectivity is to endorse an anti-transcendentalist version of science based on the intra-scientific constitution of historical objectivity, leaving aside the transcendental gesture of a Kantian type that recuperates the objectivity of science in the a-priori structures of the subject. Behind this opposition, however, we need to grasp that there is also a common opposition, i.e. the opposition to the Hegelian metaphysics of history and, by extension, to Marxist philosophy of history. Both in Aron and in Ricoeur the insistence on the singularity of the moment, on the freedom of individuals and on the issue of contingency are pitted against the resorption of the singular in an overarching narrative that sacrifices singularity to totality⁷¹. It is on this point that Althusser's argument is interesting. In fact, he *does not* reject the issue of contingency and of the singularity of the moment in history; what he rejects is Aron and Ricoeur's conclusion that history cannot really be a science *because* it is ineluctably defective with regard to history 'lived' in its singularity and contingency. In their argument, Althusser writes,

it is a matter of opposing, to the objectivity effectively obtained by history [as science] an inexhaustible nature of men, a sudden freedom, that refuses in advance the pretences of history to objectivity⁷².

The resemblance of this passage, even the words of it, to what Althusser says in the '55 - '56 course is striking. As other notes and other passages in the pages of the course on Hegel and Marx show⁷³, Althusser kept referring to Aron and to the Heideggerian idea of an originary historicity, which allows us to argue for a certain link between this article and the course. We also need to stress that what

71 Althusser was of course aware that one of the criticisms to Marxism was that it justified the horrors of Stalinism. See for example G. Canguilhem, 'Hegel en France', *Revue d'histoire de la philosophie religieuse*, 28-29 (1948-49), p. 283. For an account on the ambiguous role played by Hegel in the postwar French philosophy in regard to the reconceptualization of history, as well as for the role played by Kant, see A. Cutro, *Il valore dei concetti* (Milano: Mimesis, 2010), pp. 45-63.

72 Althusser, 'Sur l'objectivité', p. 28.

73 Notes that are now published as *ouverture* to the course. PH, pp. 29-32.

Althusser refuses in the article is the opposition between objectivity on the one hand, and contingency and freedom on the other; and the 'exploitation' of the latter to negate the former to history as science. This means at least one thing, namely that Althusser is not at all denying *the existence* of a degree of contingency in history, but only that it can be used against the idea that there can be history as a science.

The problem that Althusser has with Ricoeur and Aron is crystallised in an interesting remark about historical causality. Althusser argues, in fact, that the problems raised by the very opposition put forth by Ricoeur must be resolved not by philosophically opposing two domains (*histoire vécue* against science) that do not belong to the same 'level', but through the elaboration of a concept of causality capable of rendering history intelligible⁷⁴; that is, on an epistemological level. If we return now the passage from the '56 course, we cannot avoid noticing the paradox: the answer provided in the latter is formally equivalent, as it appeals to an 'excess' which is postulated, even if Althusser does not use it as a means to deny to history the status of science. This circumstance speaks by itself: it means that Althusser was not insensitive to the critiques of Marxism launched by such thinkers as Aron or Ricoeur, and attempted to attenuate the concept of 'necessity', of which he saw the proximity to the Hegelian 'concept'.

It is here that the question of the relationship between necessity and contingency reaches the threshold of its formulation in connection to the idea of history as an open process. In fact, if the issue of history as a closed or open process needs to be supplemented by an addition of an 'excess', however formulated, it means that for Althusser the Marxist model of necessity is not sufficient to adequately formulate the 'open' character of history, and that something else is needed. We cannot say, as we already noted, that the problem of contingency is explicitly posed by Althusser; but we can say that Althusser, in the '50s, whilst refusing to oppose contingency to necessity starting from a phenomenological perspective (as it is in Ricoeur especially), at the same time keeps a problematic reference to it, one that points towards the need to problematise the Marxist⁷⁵ concept

⁷⁴ Althusser, 'Sur l'objectivité', p. 26.

⁷⁵ Here I use Marxist as opposed to Marxian. Whereas in the thesis Althusser had already seen

of necessity.

3.2 Reading the *Esprit des Lois*: Towards a New Dialectics of History

It is in the book on Montesquieu⁷⁶ that the problem of necessity finds a first – but decisive – answer. Althusser writes this book soon after the '56 course. It can be considered his first public intervention in the field of Marxist philosophy: even if Marx is only tangentially mentioned, it is always referred to at decisive moments. The reasons why Althusser wrote a book on Montesquieu instead of writing on Marx are manifold. Considered from the point of view of Althusser's strategy of intervention in the PCF and his practice of detours as he himself described them later on, one can say that here we are witnessing a detour through Montesquieu aimed at stating some new thesis on Marx. But seeing only a detour in Althusser's engagement with Montesquieu, and in Montesquieu a nickname for Marx would be reductive as to the role that Montesquieu played in the development of Althusser's thought. I want to suggest that the second reason that led Althusser towards Montesquieu was the fact that, during the years leading up to the writing of this text, Althusser saw in the author of the *Esprit des lois* not only a way to assert the distance between Marx and Hegel, but also a means to develop a new schema of historical causality that included the idea of multiple determinations in a new conception of the dialectics.

It has been noted by É. Balibar that it is in this short monograph that Althusser publicly put forth the idea of 'epistemological break' for the first time⁷⁷. Althusser says clearly, in the opening of the book, that Montesquieu is the first thinker to have introduced a 'theoretical revolution' in the field of history, being

that the Hegelian concept of necessity ought to be transformed, here he refers extensively to Stalin and Lenin. It is true in this sense that Althusser during the '50s was under the influence of the Diamat, but he is after all discussing again the same problem that he had encountered in the end of the thesis, even if in a different way.

76 L. Althusser, 'Montesquieu: Politics and History' [1959], in Id., *Politics and History. Montesquieu, Rousseau, Marx* (London: Verso, 2007), pp. 13-112. Henceforth MPH.

77 É. Balibar, 'Althusser's object', *Social Text* 39 (1994), p.161. The words in themselves do not appear in Althusser's text.

'the first person before Marx who undertook to think history without attributing it to an end, without projecting the consciousness of men and their hopes onto the time of history'⁷⁸. Stating that Montesquieu, like Marx, did not attribute an end to history was already a daring statement, at least one that went against the idea that the attainment of communism was inscribed in the overarching and oriented narrative of the modes of production, and Althusser was certainly aware of this. The refusal of a teleology in history is thus the first, *oppositional*, step taken by Montesquieu. The foundation of a new science of history was *positively* possible because Montesquieu adopted a new concept of law, based on the Newtonian idea of law as relation. The idea of a science of history is therefore tied to a concept of necessity:

the project of constituting a science of politics and history presupposes first of all that politics and history can be the object of a science, i.e. that they contain a necessity which science can hope to discover. It is therefore necessary that [...] a single principle can unite the prodigious and daunting diversity of manners and morals [...] by a necessity whose empire is so strict that it embraces not only bizarre institutions, which last, but even the *accident* that produces victory or defeat in a momentary *encounter*⁷⁹.

This passage seems to rule out in a definitive way any positive reference to contingency: science is a matter of necessity for Montesquieu, a necessity that can explain also the accidents and the brief encounters such as defeats in battle. Let us note, for the time being, that here Althusser for the first time uses the word 'encounter', inscribing it in the domain of accidents, even if here he does not appear to attribute to it a specific philosophical meaning. In order to see how contingency enters, instead, in a new relationship with necessity, we need to first see how Althusser conceptualises historical dialectics in Montesquieu.

What interests Althusser is the fact that Montesquieu's reflection on history and politics does not end up in a mere formalism, or 'typology' of the form of governments; that is, in a static conception of the historical totalities. On the contrary,

⁷⁸ MPH, p. 50.

⁷⁹ MPH, pp. 20-21.

for Althusser this apparent typology is grounded on a dialectics between two elements: the nature of the government (answering the question 'who holds the power?'), and the principle (the passion by which a certain government is made to act)⁸⁰. It is the relationship between these two elements, which is a dynamic one, that allows Montesquieu to posit the problem of the 'motor of history'. It is apparent that Althusser sees a formal equivalence between this model of the motor of history and the Marxist contradiction between forces and relations of production. His first theoretical intervention is situated on this level, as it is here that Althusser brings Hegel into the discussion. Let us refer again to the thesis on Hegel: there, the question of the motor was one in which the motor presupposed the attained totality, active 'behind the back of consciousness'. Here Althusser points out that the motor is a question of materialist elements, independent of any reference to consciousness and of any totality to be attained. Like in Marx, if there is a necessity (and it is a presupposition of Montesquieu that *there is*), it is a materialist one, in the sense that material factors are primary. This is what Althusser had already stated in the '56 course, but as we have seen, the true question is a different one: materialist or not, the 'necessity of the transition' pointed towards a necessity that, by referring to a 'transition', keeps a reference to a final cause. This aspect, however, seems to be eliminated here, since Althusser does not mention any 'necessity of the transition'. Rather, it points to another difference with Hegel.

Arguing against the idea that Montesquieu posited the perfect circularity of the historical totalities – a position held by Cassirer – Althusser insists that the opposite is the case: between 'principle' and 'nature' there exists, in Montesquieu, an asymmetry, which posits the dominance of one element over the other: it is the dominance of the principle. The stake of this seemingly academic issue is clear soon after. Althusser argues, in fact, that 1) this dominance performs a distribution of efficacy: the principle is dominant, but 'nature' can act back on it; 2) it breaks with the circularity, i.e., with the idea of an 'expressive totality'. We have to bear in mind, here, that for Althusser circularity always means 'end of history', in the sense we have already discussed; therefore, there can be no real dialectics of history in Montesquieu if there was no asymmetry in his conceptualisation of history.

⁸⁰ MPH, p. 45.

ical totalities (and Althusser's argument that there is a motor of history, and therefore that Montesquieu is not a formalist, rests on this point). It is here that Althusser refers to Marx:

the type of this determination in the last instance by the principle, determination which nevertheless farms out a whole zone of subordinate effectivity to the nature of the government, can be compared with the type of determination which Marx attributes in the last instance to the economy, a determination which nevertheless farms out a zone of subordinate effectivity to politics⁸¹.

This parallel is remarkable in at least two senses. First, Althusser attributes to Marx a type of determination that he had never previously attributed to him. In the '56 course, political action was an 'acceleration' of the historical necessity of the economic level, whereas here, by means of a comparison with Montesquieu, Althusser insists on an effectivity of politics. A subordinate one, certainly; but the novelty (with respect to the '56 course) is evident⁸². Secondly, this is the same definition that would appear in *For Marx* a few years later, essentially in the same formulation. So we can say that it is here that a new type of causality in history is for the first time proposed by Althusser.

If one of the main aims on Althusser's part was to introduce in Marxism a difference from Hegel based on the refusal of the circularity of the totality, at the same time here we also find something more, i.e. the first introduction of the concept of the encounter to account for the complexity of causality in history. After addressing the Montesquieu (Marx) - Hegel relation, Althusser raises a problem that is apparently internal to a reading of Montesquieu, i.e. what we may call the problem of the unity of the exposition of the book as a whole – a well-known problem in Montesquieu scholarship. The unity of the *Esprit des Lois* in the strict, conceptual sense, is usually attributed only to the books I to XIII, whilst the remaining books are seen as a set of empirical observations on other determin-

81 MPH, p. 53.

82 The thesis of the relative autonomy of politics was in fact circulating at the time. See E. Delpla, *Althusser. L'adieu infini* (Paris: PUF, 2012), p. 35.

ant factors such as climate, soil, religion and others, which it is assumed that Montesquieu assembled afterwards. As Althusser notes,

in front of the new determinant factors suggested [by Montesquieu] [...] it is hard to avoid the impression of disorder. The unity of a profound law has turned into a plurality of causes. The totality is lost in a list⁸³.

The crucial step taken by Althusser is to extract from the philological problem regarding the unity of the book a *philosophical* problem that regards, instead, the type of determination proper to the heterogeneous factors discussed in the second part of the *Spirit of the Laws*. For our purpose here the nature of these factors is not important; what is central is the formal model of determination that Althusser sets out for them and, by extension, for the overall causality inherent in the social totality. Firstly, Althusser argues that what characterizes them is that their efficacy is not a direct one: these factors act only through an 'indirect causality' that breaks with a mechanical type of determination⁸⁴. He then argues that they act on the 'principle', i.e. on the dominant element of the dialectics of history, constituting it in an essential manner. This means that the 'principle', the dominant determinant factor in Montesquieu's model, is in itself determined by factors that are not separable from it. This type of determination by heterogeneous and multiple factors over the 'principle', for Althusser, accounts for an aspect of Montesquieu's work that others have criticized, i.e. the fact that his examples are always 'impure'⁸⁵. All this reveals quite openly that what Althusser attempts to elaborate is a formal model of determination which is richer and more complex than the Hegelian or Marxist one (in the sense of orthodox Marxism). Now it is significant that these factors include what is normally considered under the name of contingency, in the

83 MPH, p. 54.

84 'What is indeed remarkable in these factors, which either determine the very nature of the government (e.g. geographical extent, climate, soil) or a certain number of its laws, is the fact that they only act on their object indirectly'. MPH, p. 55. In the '56 course, Althusser instead argued that these factors determine directly the nature of the government, representing a mechanical causality (PH, p. 48). This shift in the reading of Montesquieu is crucial.

85 But this is not a flaw for Althusser, but a strength; and precisely a strength that the author of the *Spirit of the Laws* failed to fully conceptualize.

sense that they refer to what is variable from one totality to another (soil, climate, etc.), and that these factors play, according to Althusser, a constitutive role in the determination of a given historical totality. If necessity in history is tied to the dialectics principle/nature, it is nonetheless premised upon other factors that cannot be viewed, as in Hegel, only as the realization of necessity.

What is still more interesting is the way in which the dialectics of these factors is conceived. Althusser had said there is no 'direct' causality. But now he introduces, to account for the multiple determination of the dominant principle, *the idea of a causality through conjunction and encounter*:

just when they are acting on the government and determining certain of its essential laws, *all these causes apparently so radically disparate, converge on a common point*: the customs, morals and manners of being, feeling and acting that they confer on the men who live within their empire. From their *encounter* [*rencontre*] arises what Montesquieu calls the spirit of a nation⁸⁶.

Soon after this passage, Althusser criticizes Montesquieu for his failure to conceptualise this idea: he stopped at the consideration of different and parallel series of causes, failing to adequately conceptualise the moment of their 'encounter' and therefore of their efficacy through conjunction⁸⁷.

Althusser himself, however, does not go yet much further on this path. But it seems quite evident that a consequence must be drawn from what we have just seen. Firstly, the question must be posed as to the effects of this model of causality upon the general dialectics between principle and nature. Althusser does not raise this point, yet it seems quite clear that according to this last position the dialectics between principle and nature in Montesquieu seems to be grounded, or sustained, by another causality that encompasses the heterogeneity of the factors and their encounter/conjunction. Second, this latter dialectics is itself irreducible to a simple one, or a teleological one. The term encounter refers quite clearly to a non-teleology. Can we say, however, that it affects the concept of necessity in history? In a

86 MPH, p. 56.

87 MPH, p. 57.

sense yes, and Althusser is aware of this. It is a sign of this awareness that he does not develop it further. The problem seems to be one of internal coherence, because he had started the book by saying that history as science was possible on the basis of a concept of law and of necessity capable of explaining even the accidents and the brief encounters; and he ends it by saying that the encounter of accidents can *in turn* explain the principle, or enters in its determination! But perhaps the problem for Althusser was also Marx. It is significant, in fact, that at this point of his argument, Althusser does not draw a parallel between Montesquieu and Marx as had done before. No doubt because this idea of a multiple determination through encounter and conjunction posed acute problems to the Marxist idea of causality in history. Yet here the problem is posed, even if it is done in a form that is still embryonic.

What Althusser finds in Montesquieu then is not only the possibility of breaking with the Hegelian expressive totality, but also the possibility of thinking together the necessity in history and the role of heterogeneous factors, which start to be considered here as the 'ground' of historical dialectics itself. Of course this is not to say that this dialectic is already fully developed here. Rather, as we saw throughout the chapter, we can say that over the '50s Althusser was aware of the flaws of the Hegelian and Marxist concepts of necessity, and the idea of heterogeneity of factors and the notion of encounter mark a first step towards a further problematisation of 'necessity'. We will see in what follows the effects of these still tentative views.

Chapter 2.

Necessity, Contingency, Irruption

1. Introduction

In this chapter my aim is to investigate the emergence and elaboration of the concept of contingency in Althusser's philosophical production in the years between 1960 and 1966. As is well-known, it is over these years that Althusser's reading of Marx took shape, through the articles then collected in *For Marx* and through the seminar on Marx's *Capital*, later published in *Reading Capital*⁸⁸. However, the goal of this chapter is not to investigate the traditional, and much debated, questions that Althusser's Marxism posed and – undoubtedly - still poses. The specific questions of whether this reading is accurate or misleading (rather than simply one-sided or 'wrong'), of theoreticism and of Althusser's epistemology need not be confronted here. Rather, building on what we have seen emerging in the last chapter (namely the critique of necessity and the notion of 'encounter'), our central problem will be: what role does contingency play in this recasting of Marxism?

When asked in the context of Althusser's project in the sixties, such a question may seem paradoxical for at least two reasons. The first is due to the proximity between Althusser and structuralism, a circumstance that led to the label, to

88 L. Althusser, *For Marx*, trans. B. Brewster (London: Verso, 2005 [1965]), henceforth FM; L. Althusser and É. Balibar, *Reading Capital*, trans. B. Brewster (London: Verso, 2009 [1968]), henceforth RC. The indication of the pages in the English edition will be followed by the page in the French edition in round brackets when necessary. I refer to the following French editions: L. Althusser, *Pour Marx* (Paris: La Découverte, 2005 [1965]); L. Althusser et al., *Lire Le Capital* (Paris: PUF, 1996 [1965]), henceforth LC.

which his name is still attached, of 'structural Marxism' being applied to Althusser's enterprise. In the common perception of structuralism⁸⁹, this intellectual movement has been associated with a negation of history⁹⁰ and with a strict determinism, according to which history, as a process, is a consequence of the combination of a limited number of elements which are supposed to be primary. By insisting on the scientific and objective character of Marx's science of history, Althusser's 'objective' Marxism was undeniably close to structuralism; it is impossible to deny that its opposition to the philosophy of history was in keeping with Lévi-Strauss' attack on Sartre and his Hegelianism⁹¹. The elimination of the subjective factors as adequate *explanans* of historical social formations, and the research of a more 'profound' logic governing the men's lives were definitely two convictions shared by Lévi-Strauss and Althusser⁹².

Alongside his proximity to structuralism, another characteristic renders the question of contingency even more paradoxical: Althusser's Spinozism. Spinoza becomes, for Althusser, the 'detour of a detour', as he put it; that is, the philosopher through which it was necessary to read Marx in order to correct the latter's detour through Hegel, to establish Marxism as an anti-Hegelianism in its own right. To be sure, Althusser was not the first in the history of Marxism to refer to Spinoza; he was the first, however, to use Spinoza *against* Hegel, as a way to bypass Hegel and the implication of his philosophy of history. To put it simply, if Hegelianism was the attempt to pass from Spinoza's substance to the sub-

89 In his last book on Althusser, Montag reconstructs the main strands of structuralism. Measuring the impact of the phenomenology of the early Husserl on the developments of linguists such as Troubetzkoy and then on the Prague School and Jakobson, he brings to light a much complicated, and fascinating, genealogy of French Structuralism. See W. Montag, *Althusser and His Contemporaries* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2013), pp. 15-102.

90 See for example A. Schmidt, *La negazione della storia* (Milano: Lampugnani Nigri, 1972).

91 I obviously refer to C. Lévi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind* (London: the University of Chicago Press, 1966) and J-P. Sartre, *Critique of Dialectical Reason* (London: Verso, 2004-2006).

92 This does not mean that Althusser was ipso facto a structuralist, or that his position can be considered as Lévi-Straussian. Yet this is the way in which Althusser and 'Althusserianism' were received and debated 'in the heath of the moment'. De Îpola reconsiders this relationship in De Îpola, *Althusser. L'adieu infini* (Paris: PUF, 2012), pp. 45-72, where he argues that Althusser's structuralism is undeniable. However, he does not refer to Althusser's 1962 seminar on structuralism, where Lévi-Strauss is criticised for his proximity to Hegel, and only takes into account the rather weak critique of Lévi-Strauss contained in a letter written by Althusser in 1966 to E. Terray, now collected under the title 'On Lévi-Strauss' in L. Althusser, *The Humanist Controversy and Other Writings*, ed. F. Matheron and trans. G.M. Goshgarian (London and New York: Verso, 2003), pp. 19-32.

stance-subject, Althusser's goal was to expunge the subject again from Marx's philosophy, alongside all the implications that a thinking of substance-subject carried with itself; concepts such as origin, subject (in all its variants: epistemological and ontological), *telos*, totality and negation of negation.

Yet the substitution of Spinoza for Hegel carries with it another: the substitution, for a teleological necessity governing history, of a strictly logico-mathematical necessity, according to which the order of things, equal to God, is a geometrical one. In Spinoza, necessity is all-pervasive, and contingency appears to be only a lack of adequate knowledge. In his now classical study on Western Marxism, P. Anderson remarked that Althusser's Spinozism was so deep that the metaphysical determinism of Spinoza could be found, without any modification, in Althusser's philosophy, in particular in the 'implacable logic' of 'structural causality'⁹³. As P. Thomas has more recently noted, Anderson's study of the relationship between Althusser and Spinoza was seminal, and most of the later interpretations of Althusser's Marxism merely repeat Anderson's reading without any modification⁹⁴.

In this chapter I will argue that Althusser's project in the sixties, notwithstanding his reliance on Spinoza and his insistence on the scientific and objective character of historical materialism, cannot be reduced to a metaphysical necessitarianism of Spinoza's kind⁹⁵ or to a structuralist determinism. The issue of contingency is, on the contrary, very much present as a problem for Althusser in these years. Not only had Althusser, by 1962, already read Machiavelli, for whom contingency plays a central role and, as Althusser would write later on, 'chance is always objective'⁹⁶, but he was also, in *For Marx* and *Reading Capital*, attempting

93 Cf. P. Anderson, *Considerations on Western Marxism* (London: Verso, 1976), cit. in P. Thomas, 'Philosophical Strategies', p. 80.

94 See P. Thomas, 'Philosophical Strategies', p. 80. Cf. G. Elliott, *Althusser. The Detour of Theory* Chicago: Haymarkets Books, 2009. p. 150; E.P. Thompson, *The Poverty of Theory & Other Essays* (London: Merlin, 1978).

95 For a book that offers a different perspective on Spinoza's necessity, investigating the influence of Machiavelli on the Dutch philosopher, see V. Morfino, *Il tempo e l'occasione. L'incontro Spinoza-Machiavelli* (Milano, LED: 2002).

96 L. Althusser, *Machiavelli and Us*, ed. F. Matheron and trans. G. Elliott (London: Verso, 1999), p. 107, fn. 22. The translation is incorrect, substituting Marx for Machiavelli (!): 'For Marx, hazard or chance is always objective'. Cf. L. Althusser, *Écrits philosophiques et politiques II*, ed. F. Matheron (Paris: STOCK/IMEC, 1995), p. 90. Hereafter EPP II.

to develop the idea that, in order to counter Hegelianism and its consequences for the conceptualisation of history, it was necessary to not only refuse the idea of necessity embedded in Hegel's conception of dialectics, but also to develop a dialectics capable of including 'contingency' as a structural dimension. However paradoxical it may seem, it is in these texts that the issue of contingency comes to the fore as a central problem for Althusser's recasting of Marxism, and it is in these years that Althusser formulates the core of a 'theory of the encounter' to explain the historical becoming. My aim is to argue that Althusser attempted to construct a conception of contingency capable of accounting for historical causality that breaks with the rationalist presupposition of a logical necessity, which is precisely what, not long ago, people such as Laclau and Mouffe, or Hindess and Hirst before them, considered to be the core of Althusserian rationalism⁹⁷.

The problem with the identification of contingency as a central question for Althusser lies perhaps in the fact that, if we follow all the instances of the word 'contingency' in *For Marx* and *Reading Capital*⁹⁸, we cannot but be struck by the persistence of its presence and the apparently non-rigorous way in which it is used. In many passages (we shall look at them in detail), Althusser rejects it, and this fact can only reinforce the idea that necessity was for him the central question. Yet things are not so simple. To introduce the problem, I will take as a point of departure a passage from *Reading Capital* in which Althusser proposes to think of history by means of the syntagm 'necessity of contingency', at the same time 'daring' such an expression and stressing its highly problematic, if not 'impossible', character:

the history of reason is neither a linear history of continuous development nor, in its continuity, a history of the progressive manifestation or emergence into consciousness of a Reason which is completely present in germ in its origins [...] We know that this type of history is merely the effect of the retrospective illusion of a given historical result which writes its history in the 'future anterior', and which therefore thinks its origins as the anticipation of its end. We are beginning to conceive this history as a history punctuated by radical discontinuities [...] We are thereby obliged to renounce

97 E. Laclau and C. Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (London: Verso, 1985), p. 104.

98 I take here into account only Althusser's contributions.

every teleology of reason, and to conceive the historical relation between a result and its conditions of existence as a relation of production, and not of expression, and therefore as what, in a phrase that clashes with the classical system of categories and demands the replacement of those categories, we can call the necessity of its contingency⁹⁹.

The expression 'necessity of contingency' that figures in this passage – which is located at the beginning of *Reading Capital* – is used against the idea of a simple and continuous teleology of reason, which Althusser (arguably a little hastily) attributes to the philosophy of Enlightenment and to Hegel¹⁰⁰. It is likewise opposed to what we may call a 'logic of expression', for which Althusser wants to substitute a 'logic of production'. This opposition is revealing. Given that Althusser, in *For Marx* and especially in *Reading Capital*, opposes the concept of 'expressive causality' for its reductionism of the elements of a determinate 'whole' to an inner essence or principle¹⁰¹, arguing for a new type of causality that he calls 'structural causality'¹⁰², we have the indication here that structural causality covers the conceptual space indicated by the phrases 'necessity of contingency' and 'logic of production'. It is all the more strange, certainly, that Althusser does not bring structural causality itself into the discussion, as he will do later in the book¹⁰³, but it is clear that we are confronted here with a decisive substitution: 'necessity of contingency' plays the role here that will be taken on by structural causality, which will be opposed to the 'expressive whole' (that is, to a logic of expression) and to the Leibniz-Hegelian 'expressive causality'. Here we also witness a typical move by Althusser in these years. Immediately after proposing this category, he does not flesh it out. What is worse, he never mentions it again (in *Reading Capital*), not even when, in chapter IX of his contribution to the book, he develops the concept

99 RC, p. 47-48, my emphasis.

100 'The rationality of the philosophy of Enlightenment to which Hegel gave the systematic form of the development of the concept is merely an ideological conception both of reason and of its history' (RC, p. 47). For this continuity, see 'Le problèmes de la philosophie de l'histoire', in L. Althusser, *Politique et Histoire de Machiavel à Marx. Cours à l'École normale supérieure 1955-1972*, ed. François Matheron (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2006), pp. 33-160.

101 Cf. *infra*, § 4.

102 Cf. *infra*, § 4.

103 But actually earlier in the order of chronology, as the introduction was written after the completion of the seminar in which the papers making up the book were presented.

of 'structural causality'. We are confronted, at a textual level, with a problem: the 'enigma' of the 'necessity of contingency' - this category of which we are only told that 'it clashes with the classical system of categories' - seems to direct us to the concept of 'structural causality' (to which the opposition to the 'logic of expression' points), and yet 1) 'structural causality' is arguably the most Spinozist concept ever proposed by Althusser and 2) in Althusser's conceptualisation of structural causality, the problem of contingency is never mentioned per se. Notwithstanding this lexical problem, the opposition that we stressed suggests that structural causality itself is associated with the category of 'necessity of contingency', and that, therefore, the issue of contingency lies at the heart of Althusser's attempt to recast Marxism at this stage.

In what follows, I will start with a reading of an early article in order to unearth the minimal 'vocabulary of contingency' that will allow us to follow the vicissitudes of Althusser's reflections on contingency in *For Marx* and *Reading Capital*. I will then argue that contingency plays a crucial role in Althusser's recasting of the materialistic dialectics and that both overdetermination and structural causality are concepts that, even if in different ways, try to elaborate on the category of the necessity of contingency in the direction of a logic of *surgissement*¹⁰⁴.

2. Marx's Contingent Beginning

It is in one of the first articles published by Althusser and later collected in *For Marx*, 'On the Young Marx'¹⁰⁵ (1960), that we can first find an explicit connection made by Althusser between Marxism and contingency. In this article, an in-

104 '*Surgissement*' is translated into English different ways, most often with 'emergence', sometimes with 'irruption'. The verb '*surgir*' is rendered both with 'arising' and with 'emerging'. Being a key term in my analysis, I translated it always in the same way, choosing 'to irrupt' for the verb, and 'irruption' for the noun. This choice is motivated by the fact that 'emerging' or 'arising' can still be read in terms of a progressive and continuous 'emergence', whereas 'irrupting' seems to be more suitable to render the meaning that Althusser attached to the verb '*surgir*', i.e. the idea of a sudden formation of a radically new element, structure, or fact.

105 FM, pp. 49-86.

tervention against the humanist interpretation of Marxism, Althusser does not merely takes side for the late Marx against the young Marx, but rather tackles the problem of the method of interpretation of the development of Marx's thought at deeper level. He argues that most of the interpretations – he refers to the set of studies collected in an issue of *Recherches Internationales* that included both Western Marxists and Soviet philosophers¹⁰⁶ – of the development of Marx's thought have taken a defensive stance, following the attack on the science of history and the recuperation of the young Marx launched by the Socialdemocrats; and that such a defensive stance generally amounts to a defence of the unity of Marx's thought. For Althusser, this is a mistake both from a political point of view, insofar as it follows the adversaries – interested in denying that Marx's theory of history was scientific, i.e. 'valid'; and also, more importantly, from a theoretical point of view. Any interpretation attempting to seek a continuity of development in Marx's thinking, which in practice amounts to seeing in the young Marx an *anticipation* of the mature Marx, or in the mature Marx the *realisation* of the intuitions of the young Marx only, is 'obsessed' by Hegelian principles and relies on an idealist conception of the development of 'ideologies', ones that posit a linear and teleological unfolding of the 'concept'¹⁰⁷. The idea against which Althusser is arguing here is, clearly, the belief that thought can be interpreted only according to its own internal development; the model of such a presupposition being the autodevelopment of the Hegelian concept.

What is interesting for us is how Althusser characterizes the object of Marxist science in relation to Marx's development. He argues that a Marxist interpretation, one based on Marxist theory, of Marx's development would involve: 1) a consideration of a specific ideology as a real 'whole'; 2) the relationship between this ideology with the ideological field, with the more general 'problematic' sustaining it, and with the social structure reflected in it; 3) the view that the motor of the development of such and such ideologies must be grasped in reference to real history¹⁰⁸. As we can see, in this article, Althusser introduces the idea

106 See FM, p. 51.

107 FM, p. 62.

108 FM, p. 63.

that 'ideology' is a 'problematic', that is, a 'real whole' governed by an internal logic, a 'whole' that constitutes the 'typical systematic structure unifying all the elements of [a] thought'¹⁰⁹. This characterisation of ideology introduces a double thesis: first, ideology is not a mere reflection of 'real' history' (as for the Marx of the *German Ideology*, or for Engels, Lenin, Lukàcs, etc.), but is a concrete reality itself endowed with a specific internal logic, so that it is a quasi-transcendental matrix of what is thinkable within it; secondly, it problematises the issue of the development of the thought itself. If it is not the reflection of real history, this does not mean that it is endowed with a self-enclosed logic of development: it must be always related to real history, and the problematic itself develops only in reference to real history (point 3 above). What is interesting for us is the way in which Althusser explains the development of Marx's thoughts starting from such premises. Soon after, he remarks that the problem at stake in such interpretation is not *simply* (even if this is of course an important point) to link the process of Marx's thought to real history (as in the theory of reflection), but another, one that has to do with the *change* of the problematic. Against the idea of a unity of his thought from the beginning to the end, Althusser employs here a very specific expression to characterize the moment when Marx 'liberates' itself from the influence of Hegel. The genesis of Marx's thought must be understood, argues Althusser, in the sense of '*the necessity and contingency of its beginning*'¹¹⁰. Let us read the passage where Althusser puts forth his famous idea of Marx's break with Hegel as the break with ideology:

the world of German ideology was then without any possible comparison the world that was worst crushed beneath its ideology [...] that is, the world farthest from the actual realities of history, the most mystified, the most alienated world that existed in a Europe of ideologies. This was the world into which Marx was born and took up thought. *The contingency of Marx's beginning was this enormous layer of ideology beneath which he was born, this crushing layer which he succeeded in breaking through.* Precisely because he did deliver himself, we tend too easily to believe that the freedom he achieved at the cost of such prodigious effort and de-

109 FM, p. 67.

110 FM, p. 64.

cisive encounters was already inscribed in this world¹¹¹.

I believe that this passage is crucial in many ways. First of all, because he does not dismiss at all the importance of experience in the foundation of a science, but gives to Marx's experience all the importance of the world. But for our more limited purposes, this passage is crucial also because it assembles in it a series of concepts (or notions, at this point), that will become central later on: we have here contingency, beginning, encounters, break, posed in a strict relation to one another. Two things should be stressed: first, Althusser clearly uses the word 'contingency' in a *positive* way. Secondly, there appears for the first time in a reflected way (unlike in the thesis on Hegel, where it was used without particular rigour), a term that we need to register: beginning [*commencement*]. What comes to light here is, therefore, a first important opposition: on the one hand, Althusser ranks the Hegel-inspired principle of interpretation of ideological formations, that posit a continuity and a teleological development (origin/end¹¹²); on the other hand, he ranks the Marxist principles that, applied to Marx (because here Marx's thinking is the problem at stake), must render the conceptualization of the 'necessity and the contingency of beginning' possible. It is true that, in this context, Althusser does not say much about this idea of the series of terms 'necessity, contingency, beginning, encounter', but we can certainly draw from here the conclusion that for Althusser, Marxism as a science *must* involve the possibility of conceptualizing such a beginning, that is already here immediately pitted against a Hegelian context involving 'origin' and 'end' as well as continuity (hence, of a development that necessarily follows to the 'end' the premises contained in the 'origin'). To put it differently, the problem of the 'contingent beginning' is seen by Althusser, at this point, as one of the *central problems* of Marxism. Furthermore, the reference to the ideological history does not limit the validity of this claim; Althusser himself stresses that the principle that allow the interpretation of Marx's works are the scientific principles that allow, *in general*, the intelligibility of any other historical

111 FM, p. 74.

112 FM, p. 57.

process¹¹³.

Later on in the essay Althusser attempts to specify this concept of 'contingent beginning' in a way that comes very close to the concept of 'rupture'. Referring to the need to consider the individual thought of Marx within the wider field of his 'problematic' (that is, the structure of problems and questions governing what is actually thinkable in a given moment), and hence within the still wider context of 'real history', he writes:

the interrelation of the particular problematic of the thought of the individual under consideration with the particular problematic of the thoughts belonging to the ideological fields allows of a decision as to its author's specific difference, i.e., *whether a new meaning has emerged [surgit]*. Of course, this complex process is all hunted by real history¹¹⁴.

The question of the contingent beginning¹¹⁵ is, then, immediately tied to the problem of the 'novelty', i.e. of a *discontinuity* with respect to what comes before it. Another word that Althusser deploys here is key, as we are going to meet it again later on when confronting the late developments of the idea of structural causality: '*surgit*'. '*Surgissement*' is another term that, together with beginning and the related terms, attempts to fix the anti-teleology of the process of the emergence of a novelty, in this case the beginning of Marx's thought.

This article offers yet another hint as to the comprehension of the issue of contingency. Althusser clearly relates the displacement of the Hegelian dialectics to the need to follow the happening of history 'in the making'. According to him, refusing a Hegelian stance permits to grasp a crucial thing, i.e. what he calls 'the nodal constitution of meaning':

the truth of ideological history is neither in its principle (its source) nor in its end (its goal). It is in the facts themselves, in that nodal

113 FM, p. 63.

114 FM, p. 70 (67).

115 FM, p. 83 (81).

constitution of *ideological meanings, themes and objects*, against the deceptive backcloth of their problematic, itself evolving against the backcloth of an 'anhylose' and unstable ideological world, itself in the sway of real history¹¹⁶.

Two things are important here. First, the idea of a 'nodal constitution' anticipates the future developments on overdetermination; the use of the concept taken from psychoanalysis is grounded here, where what is at stake is, precisely, the question of a contingent beginning, a *surgissement*, a novelty (and we need to remember that for Althusser his analyses apply to any historical process). Secondly, Althusser refers the problem of the 'genesis of necessity' (mentioned on the same page) to such 'nodal constitution'. Again, here Althusser does not say much. What seems to be clear, however, is that this necessity is dependent on many different premises, on a 'knot' of factors that enters in the constitution of it. But the main thing to note is that Althusser is not only interested in the multiple constitution of a 'fact', but in the logic governing the emergence of a new fact, that is, a beginning. At this point, 'the genesis of necessity' seems to include the question of contingency, even if this inclusion is precisely what Althusser does not spell out clearly. But 'multiplicity' and 'emergence of a new fact' form, already at this point, two parts of the same logic.

At the end of the article, Althusser pushes to the limit his opposition to the Hegelian model of development, introducing another concept that is crucial as to the definition of the vocabulary of contingency:

if we are truly to be able to think this dramatic genesis of Marx's thought, it is essential to reject the term 'supersede' and turn to that of discoveries, to renounce the spirit of Hegelian logic implied in the innocent but sly concept of 'supersession' (*Aufhebung*) [...] and to adopt instead a *logic of actual experience and real emergence* [*émergence réelle*], one that would put an end to the illusions of ideological immanence, in short, to adopt a logic of the irruption of real history in ideology itself¹¹⁷.

116 FM, p. 70 (67).

117 FM, p. 82.

This is the first time, in Althusser's writings, that the idea of a new logic is mentioned. Undeveloped as it is at this point, the elements that we have seen so far permit us to conclude that such a logic involves in principle: 1) a nodal constitution of meaning and, by extension, of facts; 2) a 'beginning', a term by which Althusser tries to capture the idea of a sudden 'emergence' or, as I would rather say to stress the antiteleological valence of the term (as emergence can still have us think of a continuity), the irruption of a novelty. Certainly, in this specific context, it is in reference to the relationship between history and ideology that such logic is mentioned; but as we already pointed out, the scope of the argument is wider: Althusser also refers to *all* the other historical processes. What we find here is precisely, *in nuce*, the model of what Althusser will later on apply to history in general, in the conceptualisation of history according to principle opposed to Hegelianism. In a sense, from the analysis of Marx's texts, or of ideologies, we are going to see that precisely these terms (beginning, *surgissement*, encounter) will be *deployed and extended* to history as such in order to think of the 'becoming' of history and the production of a novelty according to a logic that attempts to flesh out the category of 'necessity of contingency'.

Let us note, as a conclusion of this brief textual investigation, a few points that, even if they are not directly our preoccupation, are nonetheless of a certain relevance: 1) It appears that the question of the epistemological break is secondary to the idea of 'beginning'. In later years, Althusser will give to the idea proposed in this essay the form of an epistemological break, which is not only a change of problematic, but also the foundation of a new science by way of a separation from ideology. But here the change of problematic is not referred to the qualitative distinction between ideology and science. This suggests that the idea of the 'break' exists in Althusser also, and *ab origine*, as a non-epistemological problem, or, better said, that Althusser thinks of the 'break' also in general as a change of structure (here, the structure of an ideological problematic: Marx that liberates himself). This more 'concrete' aspect of the 'break' seems to be confirmed also by the essay on theatre, dating from 1963 (still before the idea of epistemological break, introduced in 'On the Materialistic Dialectics'), where Althusser couples 'beginning'

and 'rupture'¹¹⁸. We are not going to investigate in detail the problems of Althusser's epistemology in this thesis, but stressing this distinction is crucial in order not to reduce Althusser's problematic of the 'break' or 'rupture' to an epistemological one. Obviously this does not mean that epistemology does not play an important part; yet it seems to me that the epistemological break rests exactly on this other, 'historical', rupture. As such, the rupture itself must be considered the central concept of the science of history, what science of history is capable of thinking, or must be; 2) The idea of a 'logic of irruption', revolving around beginning, encounter, necessity and contingency, is prior to the concepts of over-determination and structural causality. That is to say that, in our view, this is the problem that commands, and motivates, Althusser's further elaborations, the problem that sustains his 'problematic'.

3. Necessity of Contingency in the Materialistic Dialectics

In the reconstruction that we have been pursuing it is clear that, by 1962, Althusser has already formed, around the issue of contingency, a lexicon comprising such terms as 'irruption' [*surgissement*] and 'beginning'. I suggested at the end of the last section that necessity of contingency forms, as it were, the 'deep' problematic of Althusser in these years (at least from 1962). In fact, although the syntagm 'necessity of contingency' appears only sporadically in the works of the sixties¹¹⁹, the issue of 'beginning' is very much at the heart of the essays written by Althusser after 'On the Young Marx' and later collected, together with it, in *For Marx*; notably of 'Contradiction and Overdetermination' and 'On the Materialist Dialectics'. During this time, it also appears in connection with the - or even under the name of - 'event', 'historical event' of 'historical fact', expressions that can be taken as equivalent with one another, as they point towards the emergence of a

118 FM, p. 142 (142). On this, see *infra*, ch. 3, § 3.

119 In the complete form, it appears only (in addition to its occurrence, in a slightly different form, in 'On the Young Marx') in the passage of *Reading Capital* that we quoted above, in the 'Introduction' to this chapter.

novelty in the field of history more in general¹²⁰, attesting the centrality of the necessity of contingency for Althusser in the reformulation of the dialectics, which is the objective of the two above mentioned essays¹²¹, and more in general in the reformulation of Marxism.

One of the problems is that – as I noted at the beginning of this chapter – in many instances of the use of the word, 'contingency' has in Althusser during these years a negative connotation: in fact, many passages would have us think that Althusser proceeds in a double and contradictory direction: while he produces a critique of the concept of necessity (the necessity stemming from Hegelianism being his primary target), he also produces a critique of the concept of contingency, and we may say that his goal seems to be the *elimination* of contingency. This circumstance may well invalidate our argument; however, my point is that, on the issue of contingency, we do not have to take Althusser at his word in all occurrences of the word 'contingency'. One of the difficulties is that we need to carefully distinguish Althusser's critique of contingency from his (unstated at this point) theory of 'contingency' itself. In other words, not all the occurrences of contingency in these years (as we shall see in detail below) correspond to Althusser's (developing) conception of contingency, and this is precisely because Althusser is attempting to put forth a conception of contingency that is different from more traditional theories of contingency as 'event'¹²². Now, to see how the notion of contingency is problematised and transformed by Althusser, it is useful to start from two places in which Althusser tackles the issue directly, taking them as exemplary.

The first case is Althusser's critique of the conception of necessity and contingency in history held by Engels in his famous letter to Bloch¹²³. In this letter,

120 We find these occurrences in: FM, p. 126, p. 142; RC, p. 113 and p. 169.

121 In what follows, I will gather these different ways in which Althusser refers to the 'beginning' under the expression 'event of rupture', in order to highlight that Althusser's objective is to transform the structure of the materialist dialectics (the general task that Althusser sets himself in the two essays of *For Marx* mentioned above) to render thinkable, by the science of history, the event in the strong sense, i.e. what marks a 'historical rupture'. I will refer to 'Contradiction and Overdetermination' by CO, and to 'On the Materialistic Dialectics' by MD.

122 This does not mean, as I will try to show, that contingency and event do not form a tenet of Althusser's reformulation of the materialistic dialectics.

123 Engels's letter to Bloch is dated 21 September 1890.

https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1890/letters/90_09_21a.htm

Engels is dealing with the crux of Marxism, i.e. the determination in the last instance by the economy, and with the role of superstructures in the generation of historical necessity. Engel's solution to the problem is well-known. According to him, the superstructural levels do play a role in the making of history, so they cannot be considered as pure phenomena of the economy; it is, on the contrary, necessary to take them into account according to the model of action-reaction. On Althusser's account, the problem of this model is that it does not explain what was actually at stake, that is, the *relationship* between the superstructures and the economy; rather it rules out all that which is non-economic, by reducing it to the status of contingent 'accidents'¹²⁴. Althusser observes that

[...] what is remarkable in this text is the role it attributes to the different elements of the superstructure [...] the element of the superstructure do have an effectivity, but this effectivity is in some ways dispersed into an infinity [...] so the effects of this infinitesimal dispersion is to dissipate the effectivity granted the superstructures in their macroscopic existence [...] Engels presents this necessity as completely *external* to these accidents¹²⁵.

What we find in this critique is not only Althusser's rejection of economism, but also the very question of necessity in its relationship with contingency. A few paragraphs later, in fact, Althusser argues that Engel's model fails to account for the occurrence of a historical event due to its being based on the model 'necessity-accidents' [*hasards* in the French text]¹²⁶, which results in the reduction of the levels or instances in the social whole other than economy to the status of contingency: 'is this reduction', asks Althusser, 'to a dust of *accidents* not absolutely opposed to the real and epistemological function of these forms?'¹²⁷.

What is crucial is that what Althusser rejects here is not the idea that the

¹²⁴ Engels writes that 'there is an interaction of all these elements (the superstructures) in which, amid all the endless host of accidents (that is, of things and events, whose inner connection is so remote or so impossible of proof that we can regard it as non-existent, as negligible) the economic movement finally asserts itself as necessary'. Cited in FM, p. 117-118.

¹²⁵ FM, p. 118.

¹²⁶ FM, p. 119 (119)

¹²⁷ FM, p. 119.

superstructures generate a certain contingency, but the reduction of the efficacy of the superstructures to a *certain concept* of contingency that puts them out of history itself as negligible, i.e., their reduction to the status of epiphenomena, to the ineffective, and the ensuing *externality* between necessity (essence: the economic) and contingency (superstructures). Even if Althusser seems to be refusing here the very idea of contingency, by refusing to account for the effects of superstructures in terms of 'contingent accidents', in reality he is rejecting the *opposition* of necessity to contingency that follows from Engels' adoption of a model of the type necessity/accidents. Interestingly, however, here Althusser does not say what model we should use *instead*. We may ask: given that he refuses to reduce the superstructures to the status of contingency, is that because there is no contingency at all? What model should be put in place, one that asserts only necessity? This appendix, in reality, does not answer these questions. However, we find an important indication here: by refusing the opposition of necessity to contingency, he also refuses a concept of contingency as that which is ineffective and therefore epistemologically and ontologically disposable.

This critique of contingency as 'dust' can also be found in Althusser's critique of structuralism, where it serves, however, a completely different goal. Althusser criticises structuralism in *Reading Capital* when discussing the pair synchrony/diachrony from Lévi-Strauss in the context of the critique of the paralogisms of empiricism, among which Althusser lists (significantly) the two pairs essence/phenomena and necessity/contingency¹²⁸. Althusser criticises empiricism for its confusion between the real object and the object of thought¹²⁹: empiricism takes the object of thought for the essence of the real object, and inserts an ontological *partage* within the thing itself, when in reality, for Althusser's Spinozist epi-

128 There is a continuity, that justifies our rapprochement, between the appendix to 'Contradiction and Overdetermination' and the critique of Lévi-Strauss, as demonstrated by the fact that Althusser returns in the same chapter to the critique of Engels in the same terms as in the appendix.

129 This distinction, taken from Spinoza, is perhaps one of the crux of Althusser's epistemology. Althusser deals with the relationship between the real object and the object of thought at the end of his introduction to *Reading Capital* (RC, p. 65 ff.), introducing the notion of 'knowledge-effect'. But the text itself does not go any further than this introduction, leaving the epistemological question of the 'knowledge-effect' open to further developments. For a critical assessment of Althusser's anti-empiricist epistemology, cf. Elliott, *Althusser. The detour of Theory*, p. 89 and A. Callinicos, *Althusser's Marxism* (London: Pluto Press, 1976), p. 76.

stemology, the distinction is only an epistemological one between what is known (the concept) and the real object. Empiricism hence reduces whatever does not 'correspond' to the essence to the status of 'phenomena' or 'contingency', both of which are reduced to an inferior status¹³⁰. On the basis of this premise, Althusser critiques the paralogism intrinsic to the pair synchrony and diachrony as used by structuralism. Althusser's point is that on the one hand synchrony is defined by structuralism as an essence, as a simple, self-contemporaneous¹³¹ structure reproducing itself; on the other hand, diachrony is thought of as the inessential 'development', and is conceived as external to synchrony. But this poses, notes Althusser, a serious problem to any project of 'structural history'¹³²:

[in structuralism] diachrony is reduced to the sequence of events [*à l'événementiel*], and to the effects of this sequence of events on the structure of the synchronic: the historical then becomes the unexpected, the accidental, the factually unique, arising or falling in the empty continuum of time, for purely *contingent* reasons [...] the project of a structural history poses serious problems [...]. Indeed, *by what miracle could an empty time and momentary events induce de- and re-structuration of the synchronic*¹³³?

We shall see later on in detail what Althusser proposes as an alternative to an 'empty time'; for now, what interests us is that this passage unequivocally rules out the idea of the 'event' as chance, as the exception that takes place for 'purely contingent reasons'. Undeniably, we are presented with a rejection of both the event and of contingency as what is responsible for the destructure of the synchronic. The apparently legitimate conclusion to draw from this passage would be that Althusser refuses to assign any role to contingency. But such conclusion would be a mistake: in reality, what this passage authorises – its real meaning – is not a

130 RC p. 123-124.

131 We will see later on Althusser's conception of a non-contemporaneous structure. Cf. *Infra*, ch. 2 § 4.

132 RC, p. 120.

133 RC, p. 120, my emphasis. This is, more generally, the problem that Althusser attributes to any historicist mode of thinking grounded on a Hegelian conception of totality as 'simple' and 'self-contemporaneous'. On Althusser's allegation of Hegelianism to Lévi-Strauss, see ALT2.A40-02.03, 'Lévi-Strauss à la recherche de ses ancêtres putatifs', discussed in Montag, *Althusser and His Contemporaries*, pp. 61 ff.

negation of contingency, or a dismissal of the event, but *only the rejection of the punctual event, and of a simple contingency understood as a miracle coming from outside the synchronic*. In effect, both Engels and Levi-Strauss' models are based on a neat opposition between necessity and contingency, which is in turn premised upon the essence/phenomenon opposition. What these two passages make clear is that if Althusser refuses contingency, this refusal is to be referred to a philosophically *specific* use of contingency; that is, its meaning and use within what Althusser calls an empiricist problematic. Althusser refuses both the uses that, within this problematic, can be made of contingency: both its epistemological reduction and dispersion (Engels); and its recuperation as a means of (non) explanation of what a specific theory is not capable of explaining (the historical becoming in Lévi-Strauss). It is precisely *this* meaning of contingency that Althusser criticizes in *For Marx* and *Reading Capital*.

Of course, the fact remains that these critiques are, indeed, critiques; they do not tell us how – and if – contingency is deployed by Althusser in his conception of history (of the dialectics of history).

3.1 Necessity and Contingency in the Overdetermined Process

To extract the positive concept of contingency we will start by confronting the two central essays on dialectics of *For Marx*, 'Contradiction and Overdetermination' (1962) and 'On the Materialistic Dialectics' (1963). Here we find, according to my reading, the first moment of Althusser's reflection on the 'necessity of contingency'.

What is at stake in these two essays is a reformulation of the Marxist contradiction on the basis of a 'break' with Hegelian principles. As such, the immediate aim of Althusser's articles is an attack on the idea of 'overturning' of the dialectics, a term Marxists have generally used to interpret (following Marx's self-

understanding) Marx's relationship with Hegel. The most common and accepted idea was, as is well-known, that Marx had put the Hegelian dialectics on its feet, by refusing the 'speculative abstraction' and replacing the 'Idea' with material forces (i.e. economy) driving the course of history. For Althusser, such an inversion merely rearranges or redistributes the elements of dialectics within the same structure, whereas Marx had transformed the structure itself. With regard to the history of the relationship between Marxism and Hegel, it is clear that Althusser refuses the old idea that it is possible to take from Hegel only the dialectics, refusing the 'system', as Engels himself had sometimes suggested. More to the point, it means that the structure of the contradiction itself encapsulates both a certain conception of the structure of social formation and a philosophy of history¹³⁴. The critique of Hegel's philosophy is therefore at the same time aimed at his notion of contradiction (which is itself deemed to be a simple unity¹³⁵), social whole and philosophy of history. These three elements are gathered by Althusser in the notion of 'origin', which is the deep 'theoretical presupposition of the Hegelian model: the presupposition of an original simple unity [and] the pretension] to coincide with a radical origin'¹³⁶. The 'origin', in keeping with what we have already seen in Chapter 1, is held conceptually responsible for all of the consequences on the consideration of history:

Hegel thought the phenomena of historical mutation in terms of this simple concept of contradiction [...] the simplicity of the Hegelian contradiction is made possible only by the simplicity of the internal principle that constitutes the essence of any historical period. If it is possible, in principle, to reduce the totality, the infinite diversity, of a historically given society [...] to a simple internal principle, this very simplicity can be reflected in the contradiction [...] We can now see how the 'mystical shell' affects and contaminates the 'kernel' – for the simplicity of Hegelian contradiction is never more than a reflection of the simplicity of this internal principle of a people, that is, not its material reality but its most abstract ideology. It is also why he could represent Universal history from the Ancient Orient to the present days as 'dialectical', that is, moved by the simple play of a principle of simple contradiction. *It is why there is never for him any basic rupture, no actual end to*

134 FM, p. 107.

135 FM, p. 194-196.

136 FM, p. 198.

*any real history – nor any radical beginning*¹³⁷.

Let us note two points here. Firstly, the concept of 'beginning' must be carefully distinguished, both here and in all the rest of Althusserian philosophy, from the concept of 'origin'. Whereas in the dissertation on Hegel Althusser did not distinguish conceptually the two of them, using them interchangeably, now they are forcefully opposed to one another. Origin is synonymous with 'simple unity', one that remains unaltered through the unfolding of the process, whereas 'beginning' is precisely the rupture of the continuity. The second point concerns the opposition idealism/materialism (which Althusser refers to in passing when he says that Hegel does not think of 'material reality'). Althusser does not think of it as the opposition between spirit/matter. Certainly he refers to the primacy of matter over spirit (self-consciousness), but the more profound opposition is between simplicity and complexity; it is according to the latter that the 'materiality' of a social 'whole' must be thought, and according to which the Marxist contradiction itself must be conceived. Complexity appears to be, in the above quoted passage, the essential precondition to be fulfilled in order to be able to think of a 'radical beginning' (instead of an inversion of a simple inversion of the simplicity of Hegelian contradiction). This amounts to a reformulation of materialism itself, which, even if not conceptualised as such by Althusser, nonetheless is an obvious consequence of this transformation of the dialectics along the opposition simplicity/complexity instead of that matter/spirit. Such a materialism takes the form of a refusal of the 'origin', which for Althusser entails the refusal of the possibility of *reduction* of complexity to such a primordial unity:

[Marxism] rejects the Hegelian philosophical pretension which accepts this original simple unity (reproduced at each moment of the process) which will produce the whole complexity of the process later in its autodevelopment, but without ever getting lost in this complexity itself, without ever losing in it either its simplicity or its unity – since the plurality and the complexity will never be more than its 'phenomenon', entrusted with the manifestation of its own essence¹³⁸.

137 FM, p. 103, my emphasis.

138 FM, p. 198.

The refusal of the origin has a paramount consequence for the understanding of the structure of social formation. For Althusser, the problem of economism¹³⁹ was precisely the misunderstanding of such consequences, as the mere application of the Hegelian model of the origin entailed that the 'structure of reduction' was left unaltered, so that the complexity of the 'social whole' was deemed to be reducible, in principle, not to the 'spirit', but to 'economy'. In Marx – in Althusser's reading – such reduction is not possible:

For Marx, the tacit identity (phenomenon- essence-truth of...) of the economic and the political disappears in favour of a new conception of the *relation between determinant instances in the structure-superstructure complex which constitutes the essence of any social formation*. [...] these relations [...] still deserve theoretical elaboration and investigation. However, Marx has at least given us the 'two ends of the chain', and has told us to find out what goes on between them: on the one hand, determination in the last instance by the (economic) mode of production; on the other, the relative autonomy of the superstructures and their specific effectivity. This clearly breaks with the Hegelian principle of explanation by consciousness of (self) ideology, but also with the Hegelian theme of phenomenon-essence-truth of¹⁴⁰.

Althusser refers to the Marxist model of social formation¹⁴¹ as a 'complex whole structured in dominance', in which we are not confronted with a single centre, an essence (= an origin), but with a multiple determination. It follows that the notion of contradiction within the social formation must be reformulated accordingly. It is no longer possible to think of it as a 'simple' contradiction which would constitute the motor of history, 'realizing itself' amidst the 'contingencies' of history, as

139 See *supra* the discussion of Engels.

140 FM, p. 111.

141 The notions of circle and centre are central to Althusser's philosophy, where it is equivalent to the idea of a simple determination and to 'ground' (*fundamentum*). In general, centre and origin are equivalent: for Althusser they mean a simple originary unity that grounds and commands the unfolding of all processes. Althusser's conception of the social formation, the only materialist one for him, is one in which the centres of causality are manifold: a plurality of origins, so to speak – but obviously, origin does not want to share its status with any other origin: originality means also loneliness.

in Hegel¹⁴². The 'two ends of the chain' mentioned in the passage above do not entail a juxtaposition of different levels, but a reformulation of the 'essence' of the contradiction itself:

the contradiction is inseparable from the total structure of the social body [...] inseparable from its formal conditions of existence and even from the instances it governs; it is radically affected by them, determining but also determined in one and the same movement, and determined by the various levels and instances of the social formation it animates; it might be called overdetermined in its principle¹⁴³ [...] Overdetermination designates the following essential quality of contradiction: the reflection in contradiction itself of its conditions of existence, that is, of its situation in the structure in dominance of the complex whole¹⁴⁴.

This means that every single contradiction existing within a social formation cannot be considered to be the 'expression' of a more fundamental contradiction (which would be its 'essence'), but that every contradiction is, as Althusser puts it, 'unequally determined' by its very conditions of existence, which are other contradictions that exist within the 'whole' itself¹⁴⁵. This idea has, as its presupposition, an ontological claim: that there is no such thing as an essence of the social formation, as, for Althusser, there is no such thing as an essence at all, in any process. It involves a Spinozist ontology of immanence, which appears to already be at the core of Althusser's analyses in *For Marx*, even if he never mentions Spinoza either in 'Contradiction and Overdetermination' or in 'On the Materialistic Dialectics'¹⁴⁶. Althusser's strategy, as is apparent, is not to assign to the origin a different content, but to 'pluralise' the origin – which amounts to deny that there is an origin at

142 FM, p. 208.

143 FM, p. 101.

144 FM, p. 209.

145 It is the same idea expressed by the concept of empirical transcendentalism that we encountered in Chapter 1.

146 To note the Spinozist background is, it seems to me, crucial as to the understanding of the true use that Althusser makes of Spinoza here, and in order not to fall in the mistake of attributing to his recourse of Spinozism in *Reading Capital* the theoretical responsibility of a kind a failure of conceptualizing contingency. In fact, quite the opposite is true: in *Reading Capital* Spinoza is what saves Althusser from a relapse on a sort of 'transcendentalism' in the conception of the 'absent cause', and in this sense it prevents Althusser from relapsing in a necessitarianism.

all: the origin does not bear to share its status; either origin is alone, or it is not.

What is, at this point, the status of contingency? To be sure, a first result of the overdetermination is that what Engels and Hegel (among others) attributed to 'contingency' (the conditions of existence, the superstructures) is *incorporated* within the constitution of necessity itself, because the reality and efficacy of the superstructures are at the same time reflected *in* the 'economic' contradiction, which is never 'pure and simple' ('the lonely hour of the last instance never comes'¹⁴⁷). Now, if this is the case, and if Althusser's polemic objective was the idea of an 'economic' necessity, clearly the result is that the overdetermined contradiction renders this necessity spurious, overdetermined in itself. But in a sense we may say that we are actually left with no contingency: what is normally considered contingent by a model of essence-phenomena is instead endowed with a different status, ensuring it a real efficacy. Does this mean that, at this point, Althusser has transformed the problem of contingency so that another necessity is put in place? What we would have is a *complex* necessity, which is, precisely, a complex *necessity*. Furthermore, where would an 'irruption' come from, an event come from, and how would a 'radical beginning' take place?

What we need to grasp, however, is that if contingency has been eliminated, such elimination regards only the meaning that it takes within a model based on the opposition essence/phenomena, on which according to Althusser the pair necessity/contingency rests. Contingency does not disappear, but is recovered at another level, which is the level of the relations between the instances of the social whole. It is then recovered precisely at the level of the general process of the 'becoming [*dévenir*] of things'¹⁴⁸, as a specific (conceptual) *consequence* of the overdetermination of the contradiction. The process of 'becoming of things' does not rest on a simple development of a single contradiction, according to the Hegelian model of the negation of the negation, *but on a continuous exchange of 'roles' within the global process between the contradictions* that are specific to each 'level' of the social formation (and which are themselves overdetermined). As Althusser points out,

¹⁴⁷ FM, p. 113.

¹⁴⁸ FM, p. 169.

the structure in dominance remains constant, [but] the disposition of the roles within it changes; the principal contradiction becomes a secondary one, a secondary contradiction takes its place, the principal aspect becomes a secondary one, the secondary aspect becomes the principal one¹⁴⁹.

The idea of overdetermination is aimed, in these essays, at economism and at its idea that economy is always determinant. As such, it involves a critique of the 'fixity' of its model and of its 'simplicity':

economism [...] sets up the hierarchy of instances once and for all, not realizing that the necessity of the process lies in an exchange of roles 'according to circumstances'. It is economism that identifies eternally in advance the determinant contradiction-in-the-last-instance with the role of the dominant contradiction [...] whereas in real history determination on the last instance by the economy is exercised precisely in the permutations of the principal role [...] the whole of Lenin's political work witnesses to the profundity of this principle: that determination in the last instance by the economy is exercised, according to the phases of the process, not accidentally, *not for external or contingent reasons, but essentially, for internal and necessary reasons, by permutations, displacements and condensations*¹⁵⁰.

As to the problem of determination by economy, it is clear that Althusser displaces its role: it is not always determinant, because it may not be the dominant contradiction. But it would be more appropriate to say that in fact there is no economic contradiction in the 'pure state', as the contradiction(s) are always overdetermined. Now, here Althusser chooses his words very carefully. He does not say that economy *determines* the permutations and the displacements. He says that the necessity that belongs to the last instance *exists in, consists of, is exercised in*, these permutations: this means, fundamentally, that the determination of the last instance is not to 'cause' these permutations; it is these very permutations. In fact, we may even push the argument to its limits, by saying that there is no *determination in the last instance*, because there is no 'economic' contradiction in a pure state. If the

149 FM, p. 211.

150 FM, p. 212, my emphasis.

'lonely hour of the determination in the last instance never comes', this is not for a temporal reason, but for essential reasons, inscribed in the 'essence' of the contradiction itself, which is always caught in a 'play' that renders it a *non-origin*. Certainly an economic contradiction can be theoretically constructed, and must be; but the concept of history is not history itself. The determination in the last instance, properly speaking, belongs to the *global process* in its entirety, because it is the process in its entirety that is the 'becoming of things in general'. If Althusser here refers to economy as the last instance, this must be understood in the context of his argument against economism. But in fact what is determinant in the last instance is always, in 'real history', the dominant contradiction, and *a rigore* we can refer it to the economic instance/contradiction (but also to any other 'level') only if we conceive of the latter as always already overdetermined itself.

For what interests us here now, however, the crucial matter is that the validity of these claims must not be limited to a critique of economism or to the problem of the necessity of the last instance; they have more far-reaching consequences for the general concept of necessity and contingency in history in general¹⁵¹. Now, displacement and condensation are, it is clear, Freudian terms. As such, they imply a logic which is not reducible to the Hegelian dialectics¹⁵². In Freud the term '*Überdeterminierung*' refers to the mechanism of the formation of dreams. As Y. Sato correctly points out, 'the mechanism of displacement and condensation realises itself by means of an energetic investment in the unconscious,

151 And these more general consequences can in turn clarify the problem of the last instance, to which we will return in the next section.

152 Cf. L. Althusser, 'On Marx and Freud', in L. Althusser, *Writings on Psychoanalysis* (New York and Chichester: Columbia University Press, 1996), pp. 107-108: 'As for dialectic, Freud furnished some surprising manifestations of it, which he never treated as "laws" (that questionable form of a certain Marxist tradition), such as the categories of displacement, condensation, overdetermination, and so on, and also in this limit thesis, whose meditation would take us far: the unconscious does not know contradiction; that absence of contradiction is the condition of all contradiction. One finds therein the wherewithal to "shatter" the classical model of contradiction, too intimately inspired by Hegel to serve truly as a "method" for Marxist analysis. Marx and Freud would thus be close to each other through materialism and dialectic, with a strange advantage accruing to Freud for having explored figures of dialectic very close to those of Marx but also at times richer than them and as though awaited by Marx's theory. If I can quote myself here, I once gave an example of that surprising affinity by showing that the category of overdetermination (borrowed from Freud) was as if required and expected by the analyses of Marx and Lenin, to which it was precisely suited, even as it had the advantage of bringing into relief what separated Marx and Lenin from Hegel, for whom contradiction, precisely, is not overdetermined'.

where energy is totally free and mobile: the energetic investments, Freud writes, "can easily be transferred, displaced and condensed". In other words, condensation and displacement are the other name of contingency'¹⁵³. By using these Freudian terms, Althusser introduces the idea that the movements that can be observed in the development of a social formation are not only not reducible to an essence, but that they are also not understandable on the basis of a 'law' whatsoever; in this sense they can be said to be 'contingent' movements, provided that we understand that contingency is used here within a problematic that does not rely on pairs such as essence/phenomena and necessity/contingency. It is crucial, to understand the difficulty that Althusser himself has with the notion of contingency, to note the use of the word in the passage above: Althusser *denies* that displacements and condensations happen *for contingent reasons*. Yet it is impossible to say that displacements and condensations respond to a 'law' in a mathematical, even statistical, sense: we do not find anything like this in Freud. We need to interpret the idea that they do not happen for 'contingent reasons' in the sense of the 'empiricist' problematic, whereby contingency is the pure externality of necessity, or a miracle. For Althusser, the process is subjected to displacements and permutations *because of the structure of the contradiction*, which is unevenly determined. *Such contingency is therefore entailed de necessitate by the necessity itself; it is the necessity of the historical process*. In this sense we can understand the idea of the necessity of contingency: contingency exists in history by necessity, *it is the form of necessity itself, the existence of necessity itself*. Contingency has been, so to speak, *internalised and established on the plane of immanence, as there is no ontological difference between what is necessary and what is contingent, but only the form of their intertwining, so to speak, which can be 'analysed' by means of concepts such as displacement and condensation*. As such, contingency is not what is ontologically inferior, or negligible at the epistemological level; it is what happens *between* the contradictions, *between* the instances and *in* the contradictions and *in* the instances. In this sense, we can say that contingency is recovered at another level, not as a pure phenomenon; strictly speaking, the necessity of contingency is the new category that really clashes with the categories that we inher-

153 Y. Sato, *Pouvoir et Résistance* (Paris: Harmattan, 2007), p. 208.

ited from the past philosophies.

3.2 The Event of Rupture as Intensification and Explosion

The question that we need to tackle now is how Althusser can conceptualise, on the basis of this model, the 'contingent beginning'. We have seen above that Althusser explicitly rejects the conception of 'event' as it is conceptualised in Lévi-Strauss, that is, as sort of 'miracle' that, excluded from the 'structure', is then held responsible for the 'destructuring' of the synchronic itself. Again, this does not mean that Althusser refuses the event *in general*, but only that he refuses *that particular* kind of event, understood as a 'miracle' (see *supra*). It is not easy, however, to think about the event in a way that is different to the way to which we are accustomed; we are always tempted to think of it in opposition to what is necessary, as an exception to some 'law'. In Althusser, at this stage of his philosophy, such an opposition is strictly forbidden, as there is no such thing as a 'law' in the traditional sense that would be 'interrupted' all of a sudden by something external to that law. The most appropriate way to account for what Althusser refers to as the moment of 'rupture' is to think of it as an 'intensification' of the process of overdetermination. For example in CO he writes:

if the general contradiction [...] is sufficient to define the situation when revolution is the 'task of the day', it cannot of its own simple, direct power induce a 'revolutionary situation', nor a fortiori a situation of revolutionary rupture and the triumph of the revolution. If this contradiction is to become 'active' in the strongest sense, to become a *ruptural principle*, there must be an accumulation of 'circumstances' and 'currents' so that whatever their origin and sense (and many of them will necessary be paradoxically foreign to the revolution in origin and sense, or even its direct opponents), they 'fuse' into a ruptural unity¹⁵⁴.

Here Althusser remarks that the 'activation' of the 'event of rupture' is premised upon an 'accumulation' of heterogeneous factors that 'fuse', i.e. condense, produ-

154 FM, p. 99.

cing the 'ruptural unity'. The problem with this passage, however, is that it seems to imply that the 'general' contradiction is not itself overdetermined. Given, however, that such a contradiction is *always* an overdetermination, and that we have to admit that, in principle, we are *always* in an overdetermined situation, then the decisive accumulation, so to speak, takes the form of an *intensification* of the always and already present overdetermination. Such intensification points to the 'surplus of contingency' that Althusser tries to capture by saying that there must be an accumulation of 'circumstances and currents' that are originally *foreign* to the revolution, and at the same time, that they are, nonetheless, 'necessary' to it. In the final pages of 'On the Materialistic Dialectics', Althusser formalises this model:

In Marxist theory, to say that the contradiction is a motive force is to say that it implies a real struggle, real confrontations [... and] that the organic phenomena of condensation and displacement are the very existence of the 'identity of the opposites' *until they produce the globally visible form of the mutation or qualitative leap that sanctions the revolutionary situation when the whole is recrystallized.* [...] The revolutionary explosion (in society, in theory, etc.) [is] the moment of *unstable global condensation inducing the dissolution and resolution of the whole, a global restructuring of the whole on a qualitatively new basis*¹⁵⁵.

By referring to Lenin's idea that 'the contradiction is always at work', Althusser distinguishes between moments of non-revolutionary accumulation of contradictions, moments in which the contradictions 'fuse' in a place or another of the social structure, and the moment of rupture, which is the moment of the 'explosion', or 'global condensation'. Thus, the global process is not only always, in a form of another, a contradictory one; but it is always an overdetermined process. As such, there is never a 'smooth' reproduction of the social formation for Althusser, and there is never a law whose development is *totally* predictable. We might even say that a determinate social formation (an antagonistic one) is always already in a state of 'crisis', whether latent or visible. Notwithstanding a certain dependency, on Althusser's part, on the idea of the 'transformation of quantity into quality' 155 FM, p. 216.

('qualitative leap' in the above quote), which manifests perhaps his will to speak a 'recognisable' jargon, or even, possibly, certain attempt to render the logic of overdetermination compatible with it, the moment of rupture depends on a global condensation that is never reducible to a linear accumulation. In this sense, there is neither a totally predictable event (which would not be, strictly speaking, an event), nor a totally unpredictable one in the sense of a 'miracle': the event of rupture is rather, at this stage of Althusser's philosophy, an intensification the logic of which is the (non)law of 'necessity of contingency'.

4. From Structural Causality to the Theory of the Encounter

In *Reading Capital*, Althusser introduces the concept of 'structural causality', which becomes the central pivot of his reading of 'Marx's immense theoretical revolution'¹⁵⁶. Such a concept has been perhaps – if we just give a quick look to the secondary literature – the one that attracted most criticism, being often associated with a necessarist inflection of Althusser's philosophy, which would go hand in hand with a new 'essentialism'¹⁵⁷. In this section, I will argue that an

¹⁵⁶ RC, pp. 201-214.

¹⁵⁷ Perhaps the most famous attack on Althusser's philosophy, one that is particularly harsh precisely on structural causality, is E. P. Thompson, *The Poverty of Theory, & Other Essays* (London: Merlin Press, 1978). The bulk of Thompson's argument is that Althusser, by his recourse to Spinoza, falls in a strict conception of necessity that negates human agency, reducing subjects to the mere supports of structural relations. There are two angles of attack, as long as I am aware, on structural causality: one is the charge of denial of human agency; the other is that it does not allow us to think the becoming of social formation. Strictly speaking, they are not the same thing, but it is evident that in a humanist perspective they cover the same problem: the free political action, rooted in individual freedom. We are going to see in the next chapter that Althusser's philosophy does not deny human freedom through a study of his theory of ideology. Here I want to stress that structural causality does not imply a 'metaphysical' necessity, and that it should be read as a follow-up, and an expansion, of the logic of necessity of contingency, which is precisely the way in which Althusser thinks the 'becoming' of history and the emergence of a new structure. Structural causality has been also fiercely opposed by Hindess and Hirst in A. Cutler *et al.*, *Marx's Capital and Capitalism Today* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1977), Vol. 1, p. 222 ff. Laclau and Mouffe see a progressive return to an economic essentialism of Althusser's discourse after 'Contradiction and Overdetermination', already evident in 'On the Materialistic Dialectics' and culminating in *Reading Capital*. E. Laclau and C. Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* (London: Verso, 1985), p. 98 ff. See also Elliott, *Althusser. The Detour of Theory*, p.

such interpretation misses precisely what we have been trying to bring to the fore, i.e. the presence of contingency at the heart of Althusser's reformulations of the materialistic dialectics, of which 'structural causality' can be considered as a development. Some passages of *Reading Capital*, along with some other notes of Althusser's written soon after the publication of the book, show that structural causality is the concept by which Althusser continues to reflect on the 'beginning', at the same time generalising *and* modifying the results of his previous formulations.

Our argument in this section is that structural causality should be read as a crucial step in Althusser's elaboration of a non-dialectical theory of the beginning, and that it is precisely throughout structural causality that Althusser was led to formulate the 'theory of encounter' which will be at the centre of his late philosophy, and in which contingency play a key role¹⁵⁸. My thesis is that in order to see how 'structural causality' is linked to the theory of encounter, and how it modifies, at the same time, the terms in which Althusser has confronted the issue of contingency in *For Marx*, it is necessary to take into account the role that 'absence' plays therein. Whilst most interpretations have focused either on the absence of the cause (structural causality as 'absent cause') or on the presence of the cause ('structural causality' as immanent cause), my point is that the link between 'structural causality' and contingency is to be found in the concept of 'determinate absence', that Althusser introduces in *Reading Capital* and develops in the following years as a constitutive premise of his 'theory of the encounter' as a 'logic of *surgissement*'.

4.1 Absence and Presence of the Structure

In order to see how Althusser introduces the concept of 'determinate ab-

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158 I say 'paving the way' because, as will be clarified in the following chapters (esp. ch. 5), this is not *exactly* the theory of the encounter that we can find in the eighties, even if the two are obviously not unrelated.

sence', we need to refer to Althusser's relationship with structuralism, with which 'structural causality' evidently entertains a close relationship. We already saw that Althusser was very critical towards the dichotomy synchronic/diachrony as implied by Lévi-Strauss' structuralism; and it is today quite clear that Althusser was critical of some aspects of Lévi-Strauss and Foucault's works already in 1962, as demonstrated by the minutes of the seminar delivered at the ENS¹⁵⁹ in that year. But in fact, the elaboration of 'structural causality' depends much more (like overdetermination) on the research carried out in the wake of Lacan's re-reading of Freud rather than on Lévi-Strauss (or Foucault)¹⁶⁰. It depends on Lacan's 'psychoanalytic structuralism' and, more specifically, on the concept of 'metonymic causality' developed by J-A. Miller, who at the time was a student of both Lacan and Althusser; it is indeed this concept that formalized, for the first time, the idea of a relationship between causality and absence. What is, then, 'metonymic causality', and how does Althusser use it for his concept of 'structural causality'?

As such, 'metonymic causality' is developed in relation to the specific problem of the relationship between the subject and the structure. Miller, in a text titled 'Action of the Structure', points out that the psychoanalytic structuralism of Lacan marks an advance on Lévi-Strauss' structuralism without subject precisely in its attempt to include – rather than eliminating it – the subject in a post-Cartesian way, that is, in a constituted rather than foundational position¹⁶¹. The vicissitudes of 'metonymic causality' are in themselves rather intricate, but it seems

159 Althusser delivered two lectures in this seminar: 'Lévi-Strauss à la recherche de ses ancêtres putatifs', ALT2.A40-02.03, and 'Foucault et la problématique des origines', ALT2.A40-02.02. For an account of the first, see Montag, *Althusser and His Contemporaries*, pp. 61 ff.; for a discussion of the second, W. Montag, 'Foucault and the Problematic of Origins. Althusser's Reading of Folie et Déraillement', *Borderlands* 4, 2 (2005), available at http://www.borderlands.net.au/vol4no2_2005/montag_foucault.htm. A different critique of Lévi-Strauss, bearing on the latter's poor understanding of the superstructures, can be found in L. Althusser, 'On Lévi-Strauss', in Id., *The Humanist Controversy and Other Writings*, trans. G.M. Goshgarian (London: Verso, 2003), pp. 19-32.

160 This fact is attested by the repeated warnings against Lacan's too deep reliance on Lévi-Strauss, expressed to Lacan himself in their correspondence. See Althusser, *Writings on Psychoanalysis*, p. 171 (Althusser's letter to Lacan, 11th of July 1966).

161 J-A. Miller, 'Action de la structure', *Cahiers pour l'Analyse* 9 (1968): 93-105, eng. trans. available here: <http://cahiers.kingston.ac.uk/pdf/cpa9.6.miller.translation.pdf> (accessed 3rd of August 2015). On this point see also Duroux's comments in his 7/5/2007 interview with P. Hallward, 'Strong structuralism, Weak Subject: An Interview with Yves Duroux', in *Concept and Form 2. Interviews and essays on the Cahiers pour l'analyse*, ed. P. Hallward and K. Peden (London: Verso 2012), p. 197.

certain that Miller introduced it for the first time in the course of the seminar on psychoanalysis organised by Althusser himself in 1963-64. In Miller's view, 'metonymic causality' served to conceptualise the action of the 'phallus', 'the signifier of signifiers', following the conversion of need in 'desire' after the crossing, on the part of the infant, of the symbolic order. Miller argues (following Lacan) that in such conversion, marked by a 'loss', 'the phallus assumes the function of the signifier that signifies the lack of being [manque à être] which determined the subject in its relationship to the signifier': 'this relationship between the lack of being [manque à être] and desire, we are not going to call it "cause", which would be too mechanistic a term, but metonymy [...] desire is the metonymy of the lack of being', which defines the mode of being of the subject itself¹⁶².

The interest of this type of causality (as stressed by Miller) is that it rules out any reference to a mechanistic conception of causality; as such, it certainly opened an interesting and fecund perspective to all those looking to do away with the model of causality endorsed by economism and, more in general, with the simple determinism of the official Marxism. Miller suggested himself, in 'Action of the Structure' (1964), that this new causality represented a point of transition between Marxism and psychoanalysis, developing it in a more general theory of the dependency of the subject from the structure via the introduction of the idea of the 'absent cause':

let us assume the presence of an element that turns back on reality and perceives it, reflects it and signifies it, an element capable of redoubling itself on its own account [...] From the moment that the structure involves the element we have mentioned: – its actuality becomes an experience or experiment; – the virtuality of the structuring [le structurant] is converted into an absence; – this absence is produced in the real order of the structure: the action of the structure comes to be supported by a lack. The structuring [le structurant], by not being there, governs the real¹⁶³.

This causality entails that the subjects 'covers', or 'sutures', the lack by imaginary

162 P. Gillot, *Althusser et la psychanalyse* (Paris: PUF, 2009), p. 83-84.

163 J-A. Miller, 'Action de la structure', *Cahiers pour l'Analyse* 9 (1968): 93-105, eng. trans. available here: <http://cahiers.kingston.ac.uk/pdf/cpa9.6.miller.translation.pdf>.

formations, so that the lack itself is never present to the subject; it can only be recovered by a 'pure science' (to which the last part of the article is devoted).

If later on this theory was used in *Reading Capital*, especially by Ranciere in his contribution, in relation to fetishism¹⁶⁴, the concept of 'structural causality' as deployed by Althusser stands at a certain distance from Miller's specific attempt to make 'metonymic causality' function both in psychoanalysis and in Marxism. In fact, what seems to be hardly conceptualisable by means of 'metonymic causality' is what is at the core of 'structural causality', i.e. the efficacy of a structure on its elements, and the efficacy of a structure on subordinated structures, which is indeed the very definition of structural causality in Althusser's version in *Reading Capital*:

by means of what concept is it possible to think the new type of determination which has just been identified as the determination of the phenomena of a given region by the structure of that region? More generally, by means of what concept, or what set of concepts, is it possible to think the determination of the elements of a structure, and the structural relations between those elements, and all the effects of those relations by the effectivity of that structure? And, a fortiori, by means of what concept or what set of concepts to think the determination of a subordinate structure by a dominant structure; in other words, how is it possible to define the concept of a structural causality?¹⁶⁵

It is clear that, first of all, this problem exceeds that of the relationship between a structure and a perceiving subject, which is the focus of 'metonymic causality' in the strict sense. However, a more serious problem with metonymic causality seems to revolve, for Althusser, around the question of 'absence'. In the (only) pas-

164 As for Althusser, it is quite clear that the overdetermination that we find mentioned in his 'Marxism and Humanism' (FM, pp. 219-247), where the idea that ideology is the overdetermined unity of the real and the imaginary, is readable in Miller's terms. But, and here lies a first important indication, Althusser does not speak in his article neither of 'structure' nor of 'absence'. Althusser was certainly interested in the specific relationship between imaginary and the real and in the possibility of using psychoanalysis to develop this point; but he was also reluctant to adopt both the term 'structure' (he prefers 'real') and the idea of a 'lack'. Moreover, Miller's use of overdetermination, and Althusser's use of it in the mentioned article, are quite different from the 'overdetermination' that we find in CO and MD, where it designates a social ontology.

165 RC, p. 205-206 (401).

sage where Althusser compares structural causality and metonymic causality, Althusser remarks that what is essential, in the new type of causality that he is trying to put forth, is exactly the opposite, i.e. the *presence* of the cause in its effects:

the absence of the cause in the structure's 'metonymic causality' on its effects is not the fault of the exteriority of the structure with respect to the economic phenomena; on the contrary, it is the very form of the interiority of the structure, as a structure, in its effects [...] it implies that the structure is immanent in its effects, a cause immanent in its effects in the Spinozist sense of the term, that the whole existence of the structure consists of its effects¹⁶⁶.

As Montag noted, the difference between the second and the first edition of *Reading Capital*¹⁶⁷ on this precise point is symptomatic of a certain difficulty encountered by Althusser in keeping together 'absence' and 'presence', 'metonymic causality' and 'structural causality'. But far from being 'incoherent' (as Montag claims), the passage in the first edition clarifies things better as to the presence and absence of the structure. In this paragraph (then suppressed and rewritten), Althusser refers to the concept of *Darstellung*, term by which, in Althusser's interpretation, Marx attempted to name the concept of structural causality. The passage is worth quoting in full:

in the *Darstellung* [as opposed to the *Vorstellung*] there is nothing behind: the thing itself is there, 'da', offered up in its presence [...] this is why, *according to the level at which one is located* [*selon le niveau auquel on se place*] one can say that '*Darstellung*' is the concept of the presence of the structure in its effects, of the modification of the effects by the efficacy of the structure present in its effect - or, on the contrary, that '*Darstellung*' is the concept of the *efficacy of an absence*. It is in this second sense that Rancière has used the decisive concept of 'metonymic causality', elaborated in depth by Miller last year in the course of our seminar on Lacan. I believe that, understood as the concept of the *efficacy of an absent cause*, this concept is wonderfully fitted to designate the absence in person of the structure from the effects considered in the *oblique perspective* [*perspective rasante*] of their existence. But we must insist on the other aspect of the phenomenon, which is the pres-

166 RC, p. 209.

167 See Montag, *Althusser and His Contemporaries*, pp. 81-100.

ence, the immanence of the cause in its effects, in other words on the existence of the structure in its effects¹⁶⁸.

The difference between absence and presence, in this passage, is made dependent upon the level on which one is located. But what level is Althusser talking about here? What is clear, however, is that Althusser sees a certain incompatibility between the Spinozist model of the 'immanent cause' (according to which, as is well-known, God is not the transitive, but immanent cause of attributes and modes) and the Lacanian idea of the 'lack' (from which 'absent cause' is derived), and as a consequence he attempts to re-inscribe absence in an *epistemological* perspective. Althusser is in fact limiting the absence of the cause - hence the validity of 'metonymic causality' - to the 'oblique' perspective. The point is that this expression is far from being clear: does it mean that from the point of view of a certain 'thing', taken in isolation, as an object, the structure *appears to be* absent? I think that this is what Althusser is trying to say, as it seems to be confirmed by his reference, in the same page, to a 'latent' structure via the example of theatre. Playing on the German meaning of *Darstellung*, which means also 'theatrical representation', Althusser argues that at each single moment the structure (let us say: the general plot) is completely present in the gestures and deeds of the characters; but at the same time these gestures and deeds of such and such characters, in their *immediate* presence, refer back to a 'whole' that is not visible in them by a 'bare' eye. In this sense, the structure is absent from the immediacy of the gestures and acts, but it is so only if we remain at the level of this immediacy, if we do not 'insert' them into the whole plot, in the whole structure. The 'latency' of the structure to which Althusser refers here is not in contrast with the immanence of it in its effects (this is Montag's point), but refers to the totality of a process that is never exhausted in any moment of it. In other words, the 'latency' is latent only because it is not graspable on the level of immediacy (and therefore must be conceptually constructed) and *not* because it is an inner essence behind the immediately visible phenomena¹⁶⁹. According to this explanation, it seems that Althusser, by

168 LC, p. 646, variant 62, my emphasis.

169 This is precisely what Montag argues.

re-inscribing 'absence' in the epistemological perspective, is trying to bar the road towards an 'ontologisation' of 'absence' itself. In fact, if the 'lack' is turned into a new 'essence', it would then be *transcendent* in regard with the 'phenomena'¹⁷⁰.

Nonetheless, the primacy that Althusser attributes to the presence over the absence does not mean that, within 'structural causality', 'absence' does not play any role. On the contrary, it is indeed the question of absence that constitutes a specific difference with respect to the theorisation of the overdetermination in *For Marx*. To clarify the status of absence, we need to refer to the chapter on time in *Reading Capital*¹⁷¹, where Althusser attempts to develop the concept of historical time according to the concept of structural causality, and to flesh out the concept of 'conjuncture'.

According to Althusser, the Marxist conception of the 'whole' as structured in dominance implies a crucial consequence as to the theorization of the temporality of the 'whole'. As the levels or instances are not, like in the Hegelian model, reducible to an original simple unity, Althusser argues that

each of these different 'levels' does not have the same time of historical existence. On the contrary, we have to assign to each level a peculiar time, relatively autonomous and hence relatively independent, even in its dependence, of the 'times' of the other levels¹⁷².

Unlike the time proper to the expressive whole, this time cannot be subjected to an 'essential section', a neat cut that reveals the contemporaneity of all the levels

170 Therefore, falling back in a distinction between essence and phenomena. If this is so, then the problem with 'metonymic causality' lies for Althusser in the fact that it cannot be taken as the general model of causality of the global mode of production, of the social formation in general, because it only describes the action of the structure from the point of view of ideology. Yet in this way, basically, Althusser denies 'metonymic causality' the status of a concept, subordinating it, in the realm of history, to 'structural causality' as 'immanent cause'. This is not to say, though, that Althusser is denying 'metonymic causality' the status of a concept in its own domain, that of psychoanalysis, but only in the domain of history. The general relationship between the two is far from being clear in Althusser writings; what is certain is that, if perhaps Althusser was willing to grant to 'metonymic causality' a status in its own domain, he tended to view it only as a *form* of structural causality in general. See RC, p. 208, fn. 45 (405).

171 RC, p. 101-131.

172 RC, pp. 110-111. It is important to note that in this chapter the 'last instance' does not play any conceptual role. Althusser always refers to the totality of the other levels.

of the whole (which are not, in the expressive whole, properly speaking, *different* from each other). In order to account for the double situation of dependence and independence, Althusser introduces the notion of underdetermination¹⁷³:

to speak of differential historical temporality absolutely obliges us [...] to think, in its peculiar articulation, the function of such an element or such a level in the current configuration of the whole; it is to determine the relation of articulation of this element as a function of other elements, of this structure as a function of other structures, it obliges us to define what has been called its overdetermination or underdetermination, as a function of the structure of the determination of the whole¹⁷⁴.

Firstly, let us note that in this context, over- and under- determination are not used in reference to the contradiction. Later on, Althusser will return to these terms saying that there exists a 'threshold' of determination of the contradiction that must be reached in order for a revolution to happen¹⁷⁵. Here, however, the idea of a the 'threshold' is not mentioned; Althusser uses over- and under-determination in reference to the instances in a general situation. They seem to indicate the reciprocity, internal to the structural causality, between independence and dependence, between imbrication and autonomy in the development of each instance¹⁷⁶. The

173 It was É. Balibar the first to draw attention to the notion of 'underdetermination' in Althusser for the first time. See his 'Avant-propos pour la réédition de 1996' in L. Althusser, *Pour Marx* (Paris: La Découverte, 2005 [1996], p. xiii.

174 RC, p. 118 (293).

175 Cf. L. Althusser, *Essays in Self-Criticism*, trans. G. Lock (London: NLB, 1976), p. 187.

176 If we compare this reciprocity, and its consequences, with CS and DM, where only the overdetermination was at stake, it seems that Althusser is stressing, by introducing the under-determination, that the relations between the levels cannot be reduced to the logic of the conditions of existence. Effectively, in those two essays the overdetermination of the economic contradiction (which was the polemic objective of Althusser's articles) was due to the superstructures being also the conditions of existence of economy itself. But if we recall for a moment the passage we quoted earlier, we can see that there Althusser also said that for the main contradiction to be activated an intervention of 'currents' foreign to the task of revolution was needed. Now, on the basis of overdetermination, how are these 'foreign currents' understandable? It may be said that the concept of under-determination accounts for the existence, in the social whole, of elements and currents that are not reducible to status of conditions of existence; the various levels or instances (thus, the various contradictions), are certainly for Althusser *also* the conditions of existence of the economic level, but they are not *only* that. Each and every level has its own history and time, which is subject to a torsion by its articulation upon other levels, but is also relatively independent; the degree of its torsion is not forever determined or determinable in advance.

point that is left unexplained is, however, the exact relationship between over- and under-determination, whether one of the two can be considered primary. Could not under-determination be the effect of the overdetermination itself, or could not we think that overdetermination (which is by definition uneven) is possible because there is a constitutive underdetermination? It would be quite difficult to respond to these questions, especially in Althusser's perspective: he would have perhaps answered that we simply cannot attempt to find an 'origin', but only think starting from the 'always-already-given-complexity'. The key point here is, it seems to me, that Althusser is positing both over and under as co-originary, as it were; that they are both rooted/included in the concept of structural causality.

The crucial consequence that Althusser draws from this conception of differential time is that the concept of 'present' must be radically reformulated. Althusser substitutes, for the idea of the present as an instant, the concept of 'conjuncture', which becomes the name of the 'present' within the framework of structural causality. The present is not a simple moment, but in itself a complex moment, 'a time of times', a time whose characteristic is to be non-contemporaneous with itself. As such, the idea of a complex and non-contemporaneous present has an important consequence: on the one hand, it opposes the idea, which is linked by Althusser to the empirical conception of time (of which the model is Aristotle's *Physics*), according to which time is a linear succession of instants that are in themselves simple; on the other, it refuses also the idea that each present of the 'whole' is a 'full' present, a present where all the elements coexist expressing one another.

Now, it is this play of over- and under-determination that in fact grounds the role of absence in the scientific knowledge of the conjuncture. Althusser writes that

the present of one level is, so to speak, the absence of another, and this co-existence of a 'presence' and absences is simply the effect of the structure of the whole in its articulated decentricity. What is thus grasped as absences in a localized presence is precisely the non-localisation of the structure of the whole¹⁷⁷.

177 RC, pp. 115-116 (290).

In this passage, the notion of absence is clearly admitted. There is, however, a crucial difference with respect to the absence that we can find in 'metonymic causality'. In primis, we must note that Althusser refers to a *system* of absences, rather than to the absence of a cause. Whereas for Miller the absence is the absence of the structure, or of the phallus, Althusser is emphasising the *plurality* of the absences, which correspond to the different and intertwined structures making up the complex of structural causality¹⁷⁸. Secondly, the absence here is a function of the presence. It is not, in other words, an absence that is transcendent with respect to the presence: 'absence' is the very name of the non-contemporaneity of the conjuncture, and not its principle of organisation. Therefore, according to this passage, for Althusser any absence is always a function of the presence, or, better said, the plurality of absences is the modality of the presence of the whole due to its non-contemporaneity.

4. 2 *Surgissement* as Encounter

How does Althusser's insistence on non-contemporaneity and presence-absences link up with the problem of necessity and/of contingency? In some letters to his psychoanalyst Diakhtine¹⁷⁹, Althusser broaches the problem of a logic capable of thinking the 'birth' of a novel structure, or of a certain phenomenon 'radically novel with respect to whatever comes before it', explicitly building on the concepts of non-contemporaneity and absences. Such logic is premised upon a total refusal of the concept of genesis, which Althusser had already criticised in *For Marx* and in *Reading Capital*; here Althusser organically links it to other concepts such as subject and end:

178 We should stress that in this context the determination in the last instance by economy is totally omitted.

179 L. Althusser, 'Letters to D.', in Id., *Writings on Psychoanalysis*, pp. 33-78. Hereafter LD.

Whoever says genesis says the reconstitution of the process through which a phenomenon A has actually been engendered. That reconstitution is itself a process of knowledge: it has meaning (as knowledge) only if it reproduces (reconstitutes) the real process that engendered the phenomenon A. [...] Whoever says genesis says from the outset that the process of knowledge is identical in all its parts and in their order of succession to the actual process of engendering. That means that whoever elaborates the genesis of a phenomenon A can follow the tracks [suivre à la trace], in all its phases, from the origin of the actual process of engendering without any interruption, that is, without any discontinuity, lacuna, or break [...]. Whoever says genesis is thus implementing, with necessary organic unity, the following concepts: the process of engendering, the origin of the process, the end or term of the process (phenomenon A), and the identity of the subject of the process of engendering¹⁸⁰.

Origin, subject and end are therefore connected in what can be called the 'problematic of the genesis' (or 'geneticist ideology', as Althusser also calls it). The problem with such a logic, argues Althusser, is that it can think of discontinuities only on condition of 'recuperating' them into a more fundamental unity or continuity¹⁸¹. There exists a contradiction that this schema, according to Althusser, refuses to take into account, and that is, on the contrary, crucial to assume:

That contradiction, which geneticist ideology does not assume, which it refuses to confront [...] is the following: ultimately, 'to undertake the genesis' of a phenomenon means to explain how it was born from what is not it. To undertake the genesis of A is to explain through what mechanism not-A (what is other than A) produces A. To assume or take on that contradiction is to accept that what one is seeking in order to explain the mechanism through which A irrupts [*surgit*] is not A, nor is it its prefiguration, germ, draft, promise, etc.¹⁸².

A few pages later on, Althusser continues:

whereas the ideology of genesis presupposes that one can 'follow

180 LD, p. 55.

181 LD, p. 54.

182 LD, p. 58.

the trace' of birth, and as a result it considers only what resembles the effect to be explained, thus only what is most similar to it and the most visibly close, this new logic can provoke the intervention of elements that at first sight do not seem to be directly in question and may even seem to be absent from the conditions of phenomenon A. I believe you will agree with the very general principle that absence possesses a certain efficacy on the condition, to be sure, that it be not absence in general, nothingness, or any other Heideggerian 'openness' but a determinate absence playing a role in the space of its absence¹⁸³.

Two points must be noted. The first is that here non-A must not be understood as the dialectical negative of A, which would be already A but in a negated form. Rather, it must be understood according to the 'labour of the positive' to which Althusser refers in the first chapter of *Reading Capital*. If Althusser is careful to distinguish this negativity from the dialectical one, the passage makes clear that he was wary of the other alternative to the dialectical thought, i.e. Heidegger. For Althusser, the absence is not a general, total absence, a quasi-mystical property of 'Being'; here it is a positive element, a *determinate* absence. Althusser says very little about this absence here, but it would be impossible to make sense of it without referring it to the absences that we found in the theorisation of the non-contemporaneity of the 'whole'; it is only in this sense that we can keep together the idea of absence with the labour of the positive, without risking to interpret this absence in an ontological sense, as an 'original' Being that hides itself in beings¹⁸⁴. In this context, there is no transcendence of any sort: we are still within the immanence inspired by Spinoza. From this conception, Althusser draws the consequences as to the 'irruption' of a novelty, by referring to Marx's conceptualisation of the 'transition' from the feudal mode of production to capitalism:

183 LD, p. 61.

184 The explicit mention of Heidegger is important, as Heidegger was precisely a reference of Lacan that Althusser, in these years, criticizes. The absence of which Heidegger talks is in fact transcendent with respect to beings, and perhaps Althusser saw in Lacan the tendency to ontologise the 'lack' according to this model. Nonetheless, at this stage Althusser is very much convinced that Lacan's philosophical references can be rejected while retaining other aspects of his reading of Freud. By contrast, later on he will denounce Lacan's pretence to have sought to elaborate a 'philosophy' of psychoanalysis, departing from the materialist insights of Freud. Cf. Althusser, *Writings on Psychoanalysis*, p. 91. Quite paradoxically, this late critique of Lacan will occur a few years before Althusser's positive remarks on Heidegger. We will talk about them in chapter 5. For the use of Heidegger in structuralism, cf. U. Eco, *La struttura assente* (Bologna: Bompiani, 2008), pp. 253-380.

the elements defined by Marx 'combine' - I prefer to say (in order to translate the term *Verbindung*) 'conjoin' by 'taking hold' [*prenant*] in a new structure. This structure cannot be thought, in its appearance [*surgissement*], as the effect of a filiation, but as the effect of a conjunction. This new Logic has nothing to do with the linear causality of filiation, nor with Hegelian 'dialectical' logic, which only says out loud what is implicitly contained in the logic of linear causality. [...] Each of the elements that come to be combined in the conjunction of the new structure (in this case, of accumulated money-capital, 'free' labor-power, that is, labor-power stripped of the instruments of labor, technological inventions) is itself, as such, a product, an effect. [But] what is important in Marx's demonstration is that the three elements are not contemporary products of one and the same situation. It is not, in other words, the feudal mode of production that, by itself, and through a providential finality, engenders at the same time the three elements necessary for the new structure to 'take hold'. Each of these elements has its own 'history', or its own genealogy¹⁸⁵.

Here Althusser introduces, as definite concepts, both 'encounter' (which he uses as a synonym of 'conjunction'¹⁸⁶, which, as we saw, he already used in his book on Montesquieu, and which was mentioned in 'On the Young Marx'), and the idea of 'taking hold', two concepts that will become more and more central to Althusser's philosophy in the following years. What is important for us is that this theory of encounter is supposed to account for the 'irruption' of a new structure in such a way that the passage from one structure to another is not a necessary one. According to this logic, contingency plays a definite and crucial role: the elements that enter into the new combination that makes up the new structure are produced by the 'old' structure, but neither are they produced at the same time, nor are they products of the same genealogy (a term that Balibar had introduced in his contribution to *Reading Capital*¹⁸⁷), nor do they generate one another (or one from the other). But above all, *they do not include the sufficient conditions of their encounter, or of their 'taking hold'*, a concept that Althusser uses precisely to mean this conjunction/combination. In a sense, we might well say that, according to

185 L. Althusser, 'On Genesis', *Décalages* Vol. 1: 2 (2013). Available at: <http://scholar.oxy.edu/decalages/vol1/iss2/11>.

186 Before the above quoted passage, Althusser writes: 'in the schema of the "theory of the encounter" or of "conjunction" [...]'.
 187 RC, p. 317.

Althusser, feudalism posed the conditions of its own 'overcoming', but that these conditions become conditions of 'overcoming' only by virtue of a *surplus of contingency*: the encounter is precisely what is *not* produced by feudalism itself as the outcome of its own internal law. The same holds, evidently, for capitalism: to say that capitalism produces the elements that can lead to communism does not mean that capitalism is its own gravedigger: what is determinant is what capitalism does not 'produce' as its own results, i.e., the *combination* of the elements in a new structure. From such a perspective, the passage from one 'moment' (in the Hegelian sense) to another is a contingent one.

Even though this aspect of the 'surplus of contingency' remains, in the letters, still underdeveloped (that is, Althusser does not say it *explicitly*, even if it is objectively present in his negative formulations), Althusser further elaborates on the relationship between structural causality and encounter¹⁸⁸ in a contemporaneous course on Rousseau, delivered at the ENS in 1965-'66. Analysing Rousseau's *Second Discourse*, Althusser argues that in Rousseau it is possible to find a conceptualisation of the development of history according to a model of a 'discontinuous genesis' which stands in contrast to any conceptualisation of history as a development of an originary essence. Althusser's focus is on the way in which Rousseau, in the second part of the *Second Discourse*, thinks of the 'transition' between an epoch and another¹⁸⁹. The reference, implicit, to the 'succession' of the modes of production here, is evident, and it is precisely on this point that the reading of Rousseau is crucial.

On the one hand, Althusser stresses that in Rousseau there are two profound discontinuities in this historical development; the first caused by natural phenomena, and the second caused by the discovery of metallurgy and agriculture. In this way, Rousseau is 'recuperated' in a dialectical thinking: 'in Rousseau, the discontinuities are leaps: the result is radically different from the origin; at the end

188 L. Althusser, 'Rousseau et ses prédécesseurs. La philosophie politique au XVII^e et au XVIII^e siècle', in Id., *Politique et Histoire de Machiavel à Marx. Cours à l'École normale supérieure de 1955 à 1972*, ed. F. Matheron (Paris: Seuil, 2006), pp. 258-366, in part. pp. 300-329. Henceforth PH.

189 Althusser divides Rousseau's periodisation as follows: [(I) state of pure nature; (II) youth of the world; (III) state of war] = state of nature; [(IV) state of war, after the unequal 'contract'] = civil state. See PH, p. 301.

one find a different essence than the one existing at the beginning'¹⁹⁰. This characterisation is certainly dialectical, but very much in the sense of Hegel, and it is also perfectly compatible with the accounts of the leaps in Engels (and Stalin). But soon after, Althusser reads these discontinuities in a way that brings Rousseau's concept of causality in history very close to Althusser's conception of Marxist dialectics as a dialectics without origin. Althusser notes, crucially, that if Rousseau thinks of history in terms of discontinuities, then at the same time, he 'records [*constate*] the impossibility to assign an *origin* to a new phenomenon'¹⁹¹. Furthermore, Althusser reads Rousseau's characterisation of the internal dialectics of the state of nature in even more 'Althusserian' terms, so to speak, by arguing that Rousseau proposes a non-dialectical version of the contradiction which is bound up with to a conception of contingency as a determinant factor of change, or of transition from a state of another:

the state of pure nature (I), the state of youth of the world (II), the state of war (III) do not hold in themselves any principle of resolution of their own contradiction [...] *there had to occur some accidents to produce the transition from a state to another*¹⁹².

The important aspect of this reading lies in that, here, Althusser explicitly links the contradiction to 'accidents' by reversing the priority of the contradiction and its 'necessary' development – as one finds in Hegel or in the orthodox version of Marxism – over 'contingency'. It is contingency that brings about the 'supersession', not the immanent development of the contradiction. 'Accidents', which Althusser also refers to as 'contingent events' in the same page¹⁹³, appear therefore as that 'surplus of contingency' which is actually necessary to the unfolding of the historical process; but they also appear, crucially, as the other side, so to speak, of 'structural causality' as a causality without origin and without centre. Now, the evident superposition of Althusser's own philosophy and the discourse of

190 PH, p. 301.

191 PH, p. 306.

192 PH, p. 306, my emphasis.

193 PH, p. 306.

Rousseau enable us to read, in the notion of the accident, *precisely* the equivalent of the idea of the 'encounter' expressed in the letters to Diaktime: both the encounter and the accident are without 'origin'.

It is precisely this insistence on the constitutive role played by the 'accident' that marks the irreducible gap between a classical (Hegelian) reading of Rousseau and Althusser's own dialectical reading, and by extension, the difference between an orthodox dialectics of the transformation of quantity into quality and Althusser's own dialectics. This difference appears precisely when Althusser tries to refer to the model of the 'leaps', included, as is well-known, in the classical version of dialectics propounded by traditional Marxism in the wake of Hegel. Summing up the model of genesis to be found in Rousseau, Althusser writes in reference to Rousseau's model of genesis that

a) it is a *constituent, productive genesis*. At every stage, there occurs something new which affects the *ensemble* [...]; b) it is a dialectical genesis, as the constitution [*constitution*] is discontinuous and proceeds by leaps [*sauts*]; c) it a genesis of differences¹⁹⁴.

And later on, in a passage that is absolutely crucial, he adds:

For Rousseau every genesis is the transformation of a determinate contingency [*d'une contingence*] in necessity: that which comes about contingently [*comme contingent*] produces a new and irreversible necessity. Every necessity, conversely [*inversement*] has as its origin a determinate contingency. Necessity is therefore shaken [*frappé*] by a certain precarity¹⁹⁵.

It is probably useless to point out that this reading of Rousseau, which turns the concept of accidents – certainly not the central concept of Rousseau's *Second Discourse* itself¹⁹⁶ – into a fundamental tenet of Rousseau's understanding of history,

194 PH, p. 308.

195 PH, p. 308.

196 Althusser deliberately downplays other aspects of Rousseau's text that are more 'gradualist', so to speak, such as for example the growth of population. Needless to say, we are not interested

places Althusser at the greatest possible distance from any idea of logical necessity or metaphysical necessity. It is quite paradoxical that in 1966 Althusser was developing a logic that moved from structural causality towards a logic of irruption, and that at the same time he constituted (also in 1966) a secret group called 'group Spinoza'. Yet the logic that Althusser reads in Rousseau (reading himself in Rousseau) has little in common with the logical necessity of Spinoza. It stands in contrast to both Spinoza's and Hegel's necessity: there is *neither* a teleological necessity, *nor* a logical one. It may surely be objected, at this point, that this course is a reading of Rousseau. But this is not a good objection: after all, Althusser's philosophy is always mediated by readings of other authors. More to the point, the fact that Althusser here is developing *his own* concepts is proved by the almost perfect contemporaneity (same year) of the texts here under examination, and also by the presence of specific words and concepts, such as 'necessity and contingency', and the theme of the impossibility of locating the origin.

Moreover, in this reading of Rousseau, Althusser seems to go even further than in the letters to Diakhtine. The narrative of the necessary succession of the modes of production is severely, if indirectly, criticised. After the passage quoted above, Althusser goes on to argue that 'every order of necessity is specific and different from the others. A specific law governs a specific phase, and this is the law of its *structure*'¹⁹⁷. This passage (and all the course) leaves the status of this 'law' unexplained. I would suggest that the emphasis on 'law' here must be understood, not as Althusser's change of mind as to the fact that there is no 'law' in the classical sense (as seen above when discussing the overdetermined process), but as a polemic against the idea of a general and all-encompassing 'law of history' held by classical Marxism. It is indeed the consequence of the introduction of the determinant role of 'accidents', and of the contingent origin (an expression that is obviously paradoxical) of necessity itself.

It would be difficult, however, to find in this course Althusser's idea about the possibility of articulating this model, which he finds in Rousseau, and the concept of history as an overdetermined process, which is never mentioned. But

here in assessing the accuracy of Althusser's reading.

197 PH, p. 308, my emphasis.

what matters as to the development of the concept of contingency is that it seems to be promoted, so to speak, through the notions of 'encounter' and of 'accident', to the rank of what is determinant in the last instance in the transition from one 'phase' to another. It is clear that contingency is not, as it was for Spinoza and for Hegel, an epistemological weakness of human knowledge, but is ontologically constitutive of history.

In this sense, it seems fair to conclude that when Althusser wrote, at the beginning of *Reading Capital*, that history must be thought of by means of the category of 'necessity of contingency', he was already developing it through Rousseau, whom he was reading exactly in those months. There is no evidence that Althusser felt that the Spinozist background of 'structural causality' might be in tension with the idea that every necessity comes from contingency. The use of Freudian concepts, as we have seen, was already in contrast with the logical determinism of Spinoza's ontology. Yet it is perhaps a sign that he felt this tension that he never tried to elaborate further on regarding the relationship between structural causality and 'encounter', or accidents. From 1966, the concept of structural causality disappears from his vocabulary, whereas the problem of *surgissement*, beginning and encounter will remain at the centre of his preoccupations, with growing importance.

Chapter 3.

Contingency and Ideology

1. Introduction

In this chapter I will address the development of the problem of contingency in Althusser's theory of ideology. The very idea of a relationship between ideology and contingency in Althusser may seem debatable: if we look at the reception of his theory of ideology, the most widespread critique is that of functionalism or structuralism, with which an inability to consider the possibility of change within the social formation is normally associated. Along with this criticism, the other most famous (and agreed upon) accusation targets Althusser's notion of the subject, which seems to make no room for any notion of agency by reducing the subject to a totally subjected subject, thus ruling out the possibility for the interpellated individual to reject its own subjection, i.e. of refusing its own interpellation¹⁹⁸.

Althusser's theory of ideology does not develop in a linear manner, nor does it have a moment of systematic synthesis. Rather, it is a continuous work in progress during which, over time, some aspects are abandoned and others are modified. My intention is not to provide it with the synthesis it lacks, but rather to clarify the way in which the conceptual framework of contingency might help us understand his theory in a non-functionalist and anti-lacanian way¹⁹⁹, and as a the-

198 On this, there are many now 'classical' studies, such as T. Benton, *The Rise and Fall of Structural Marxism* (Hong Kong: Macmillan, 1984), pp. 104-107; G. Elliott, *Althusser. The Detour of Theory* (Chicago: Haymarket, 2009), pp. 150, 210, 213; E.P. Thompson, *The poverty of Theory & Other Essays* (New York, London: Monthly review press, 1978). P. Anderson, *Argument within Western Marxism* (London: Verso, 1980), pp. 18 ff.

199 On Althusser and Lacan, see D. Macey, 'Thinking with Borrowed Concepts: Althusser and

ory that includes the possibility of what I will call 'disinterpellation'.

In the first part of the chapter (sections 1 to 3), I will concentrate on Althusser's relation to Lacan, in order to show that it is the issue of contingency that brings about a break between the two thinkers on the concept of subject. It is by developing what he calls 'a logic of irruption' [*logique du surgissement*] that Althusser recognizes a residual idealism in Lacan's conception of the subject of the unconscious, against which he proposes the idea of an unconscious as 'mechanism' and introduces the problem of the articulation between unconscious and ideology. Such a break with Lacan enables Althusser to think of the relationship between unconscious and ideology in terms of a contingent 'taking hold'. The crucial consequence of this idea is, I will argue, that it both admits in principle the possibility of many articulations, and that it implies that the duration of any articulation is never guaranteed, allowing us to conceive of a multiplicity of interpellations that inscribe themselves in the unconscious.

In the second part of the chapter (sections 3-4) my aim is to investigate the importance of two central concepts of our study, void and contingency, in regards to Althusser's theory of the interpellation. By analysing Althusser's writings on theatre, I will argue that it is in the relationship between contingency, void and subject that Althusser locates the possibility for an individual to break with his/her own interpellation, i.e., with his/her own subjection. By emphasizing this basically neglected aspect of Althusser's philosophy, my goal is to correct the common misperception of Althusser as a theorist interested only in structures and indifferent to the 'rebellion of subjectivity'²⁰⁰, and at the same time to show that his famous concept of the 'break' cannot be reduced to its epistemological valence, suggesting that its scope is actually wider and also has existential implications.

In the last section of the chapter, lastly, I will maintain that the line which emerged from the studies on theatre constitutes the background of the investiga-

Lacan' in G. Elliott, *Althusser: A Critical Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994); T. Eagleton, *Ideology: an Introduction* (London: Verso, 1991), Y. Sato, *Pouvoir et Résistance* (Paris: Harmattan, 2007), F. Raimondi, *Il custode del vuoto* (Verona: Ombre Corte, 2011). Sato and Raimondi argue, in different ways, against the widespread idea that Althusser fails to grasp the difference between the Imaginary and the Symbolic as conceptualized by Lacan. My argument is sympathetic, and I think to a certain extent compatible, with their views.

200 See T. Benton, *The Rise and Fall of Structural Marxism*, p. 173 ff.

tions on ideology carried out by Althusser in *Sur la reproduction*²⁰¹, which can be seen as a problematisation of the concept of interpellation. I will argue that the perspective opened up in this posthumously published study calls for both a revision of the concept of interpellation and for the introduction of a more complex idea of the constitution of the subject, one that we will call (in the wake of the concept of overdetermination) 'overinterpellation'. By introducing this concept, my aim is to show that in Althusser's theory the subject is not univocally determined, but rather a sort of 'scene of confrontation' of different interpellations which, in their interplay, constitute a space of 'objective freedom' - a concept introduced by Althusser himself in his unpublished notes that we will discuss in detail at the end of the chapter.

2. The Unconscious and the 'Logic of Irruption'. A Critique of the Lacanian Subject

We have seen in the previous chapter that psychoanalysis played a major role in Althusser's recasting on the materialistic dialectics. However, Althusser was not only interested in 'importing' psychoanalytic concepts to Marxism, but also spent a considerable amount of time trying to understand how the psychic unconscious in itself was to be conceived and its relationship to ideology conceptualised.

In such an examination, Lacan played a major role. In 1963 (before 'Freud

²⁰¹ L. Althusser, *Sur la reproduction* (Paris: PUF, 1994). Posthumously published, it is the long manuscript from which the article 'Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses' (now in L. Althusser, *On Ideology* (London: Verso, 2008), pp. 1-60) was culled for publication in 1970. As Balibar remarked, Althusser indicated the 'sutures' of the new text by some dots, which are normally suppressed in the current editions of the article. Having now at our disposal the longer manuscript, some of the difficulties of the essay can be, if not totally clarified, better understood. See on this F. O. Wolf, 'The problem of reproduction: probing the lacunae of Althusser's theoretical investigations of ideology and ideological state apparatuses', in *Encountering Althusser. Politics and Materialism in Contemporary Radical Thought*, ed. K. Diefenbach *et al.* (London and New York: Bloomsbury 2013), pp. 247-260.

and Lacan'), Althusser went as far as to say that 'we owe him the essential'²⁰². Such openly declared proximity to Lacan and Althusser's usage of terms central to Lacan's teaching²⁰³ fuelled, over time, the idea that Althusser had simply incorporated some Lacanian concepts into his theory of ideology without questioning what exactly the 'essential', which the above mentioned quote refers to, was, or what amounts to the same, without asking what Althusser *rejects* of Lacan, and why²⁰⁴. It is, nonetheless, necessary to address this problem, as it is through it that we can grasp the specific Althusserian conception of the unconscious, and the distance between Althusser and Lacan on the notion of the subject. The materials now collected in *The Writing on Psychoanalysis*, together with other writings such as the *Psychanalyse et sciences humaines*²⁰⁵, allow us to examine this point.

Reading the texts of the early sixties²⁰⁶, it is difficult to avoid the impression that Lacan was important to Althusser, above all, more for the 'breaks' that he made possible, i.e., in a negative way, than for any particular concepts of his theory. It was the break with psychology that interested Althusser the most, as this break allowed him to come to terms with a discipline to which he - as the archives show - had devoted a considerable amount of study²⁰⁷. In the two lectures on psy-

202 L. Althusser, 'Philosophie et sciences humaines', in Id., *Solitude de Machiavel*, ed. Y. Syntomer (Paris: PUF, 1998), p. 54, fn. 18.

203 To which we should add the constitution of the group gathered around the Althussero-Lacanian *Cahiers pour l'Analyse*, which explicitly tried to combine Althusserian Marxism and Lacanian psychoanalysis. The students who participated in the *Cahiers* were certainly influenced by Althusser, but they also influenced him in turn, as it was the case with Miller. Perhaps it was this group of students that prompted Althusser, in 1966, to clarify his positions on crucial concepts of Lacanian psychoanalysis, above all on the concept of 'subject', on which the *Cahiers* were divided between a more Lacanian tendency, represented by Miller, and a more Althusserian, represented by Badiou. For a careful and interesting reconstruction (which is also a philosophical assessment on its own) of these debates, see E. De Îpola, *Althusser, l'adieu infini* (Paris: PUF, 2012), pp. 35-73.

204 See for example T. Benton, *The Rise and Fall*, p. 103-106. More recently, this thesis has been held by Y. Zhang, *Althusser Revisited* (Istanbul, Duisburg, London: Canut International Publisher, 2014). To my knowledge, the most comprehensive study of the relationship between Althusser and Lacan is D. Martel, *L'anthropologie d'Althusser* (Ottawa: Université d'Ottawa, 1984). The author argues that Althusser's anthropology is taken from Lacan.

205 L. Althusser, *Writings on Psychoanalysis*, trans. J. Mehlman (New York and Chichester: Columbia University Press, 1996); L. Althusser, *Psychanalyse et sciences humaines: Deux conférences (1963-1964)*, ed. Olivier Corpet and Francois Matheron (Paris: Librairie générale française, 1996).

206 Namely L. Althusser, 'Letters to D.', in Id., *Writings on Psychoanalysis*, pp. 33-78. Hereafter LD.

207 At the IMEC there are several notes on psychology, dating from different years (see in part. ALT2. A56-06). As for Piaget, Althusser gave a lecture on him in 1958-59. According to one

choanalysis, where he talks about his own relationship with Freud's discovery, Althusser offers some clues as to the 'story' of his relationship with psychoanalysis and psychology. Here he clarifies that he had been a follower of Politzer, a prominent voice in the pre-war period, who attempted in his *Critique des Fondements de la psychologie*²⁰⁸ to renew psychology incorporating the teaching of Freud, which was nonetheless criticised for its 'abstract character. Politzer's attempt to incorporate psychoanalysis into psychology led him to a phenomenologically inflected psychoanalysis based on notions such as 'I' and 'drama' that he himself baptised 'concrete psychology', but his project was interrupted by his death at the hands of the Nazis during the War²⁰⁹. Following Politzer, in whom he saw the main source of inspiration for Sartre's and Merleau-Ponty's reading of Freud, Althusser explains in the lectures that he was led to identify the 'true' object of psychology with the 'unconscious'²¹⁰.

Given such premises, it is not difficult to understand that it was his encounter with Lacan, whose work he read at the end of the '50s, that allowed him to break with that (quite paradoxical) synthesis between Freud and psychology, inspired by Politzer. A crucial role in this break was almost certainly played by Leclaire and Laplanche's article on the unconscious²¹¹: in it, the two authors produced a forceful critique of Politzer and defended the Lacanian conception of the unconscious against any confusion between psychology and psychoanalysis. During these years (until 1966), however, Althusser does not go into any detail about Lacan's theory, instead summing up his 'great discovery' in a way that, if it was ac-

of the auditors, Althusser knew at the time Piaget's book *Introduction à l'épistémologie génétique* (Paris: PUF, 1950). The article discussed by Althusser, 'Genèse et structure en psychologie' (now in *Entretiens sur les notions de genèse et de structure: Centre culturel international de Cerisy-la-Salle juillet-août 1959*, ed. M. de Gandillac et al. (Paris: Mouton, 1965), pp. 37-48, was not published at the time, and was yet to be publicly delivered in a lecture. See É. Jalley, *Louis Althusser et quelques autres* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2014), pp. 37-57. This book contains the notes taken by the author during his time at the École Normale. Other lectures by Althusser include topics such as emotion, aphasia, pathology and perception, discussed through references to Sartre and Janet.

208 G. Politzer, *Critique of the Foundations of Psychology: The Psychology of Psychoanalysis*, trans. M. Apprey (Pittsburgh, Pa.: Duquesne University Press, 1994 [1928]).

209 Cf. A. Pardi, *Il sintomo e la rivoluzione: Georges Politzer crocevia tra due epoche* (Roma: Manifestolibri, 2007).

210 L. Althusser, *Psychanalyse et sciences humaines*, pp. 33 ff.

211 J. Laplanche, S. Leclaire, 'The Unconscious: A Psychoanalytic Study', *Yale French Studies* 48: 1972.

cepted (or at least uncontested) by Lacan²¹², would certainly not be the way in which Lacan would have summed up his own teaching: 'culture always precedes itself'²¹³. Such a formula is, let us note, also at the centre of 'Freud and Lacan', where Althusser speaks quite loosely about the Symbolic Order as the Order of Culture, demonstrating neither a particular attachment to Lacan's linguistic formalism, nor to the thesis of the unconscious as 'structured like a language'²¹⁴.

If it is safe to assume that the first period of Althusser's interest in Lacan is based on a common anti-humanist interest, and in the parallelism that he saw between his 'return to Marx' and Lacan's 'return to Freud', 1966 marks a turning point. This is at the same time the moment in which a deepening in the confrontation with Lacan occurs, and the moment in which a break is effectuated. Such a parting – and this is what interests me the most here – coincides with the deepening of the theme of structural causality in its connection with contingency and the theme of 'encounter'²¹⁵, and with a fundamental divergence on the concept of the subject. Unlike the *Deux conférences*, the two letters to Diakhtine, written in July and August 1966, show Althusser going beyond a mere opposition to psychology. Here he confronts himself with the task of explaining the 'birth' of the unconscious on the basis of a model alternative to the 'geneticism' that is intrinsic to the very epistemological presuppositions of psychology, framing the problem according to a logic of 'irruption' that crucially mobilises a version of the idea of a structural causality in which contingency plays a determinant role²¹⁶. As we shall see, what Althusser mainly criticises Lacan for is an idealistic residue in his theorisation,

212 See Lacan's letters to Althusser, in Althusser, *Writings on Psychoanalysis*, pp. 145-174.

213 Althusser, *Psychanalyse et sciences humaines*, p. 91.

214 On Althusser's 'culturalist misreading' of Lacan's thesis, see the note appended to the English edition of 'Freud and Lacan' (1964), where he argues that Lacan's theory is 'profoundly anti-culturalist', correcting some formulations that can be found in the article (Althusser, *Writings on Psychoanalysis*, p. 32). Althusser's position on this, however, remains quite mysterious. On the one hand, by remarking that Lacan's theory is anticulturalist Althusser stresses the universality that Lacan attached, following Lévi-Strauss, to the unconscious, and consequently to the moment of the Oedipus' complex. But at the same time, as we shall see in the course of this chapter, Althusser thinks that to account for the formation of the unconscious it is necessary to take into account different elements that ultimately are the ideological formations of a *determinate* society. If the two points of view are not totally incompatible, nonetheless nowhere does Althusser pose the problem of their combination.

215 See *supra*, ch. 2.

216 On structural causality as implying a degree of contingency, see *supra* ch. 2, in particular § 4.

i.e., the idea of the unconscious as subject and as 'memory'. More to the point though, our argument is that such critique is conceptually premised upon the need, on Althusser's part, to preserve the primacy of contingency over an idealistic dialect of subject and memory.

Althusser's starting point in his correspondence with Diaktine, who was at the time his psychoanalyst, is the latter's article 'Agressivité et fantasmes d'agression'²¹⁷, where Diaktine argues in favour of a neat demarcation between the psychoanalytic domain and the domains of biology and ethology, evident in Diaktine's refusal to use concepts derived from these disciplines for the conceptualization of the unconscious²¹⁸. While agreeing that a radical distinction has to be made between what is psychoanalytic and what is not, Althusser argues that such a distinction cannot take the form of a simple *chronological* distinction between two successive moments: 'I fear that it is an ideological illusion to want to inscribe that dividing line, with a bio-ethological before and an after in which *something radically new* (the unconscious) figures in the very development of the child'²¹⁹.

Why does Althusser consider such an attempt an ideological illusion? The problem is that Diaktine's theoretical effort is unconsciously premised on the idea of the unity of the development of human beings; in other words, Diaktine's argument ultimately mobilizes a logic of genesis which is in direct contrast with the other tendency in his very argument, i.e., the thesis that it is impossible to deduce the birth of the unconscious, let alone its functioning, from an ethological and biological 'before'. Such a situation of contradictoriness is, for Althusser, due to a crucial absence in Diaktine's theoretical construction: his forceful critique of ethobiologism does not correspond to an equally decided critique of 'psychology', which, for Althusser, remains fundamentally and inescapably defined by a problematic in which continuity, genesis and origin are the essential conceptual (and

217 R. Diaktine, 'Agressivité et fantasmes d'agression', *Revue française de psychanalyse*, 30 (1966).

218 'I refer not merely to two or three barbs aimed at religion [...] I refer above all to your theses concerning biology and ethology, concerning the care you take to mark your distance unambiguously from any biologism and any ethologism in the interpretation of analytic data. On this point, which is decisive, you are uncompromising. In the conflicts regarding the theoretical interpretation of the facts of analysis, it is at present (and already has been for a long time) through this quite precise point that the decisive dividing line passes'. LD, p. 35.

219 LD, p. 40.

Hegelian) coordinates. The line of Althusser's critique, if concise in these letters, is consistent with his critique of the idealism of the origin and continuity (superposition of being and thought, teleologism and the like). But the problem immediately raised by such a critique is the following: how are we to think of the birth of the unconscious? The answer lies in the adjective 'genetic'. Althusser does not intend to deny that 'at some point' something 'new' comes into being, or that something like the unconscious manifests itself at a moment in the life of the child which is not the moment of his or her birth; what he wants to deny is that such a moment can be thought to be in a *genetic*, i.e., simple and linear, relationship with the 'before'. The problem, actually, seems to lie, for Althusser, in the very idea of a 'before', because as long as we activate the very concepts of 'before' and 'after', we are led to think in terms of a singular cause - an origin - from which everything that follows stems²²⁰.

In these letters, the problem of Diaktime's 'psychologism' is, for Althusser, due to the fact that Diaktime overlooks Lacan, and that such an overlooking becomes an 'impressive silence precisely about language'. The question of language is nonetheless vital, as, for Althusser, it is the only thing that can rule out any reference to a pure 'before', as the child 'is caught [in language] from the time of his birth'²²¹. Such a reference to language and to Lacan, however, is not an endorsement of Lacan's positions. Althusser immediately points out that he does not intend to follow Lacan all the way down, explicitly declaring that Lacan drew the wrong conclusions from the right premises²²². The reference to Lacan, presented here through the reference to the thesis on the primacy of language, is to be understood only in the sense that a consideration of the problem of language rules out any possible reference to an origin, and hence to a genesis²²³. In fact, in order to think of the 'birth' of the unconscious, Althusser does not mobilise Lacan's concepts (such as *das Ding*, or the phallus). Rather, he turns to his own 'logic of sur-

220 LD, p. 40.

221 LD, p. 46.

222 LD, p. 55.

223 Cf. É. Balibar, 'Althusser's object', *Social Text* 39 (1994), p. 168, where Balibar points out that at a certain point Althusser 'made a choice' between generalizing the concepts of Marxism and generalizing the concepts of psychoanalysis. I think that the non-Lacanian choice made by Althusser in 1966 was due precisely to the idealistic overtones of the latter.

gissement' that we have already discussed in the previous chapter²²⁴. Althusser explains the 'birth' of the unconscious as follows:

what occurs in this directly observable phenomenon and seems to be the origin of the unconscious is but a datable effect of the effectiveness of the entire system of elements that were put in place from birth and that play in *extremely complex and diverse forms* (the rhythms of the mother's presence, sphincter training, etc.), *without it being possible to assign a punctual, radical origin from which a filiation might be thought*, at the 'birth' of the unconscious. The unconscious irrupts [*surgit*] not as the effect of a series of linear causes but as the effect of a complex causality, which may be termed structural (without centre, without origin), made of the idiosyncratic combination of the structural forms presiding over the 'birth' (the irruption) of the unconscious²²⁵.

Only such a logic – for Althusser, the true alternative to Hegel's logic – makes it possible to really consider the radical alterity of a structure, of its beginning as something new and its difference from what comes 'before' it. Apart from accounting for the radical alterity of a new structure in face of what is before it, however, there is another important consequence of the application of such a model of causality that we need to stress, and one which becomes central at this point to understanding Althusser's divergence from Lacan.

The crucial thing to be noted here is that Althusser, by virtue of such an emphasis on the moment of *surgissement* as an encounter, is then led to ban every origin, not only from the moment of constitution of the unconscious, but also in the ensuing organization of the unconscious. The parallel with the idea of a mode of production is clear: as the mode of production is not an 'epoch', and its inner logic is never that of cause/essence, but one in which contradictions function according to the laws of displacement and condensation and where there is no

224 'When one reads *Capital* rather closely, it appears that, contrary to the genetic ideology currently applied to Marx (or the evolutionist ideology, which is the same thing), the capitalist mode of production was not "engendered" by the feudal mode of production as its own son. There is no filiation, properly (precisely) speaking, between the feudal mode of production and the capitalist mode of production. The capitalist mode of production irrupts from the encounter (another one of your concepts to which I subscribe entirely) with a certain number of very precise elements and from the specific combination of those elements'. LD, p. 66.

225 LD, p. 73, my emphasis.

centre, so the unconscious (a fortiori!) is a structure in which a multiplicity of factors are organized by, and 'move' according to, the same logic. The problem that Althusser finds in Lacan is that he tends to think of the unconscious as a 'memory'²²⁶:

If we say that the unconscious is a memory, we lapse back into one of the worst concepts of psychology (!), and we are tempted to think that memory = history, that therapy = rectified remembrance = correct historicity, that curing a neurosis means restoring it to its 'historicity', which is surely one of the least felicitous formulas to have emerged from Lacan's pen. [...] From memory to history the path is short, and from psychology to phenomenology, the path is just as short, since it's the same one²²⁷.

As it is evident, Lacan - notwithstanding his conception of language - is not at all exempt from the critique of psychologism. Obviously, it is not difficult to see, in Althusser's need to break with a conception of unconscious understood as memory, the polemic reference to the Hegelian *Erinnerung*; from this point of view, Althusser's hypothesis of a birth by *surgissement* must also be considered in relation to the necessity of criticizing the idea of the model of the Cause insofar as it establishes a crucial link with the idea of history as memory. In other words, a conception of unconscious as memory connects with the logics of genesis and cause as origin, and ends up reproducing, in the conceptualisation of the human psyche, the Hegelian model of universal history.

In this regard, Althusser appears to be thinking not only about Diaktime, but also - above all - about Lacan, in which he sees a vocabulary of memory, idealistic in inspiration, which posits *more platonico et hegeliano*, that cure =

226 In the letters the theme of memory and its relation to the unconscious surfaces twice, if only briefly; and in both cases it is a matter of negative remarks. In the first case, Althusser recalls, to reject, Freud's conception of the remembering of the forgotten memory, linked to Freud's conception of the cure as a restitution of the repressed desire. In the second instance, Althusser's attention is on Diaktime's definition of the unconscious as a memory, a definition related to a conception of language that Althusser deems to be pre-Saussurian. From this second case it might seem that Lacan is excluded from such a critique, given that Diaktime is criticised exactly for having adopted a conception of language that is not the one adopted by Lacan.

227 LD, p. 44.

good historicity, remembering, *Erinnerung* of an originary historicity that would have been repressed and that the analytic process has the task to restore²²⁸. The conclusion that we could reach, then, is that for Althusser, in Lacan, there is certainly an appreciation of language and the idea that 'culture always precedes itself', but that this is not enough to escape the accusation of psychologism. If we look at the passage that Althusser seems to have in mind²²⁹, i.e., Lacan's discourse of Rome, Althusser highlights (in his copy) a passage in which Lacan expresses the idea that the automatism of repetition, like the death-drive, expresses 'the limit of the historical function of the subject'; a limit that, representing (à la Heidegger) the 'possibility' of the subject 'defined in his historicity', 'is present in every moment in what in this history is accomplished'. From Althusser's point of view, it is even too evident that such a formulation cannot but appear dangerously close to a Hegel-like historicism, where – as Althusser wrote in *For Marx* – the essence always accompanies his phenomena in every moment of history, which is nothing else but the manifestation of that essence²³⁰. In other words, whereas in Lacan, the desire is organized around a fundamental loss, the loss of *das Ding*, around which all the life of the subject is organized, for Althusser there is not such a loss at the origin of the unconscious, but a plurality of factors that 'take hold'; and it is clear that to consider the unconscious organized around a loss means, for Althusser, restoring in the unconscious the concept of a central Subject, even if such a subject is a '*manque*'²³¹. What Althusser is trying to do, then, is to extricate himself

228 Now, it is clear that in Lacan there are also other tendencies, and that in the teaching of Lacan this is not the last word. But this is the Lacan to whom Althusser is thinking. Moreover, it might be argued that even the Lacan of the Real (the late Lacan) remains in the orbit of an existentialist thinking. It is not by chance, for example, that a Lacanian like Recalcati emphasizes the proximity between Lacan and Sartre, and sees in Lacan a neo-existentialism. See M. Recalcati, *Il Vuoto e il Resto. Il problema del Reale in Jacques Lacan* (Milano: Mimesis, 2013 [1993]). As Hyppolite once said, 'psychoanalysis is above all a philosophy of existence'. Exactly what it was not to Althusser.

229 I follow here the suggestion made by the editors.

230 One can object, of course, that 'possibility' in Heidegger is not an essence, but an 'existential'. Yet it is still something that defines, and defines essentially, man.

231 As Y. Sato writes, 'according to Lacan, the desire of the subject is determined and explained by the originary experience of satisfaction (primitive *Vorstellungen*) that the Other qua *Ding* brings to him. But such an experience is fundamentally lost because of the interdiction of the incest (symbolic castration). The subject is therefore obliged to try to 'find again' the 'object of satisfaction in another object. [...] it is the lack that obliges him to repeat in vain the search of the lost object [...] it is around this non-representable lack that the desire of the subject is organized and that the subject is produced' (Sato, *Pouvoir et résistance*, p. 106). Sato points out

from the *consequences* of Lacan's 'great discovery', in order not to reduce such a discovery to another idealist model of the Cause.

In a subsequent passage, Althusser in fact rejects this exact model when he introduces the idea of a 'play' in the constitution of the unconscious – an idea that clearly goes (without saying it) against the idea of a sort of 'closure' of the unconscious upon itself and around a central point (which would be in Lacan the master signifier), and in favour of a multiple organisation of the unconscious, where effects and causes are mutually intertwined:

if this or that observable manifestation is indeed a datable effect, itself a moment of the constitution of the unconscious of the 'structural causality' presiding over the production of the new structure that is the unconscious, since it is only a partial and derivative effect of it and since it is not primal, it can inflect the development of the child in one direction or another; there is a 'play' of variations possible (from the normal, to the slightly and then, the seriously pathological) in the existence of that effect. This would not be the case if the effect were the effect of a filiation, an identifiable and assignable cause; in that case, it would not allow for any 'play'²³².

Althusser's theory of the constitution of the unconscious, then, must be read at the same time as directed against the idea of a genesis and filiation (against Diaktime), and as directed against the Lacanian idea of the unconscious, insofar as the latter is still dependent upon the idea of a Cause, to which Althusser opposes the idea of a *surgissement* derived from a structural causality that involves a 'play' of *manifold* elements and causes. The central idea of this passage, indeed, is that the unconscious does not come into being following a singular cause, and that it is not a matter of a single inscription of a master signifier in it, around which the chain of desire would then be organised. It is his rejection of the idea of a central Cause that allows him to take the side of a concept of unconscious as a '*mechanism*' *without memory*²³³, of which the organisation is free from the constraints exerted

that in the '50s and '60s Lacan's theory systematically subjects the economic point of view to the transcendental system of the lack (p. 112).

232 LD, p. 74.

233 LD, p. 45: 'It seems to me that the unconscious is no more a memory than is absolutely any functioning mechanism'. Here Althusser adds that one can find 'good things' about this in Lacan; but it is also obvious that Althusser ultimately see these 'good things' as suggesting a

by a signifier that totalises the chain of signifiers. And it is such a position that allows us to understand the true reason for Althusser's refusal of a subject of the unconscious, where Lacan's idealistic tendency finds its highest point:

I do not think it is appropriate to speak of the 'subject of the unconscious' when talking about the *Ich Spaltung* [...] next to the *Ich* there is a *Spaltung*, i.e. an abyss, a precipice, a lack, a *béance*. Such an abyss is not a subject but is what opens up next to the subject, next to the *Ich* [...] Lacan, in sum, would turn the abyss into a subject by means of the concept of the split subject. There is no subject of unconscious, although there can only be an unconscious by means of this abyssal relationship to the *Ich*²³⁴.

As we see from this passage, Althusser's refusal of the Lacanian subject is not due to a lack of understanding of Lacan's subject²³⁵. It is above all the consequence of another model of causality, one that involves the idea of a *surgissement* and of the absence of a single, primary Cause of, and hence in, the unconscious. It is above all, in other words, the refusal to attribute – following the problematic of the genesis, origin, *telos*, and memory – the logics of the subject to the unconscious, restoring to it what Freud sought to rule out. From this standpoint, it is clear that, for Althusser, Lacan is betraying Freud's great discovery. On the contrary, for Althusser, the unconscious is a mechanism that has a certain relationship to the subject (*Ich*), *but it is not itself a subject, and this necessarily implies that it does not possess any memory*. Both the refusal of the subject of the unconscious and of the unconscious as memory are, in fact, one and the same: the refusal to replicate, in the unconscious, the idealist problematic²³⁶.

path that Lacan does not want to follow to the end. In fact, Althusser adds: 'you will say that I am quite distant from Lacan. It is possible, I do not know. And in any case, it is him that put me on this track'.

234 L. Althusser, 'Trois notes sur la théorie des discours', in L. Althusser, *Écrits sur la psychanalyse* (Paris: Stock/IMEC, 1993), p. 165. Henceforth TN.

235 T. Eagleton, *Ideology: an Introduction*, p. 144.

236 It may be pointed out that for Lacan himself the unconscious is a mechanism that produced repetitions. The problem, however, is that Lacan conceives of the logics of the mechanism as a 'subject', whereas Althusser wants to eliminate from the functioning of the unconscious any 'memory' and any idea of a single Cause that orients the repetition. Basically, even if Althusser never talks about Lacan's conception of mechanism, one can say that Althusser is criticising here the (objective) idealist tendency of Lacan, i.e. his Hegelianism.

This does not amount to denying that the *Ich* – identified by Althusser with the subject of ideology, on which we will return shortly – exists in relation to the unconscious, but rather to refusing to subordinate the production of the effects of the unconscious to a logic of the subject, of memory and of teleology. But also, one of the consequences of the idea of the unconscious as a mechanism, as opposed to the unconscious as a subject, is that it will allow Althusser to think of the articulation between the *Ich* and the unconscious in a *contingent and unstable way*²³⁷.

3. The Articulation between Ideology and the Unconscious: The 'Taking Hold' and the Spectre of Functionalism

Althusser's reflections on the *surgissement* of the unconscious led him to refuse the Lacanian concept of a subject of the unconscious. If this is a consequence of Althusser's refusal of any compromise with the idealist tendencies that he found in Lacan, it by no means entails the dropping of the concept of the subject. Rather, Althusser's problem, at this point, becomes that of the articulation between the subject (the *Ich* of the ideological discourse) and the non-subject, i.e., the problem of thinking of the articulation between ideology and the unconscious.

It is well-known that, several times, Althusser affirmed the existence of a certain link between ideology and the unconscious in his most famous writings, and it is in respect to the better known formulations that his reflection on this problem in 1966 proves to be most original.

Let us start by retrieving the two main formulations of such a link. 1) In 'Marxism and Humanism', Althusser states that ideology is 'profoundly unconscious'; that ideologies are 'structures' that 'impose themselves to the vast majority of men without passing through their "consciousness"', which is said to be a spe-

²³⁷ The orienting and non-contingent causality of the unconscious for Lacan is effectively summed up by Recalcati: 'the void of *das Ding* [...] is not a static, inert void – it is not the void of a container – but rather expresses an orienting power over the subject. It is, as Lacan says, "that which orients all the development of the subject". It is, in other words, a *causal void*, a void that becomes the cause of desire'. Recalcati, *Il vuoto e il resto*, pp. 59-60.

cific 'form of unconsciousness'²³⁸. At the same time, ideology is an overdetermined unity of a real relationship and of an imaginary one, and the latter is defined as a 'lived' relationship of men with their world and their history, 'in political action or inaction'²³⁹. 2) The second moment in which Althusser confronts this problem is in the famous ISA essay. Here Althusser is much more laconic. When introducing the theory of ideology 'in general', and in particular the idea that ideology is 'eternal' (meaning that it is trans-historical), he says that 'ideology is eternal, exactly like the unconscious', and argues – without elaborating on this point – that 'the eternity of the unconscious is not unrelated to the eternity of ideology in general'²⁴⁰.

Of course, there are many differences between the first definition and the second that we are not going to examine in any detail here²⁴¹. What interests us is the more specific problem of the relationship between the unconscious and ideology. In the first definition, ideology is simply said to be 'profoundly unconscious'. A problem with this definition is, however, that Althusser identifies the phenomenological *vécu* with an unconscious 'lived' too quickly. Such an identification, it seems to me, is premised upon a polemical anti-phenomenological stance, but in the end it conflates Freud's two systems C/Prec and Unc²⁴², attributing an unconscious character to the world of perception, a move that is, to say the least, quite problematic. The problem stems from the Spinozist background: using Spinoza (first genre of knowledge = imaginary) against phenomenology leaves us with a tension between the *analytic* unconscious and the Spinozist framework²⁴³,

238 FM, p. 233.

239 *Ibidem*.

240 L. Althusser, 'Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses', p. 35.

241 Montag investigates the shifts between the first definition and the second at length in his *Althusser and His Contemporaries* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2013), pp. 103-172. I signalled my disagreement on specific points in my review of Montag's book appeared in *Radical Philosophy* 186 (July/August 2014).

242 I refer here to Freud's first topography, which distinguishes two systems C/Prec and Unc, to which also Althusser refers in TN.

243 On the problems stemming from relating Freud and Spinoza, one can see the useful article by B. Ogilvie, 'Spinoza dans la psychanalyse', in *Spinoza au XXème Siècle*, ed. Olivier Bloch (Paris: PUF, 1993), pp. 549-571. A recent lengthy discussion on Althusser's use of Spinoza, not only in his theory of ideology but in his overall project, can be found in K. Peden, *Spinoza contra Phenomenology* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2014), ch. 4-5. Discussions of or references to Althusser's use of Spinoza are present in almost all the secondary literature on Althusser, in relation to different aspects of his philosophy: ontology, ideology

which is not further explored. In the second definition, by contrast, Althusser actually retreats from the first one, only asserting that a *certain* link does exist, without saying anything about it – at least a sign, we may conclude, that the first definition appeared to him to be insufficient. In the passage that we cited at the end of the previous section, however, we can locate the precise point where Althusser distances himself from the definition given in 'Marxism and Humanism': there, ideology is said to regard the *Ich*; that is, it is not 'profoundly unconscious' in itself, but only has a *certain relationship* with the other system, that of the Unc. In the 'Trois notes sur la théorie des discours', it is this 'certain relationship' that Althusser attempts to articulate.

In these notes (TN), Althusser's research is predicated upon the introduction of the concept of 'discourse'. In the first note, he argues that the introduction of such a concept is necessary in order to explore the way in which 'every discourse produces a subject-effect', to which he adds the specification that 'the position of the subject produced or induced by the discourse changes in face of the discourse'²⁴⁴. Such a quite sophisticated formulation simply means that there are different types of discourses (Althusser mentions four: scientific, aesthetic, ideological, unconscious) that possess different structures, which in turn entail a different subject-effect each. Over the TN, however, Althusser's position changes in that he restricts the subject-effect to the ideological discourse only; notwithstanding this shift, Althusser deems the project still valid, except that the subject is produced only by one of the discourses, whilst the others produce or induce other effects that have an impact on the subject. Leaving aside the aesthetic and scientific discourse, let us concentrate on the relationship between the ideological and unconscious ones. For Althusser, it is first of all a matter of conceptualising them as

and epistemology. Recent essays on the topic, in addition to those already mentioned in chapter 2, are those included in *Encountering Althusser*, ed. K. Diefenbach *et al.* (Bloomsbury: New York, 2013); C. Williams, 'Althusser and Spinoza: the enigma of the subject', pp. 153-164; G.M. Goshgarian, 'The very essence of the object, the soul of Marxism and other singular things: Spinoza in Althusser 1959-67', pp. 89-112; P. Gillot, 'The theory of ideology and the theory of the Unconscious', pp. 289-306. Althusser's relation to Spinoza in the late years has been the focus of many essays by V. Morfino. See in particular the essays now included in V. Morfino, *Plural Temporality: Transindividuality and the Aleatory between Spinoza and Althusser* (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2014).

244 TN, p. 131.

discourses, then as *different* discourses, and finally to consider their 'articulation'.

The theory of articulation is premised upon a key development of the theory of ideology itself. On the one hand, Althusser keeps the idea that ideology is of the order of the imaginary; instead of being a 'structure', though, it is redefined as discourse. Ideology is said to be made of signifiers that are material, and Althusser lists among them 'gestures, behaviours, aptitudes' which make up what Althusser calls the 'ideological imaginary', to be distinguished from the 'unconscious imaginary'²⁴⁵. It is quite difficult to say how gestures and the like can be considered signifiers, at least if we look for a reason in the TN themselves. Althusser seems to assume (in fact, following Spinoza, even if Spinoza is not mentioned in these notes) that the ideological discourse exists materially in discourses that have the ability to set people in motion, to make them act; and at the same time, that they have an existence in thought, through the mental representation that a certain individual forms in order to be able to act materially. In a sense, the signifiers that make up the ideological discourse are imaginary representations that *stand for* gestures, etc., and might perhaps be called 'segmas', to stress that they are signs, or signifiers (from the Greek *sema*), that imply actions (from the Greek *pragma*), concrete gestures, etc.

But the most important innovation that we can find in these notes is about the structure of the ideological discourse, as it is here that Althusser introduces the idea that a discourse is ideological insofar as it is specular and organised around a 'central signifier':

the ideological subject participates in person, is present in person in the ideological discourse, as it is itself a signifier of this discourse. [...] the ideological discourse, in which the subject-effect is present in person and is therefore [...] the central signifier of the discourse, has a mirror-centering structure [*structure de centration speculaire*]²⁴⁶.

To account for the way in which concrete subjects are produced, Althusser intro-

245 TN, p. 133.

246 TN, pp. 131-132.

duces for the first time the concept of 'interpellation' (that must be distinguished from a general, or analytic, 'identification': otherwise, why would Althusser have introduced such a new term?²⁴⁷). Interpellation, as the specific effect of ideology, has primarily task of mediating between concrete individuals and the *Träger* functions required by the economic structure and by the superstructure:

in every social formation the base requires the *Träger* function as a function to be taken on [...] but does not care as to who is to take them on and carry them out [...] It is ideology that designates the subject (in general) that has to fill this function, and to this end it has to interpellate it as a subject, providing the reasons-of-subject to fill this function. Ideology interpellates the individual, turning it into a subject (ideological subject: hence subject of its own discourse), and providing it with reasons-of-subject to take on the functions defined as *Träger*-functions of the structure. [...] The individual, to be constituted as an interpellated subject, must recognise itself as subject in the ideological discourse, and figure in it²⁴⁸.

Later on we will see the problems raised by this seemingly functionalist formulation (at the level of reproduction); what interests us now is the concept of interpellation in itself. Two points are crucial here. The first is that ideology, in its material and singular instances, does not operate at an unconscious level. Althusser does not say that it is 'profoundly unconscious', but that it operates at the level of the *Ich*, and thus, of the system C/Prec²⁴⁹. The consequence is that it may well be *non-conscious*, but not in the strict sense of the *analytic* unconscious²⁵⁰. Moreover, it is a discourse that contains the subject (the signifier of the subject is included in its discourse) and, at the same time, the reasons-of-the-subject. What is required by ideology, therefore, is a two-fold operation: that the sub-

247 Some authors, especially those coming from the Lublijana School, tend to use the two terms interchangeably, or tend to consider interpellation and (analytic) identification as conceptually equivalent. But in Althusser they are not: he clearly rejects the conflation of the ideological and of the unconscious already in *For Marx* (see the end of 'Bertolazzi and Brecht', in L. Althusser, *For Marx*, trans. B. Brewster (London: verso, 2005), pp. 148-151, in particular fn. 6), and the attempt carried out in the TN is meant to conceptually distinguish the two domains. (Hereafter I will refer to *For Marx* as FM).

248 TN, p. 134.

249 TN, p. 165.

250 In this distinction, never made explicit by Althusser, lies, I believe, the reason of Althusser's otherwise inexplicable insistence on the terminological problem affecting the word 'unconscious'. In the three notes he says that this name must be changed. Cf. TN, p. 136.

ject recognises itself and that it accepts the reasons-of-the-subject. Althusser in fact insists on this point: 'interpellation is not a pure and simple injunction, but a matter of convincing and persuading'²⁵¹. It follows (second point) that ideological discourse is a structure that must guarantee itself in some way. Who provides, indeed, the above mentioned reasons-of-the-subject? For Althusser, it is necessary for ideological discourse to be structured around a 'doubling' of the subject, i.e., that it contains a dual structure whereby the reasons-of-subject are provided by another subject (S), which represents the guarantee of the reasons themselves, their 'ground'. Any ideological formation, then, is such only insofar as it possesses the following basic structure: s – rs – S. A crucial consequence of this threefold structure is that the recognition which produces the subject also involves a cognitive operation of acceptance of the middle term, an aspect that I think is too often downplayed in the reading of Althusser's theory of ideology. This seems to imply that the constituted subject could also put these reasons into question, thus renegotiating its own subjection²⁵². This aspect is not explored further here, yet it is a consequence of the threefold structure itself, otherwise the middle term 'rs' would not have any specific function. We will return to this point later.

Let us now consider the way in which Althusser treats the other end of his problem at stake here, i.e., the discourse of the unconscious. Firstly he identifies the nature of the signifiers of the unconscious. These are broadly defined as 'phantoms', which are said to consist of 'pieces of imaginary'. In keeping with the idea that every discourse produces different subject-effects²⁵³, Althusser argues that the unconscious is a discourse different from all the others, in that it actually implies two structures:

the subject of the discourse of the unconscious occupies a position different from the previous ones: it is represented in the chains of signifiers by a signifier that substitutes it, which is its *tenant-lieu*, and is therefore absent *par lieu-tenance* [...] in the discourse of the unconscious we are dealing with a false centring structure, suppor-

²⁵¹ TN, p. 134.

²⁵² Althusser is not referring here to ideology as something in itself 'rational', but in itself this thesis implies that the 'reason' of the individuals still plays a part in the acceptance of a certain ideological system, or, indeed, of one's own subjection.

²⁵³ This position will change in the third note.

ted by a structure of escape or of *béance*²⁵⁴.

We need to pay attention to the double characterisation included in this formulation. On the one hand, Althusser says that the discourse of the unconscious possesses a false structure of centring; on the other, that such a centring is premised upon a structure of *béance*. Which one, we may ask, is the true structure of the discourse of the unconscious? We can understand why Althusser says that the latter has a *false* structure (which suggests that the true one is the other), if we look at the way in which Althusser introduces the thesis of the articulation:

I would like to introduce here the following thesis: the interpellation of human individuals as ideological subject produces in them a specific effect, the unconscious-effect, which allows them to take on the function of ideological-subjects [...] the existence of this discourse of the unconscious, and of the specific effect that it induces, is indispensable to make the system by which the individual takes on his role of ideological subject function²⁵⁵.

It is clear, then, that the discourse of the unconscious is a falsely-centred discourse because it receives, so to speak, the centring itself from something else, i.e., from the ideological discourse. Such a formulation, however, is far from being without problems. The idea that seems to be expressed here is clear: interpellation (= structuring of the *Ich* around a central signifier present in person) *produces* an unconscious-effect, which in turn is said to be *indispensable* to interpellation itself. From the point of view of the ideological discourse, then, interpellation appears as *causa sui*, as it produces its own necessary and sufficient cause. Such a formulation seems to authorise a sort of functionalist interpretation of Althusser's theory of the articulation between the unconscious and ideology²⁵⁶.

254 TN, pp 131-132.

255 TN, p. 139.

256 It is for example the interpretation proposed by Evers. See T. Evers, *Post-Rationalism: Psychoanalysis, Epistemology and Marxism in Post-War France* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), pp. 116 ff. (in part. p. 130). Evers' argument is exactly opposed to mine. For him ideology and unconscious are in the TN indistinguishable, and 'Althusser lapses into a tendency to posit the Imaginary as ultimately and totally definitional of the subject', a critique that is common to most of the Lacanians (such as Žižek, Dolar and Močnik). Evers seems to forget that Althusser locates the distinction in the structure of the two different discourses, more than in their mater-

This problem is due, at least in this passage, to the fact that Althusser fails to distinguish between two different moments, i.e., the moment in which the unconscious is established ('takes hold'), and *other moments* in the life of an individual, when the unconscious is *already* established. Although Althusser does not distinguish clearly between these two quite different moments, if we interpreted the passage above as referring to the moment of the 'birth' of the unconscious, we would lapse back to the idea of a single Cause, which is exactly what Althusser rejects, as we saw in the previous section. Worse, this would imply that ideology is always already unconscious, however distinct the two structures are said to be.

But such a strictly functionalist interpretation, perhaps authorised by Althusser, leaves aside another aspect of Althusser's enquiry into the problem of the articulation. In fact, shortly after, Althusser writes that 'it is not a matter of showing the generation, the filiation of the unconscious from the subject-effect of the ideological discourse', and goes as far as saying that it is impossible to tackle this problem, let alone to attempt to identify a single cause as the origin of the unconscious²⁵⁷. Rather, the point of view that Althusser deems appropriate is the Marxist (or Althusserian) point of view of the articulation of *already* existing structures, without attempting to deduce the ones from the others (the reference is of course to the Hegelian model of the generation of the spheres of the social formation from a single essence). This remark must be taken as a clear sign that Althusser himself is alert of the risk he is running. This ambiguity, present at this point of Althusser's enquiry, is signalled at the very level of the concepts, or better, words, that he is using. What, indeed, is the 'unconscious-effect' to which the quotation refers? How are we to interpret it? Surely not in the sense that the interpellation produces the unconscious, but only in the sense that the interpellation pro-

ials. Eyer's argument is flawed by an incomprehension of the real articulation of ideology and unconscious, which is apparent when he writes that Althusser 'argue[s] that the unconscious, in its structural specificity, works upon the ideological, even providing ideology with its fuel' (p. 132). But this is a total reversal of Althusser's argument: it is ideology (i.e. its material signifiers that stand for gestures etc.) that provides the unconscious with its fuel. By misinterpreting this key passage, Eyer misinterprets the whole point of the 'Three Notes'. On the issue of articulation between ideology and the unconscious which develops an interpretation that I endorse, see V. Morfino, 'L'articolazione dell'ideologico e dell'inconscio in Althusser', *Quaderni Materialisti* 10 (2012).

257 The point of view is the same as that proposed in LD. Cf. *supra*.

duces an effect *in* the unconscious, one that allows 'the subject-function to be guaranteed in the misrecognition'²⁵⁸. Now, this idea of an 'effect' is of the utmost importance, as it, in itself, does not tie the unconscious to a single interpellation as a logic of the production of a structure would. In other words, it does not reduce the unconscious to a mere effect of ideology²⁵⁹.

The fact remains that interpellation is still *causa sui* in the strictest sense. Here Althusser's discourse shows, however, another hesitation about the most appropriate words to be used, and it is in this hesitation that we can see that he is trying to avoid the functionalism of his own formulation. He suggests, in the margin of the manuscript, that the word 'produced' is risky, and in other cases he uses other words, such as 'induces', whilst in another case he says that the unconscious-effect is 'indispensable' to the ideological discourse. Now, these expressions render evident the oscillation, in Althusser, between the idea of the interpellation as *causa sui* and another idea, according to which it is not. The difference is subtle, yet capital: saying that the unconscious effect is 'indispensable to' is one thing; saying that it is 'produced by' or 'induced by' is another.

It is here, in fact, that Althusser – without being explicit about it – proposes another non-functionalist understanding of the articulation. To be fair, he does not abandon the idea of a production, but this production is now interpreted as a necessary, but not sufficient, cause. In fact, he introduces the idea that the articulation must be considered on the basis of a logic that we might call *bi-directional*. Retrieving what he already proposed in the letters to Diaktine, Althusser writes:

the unconscious is a mechanism that functions massively by the ideological [discourse] [...] What does this expression mean? It designs the fact of the repetition of the effects of the unconscious in situations in which the unconscious produces its effects [...] in other words, one can ascertain [*on constate*] that the unconscious exists in the subjective-objective lived wherein it realises some of its formations²⁶⁰.

258 TN, p. 135.

259 TN, p. 140.

260 TN, p. 140.

What is crucial in this passage is that Althusser operates a shift in perspective, focusing now on the unconscious and on *its* productivity. The unconscious, he argues, produces many different effects, some of which exist in ideological formations (*le vécu*, the lived, refers to the ideological). If this shift in perspective is a clear admission that the unconscious is not reducible to the ideological, it is also responsible for another capital consequence. Althusser argues, in fact, that the ideological constitutes only the *material* through which the unconscious can function. According to this line in Althusser's argument, interpellation cannot be held responsible in itself for the articulation: it only provides the signifiers that the unconscious needs for its own discourse. Althusser also introduces the notion of 'situation' in order to emphasise the variability of such articulation. Shortly after, he argues that for the discourse of the unconscious to 'speak', what is needed is another, additional condition, which he names 'affinity':

not every ideological formation suits the *taking hold* [*prise*] of the unconscious, but [...] it operates a selection between situations [...] there are then some constraints, that we can for the time being define as 'affinities' [...] the articulation of the unconscious upon the ideological is never general, but always selective-constitutive, subjected to constraints defined by the type of unconscious with which one is dealing²⁶¹.

We need to stress that 'taking hold' here does not refer to the taking hold of the unconscious as structure, but to the taking hold of specific unconscious effects. It is, then, a specific 'taking hold' that does not depend only on the interpellation, but also on the unconscious itself. The idea of an 'affinity' is left undeveloped²⁶², but the very introduction of such a notion means that Althusser does not regard the interpellation as capable of being *causa sui* in its relationship with the unconscious. From this point of view, which is a bi-directional one, the articulation might rather be defined as an 'encounter' between the two discourses, and it is only this encounter that can produce a 'taking hold'.

261 TN, p. 143.

262 On this point I agree with Eyers.

This line of argument, which is, in the end, the line that Althusser embraces, is therefore very distant from any functionalism. First of all, one of its capital consequences is that the ideological *Ich* can *or cannot* be invested (its central signifier) by the discourse of the unconscious: in principle, Althusser leaves space for different options. There is no automatic unconscious-effect. Secondly, let us consider this conceptualisation with respect to Lacan's. Whereas Lacan thinks that there is a subject of the unconscious, thus endowing it with a true centring structure, Althusser insists that the true structure of the unconscious is a *false* structure of centring, which finds its centre on the basis of signifiers provided by the ideological discourse. The crucial aspect is that the Althusserian unconscious does not have any power to orient the subject: it is only a mechanism without memory that selects the signifiers on the basis of affinities, but *no-one can ever guarantee that such an articulation takes hold or lasts*. According to this theory, then, *the subject is a fragile articulation of different discourses*.

One aspect that is left aside by Althusser in the notes examining the problem of the articulation is, however, the specific nature of the unconscious effect. If it can ultimately be defined, as we have seen, more as an effect *on* the ideological subject rather than as an autonomous subject-effect, what is the effect of this effect on the subject? The most immediate answer to this question is not that the reasons-of-subject provided by the ideological discourse become simply unconscious; they might well become a sort of habit that goes unquestioned by the individual, yet this is not enough to qualify them as unconscious. What belongs to the unconscious-effect is instead a libido-effect, of which Althusser says very little in the second note. This note can be interpreted again as Althusser's intention to save the economic point of view of the Freudian unconscious against Lacan's privileging of a topographic model²⁶³. Here Althusser writes:

the constraints that define the discourse/unconscious [*sic*] make it work in such a way that it produces the libido-effect [...] the libido-effect is no more exterior to the discourse/unconscious than

263 From what can be inferred from the 'Letters to D.', Diaktine argued in his reply that Lacan's theory made it impossible to conceptualize the unity of the dynamic and economic points of view that Freud had made interdependent. He implied that Lacan's model was that of simple topography. See LD, p. 54.

the libido (as cause) is exterior or prior to it. The effect is nothing else than this very discourse²⁶⁴.

With the caveat that the notes we are dealing with are, precisely, notes, we might perhaps try to extract a model from this passage for the real effect of the unconscious discourse on the ideological discourse. The ideological discourse is organised around a central signifier in which an individual recognises himself/herself according to a process which involves the structure s-rs-S. At the same time, the signifiers provided by the ideological discourse are the materials on which the unconscious discourse can build its own discourse, on the basis of a 'selection' that proceeds according to 'affinities', and the effect of this discourse is the libido-effect. That Althusser fails to specify what these affinities are does not compromise the general idea as to the articulation: his idea is that of an unconscious conceived as a mechanism that produces libido-effects, which in turn produce a 'hold' on the ideological signifier.

The idea of an unconscious as a mechanism that produces libido-effects gets Althusser closer, at this point, to a perspective that will later on be developed as explicitly directed against Lacan (by Deleuze and Guattari, for example). Yet the idea of a 'repression' of the libido remains actually foreign to Althusser's horizon²⁶⁵. In fact, what remains foreign to his perspective is the idea that the unconscious can produce effects capable of 'liberating' the subject. For him, the unconscious is not a subject, is not organised as a subject, and yet produces effects on the ideological subject. But the effects that he takes into account are always ones of a 'supplement' of servitude, if one may say so, of a 'plus' of attachment to one's one interpellation, and never of a 'disruptive' type²⁶⁶. However, it should be clear

264 TN, p. 158.

265 On the 'repressive hypothesis' as the basic hypothesis of Freudo-Marxism, see E. Balibar, *La crainte des masses. Politique et philosophie avant et après Marx* (Paris: Galilée, 1997), p. 311.

266 For a different reading, one that emphasizes the 'disruptive' side, see F. Bruschi, 'Le sujet entre inconscient et idéologie. Althusser et la tentation du freudo-marxisme', *Meta: Research in Hermeneutics, Phenomenology, and Practical Philosophy*, VI: 1 (June 2014), 288-319. In the end of his article Bruschi tends to emphasize too much the idea that the disconnection between the subject and the unconscious can produce an inverse effect: the disruption of the 'ideological recognition'. I do not think that this is an 'Althusserian' idea, because for Althusser the possibility of a disruption of the recognition comes first of all from *something else*. This is the irreducible distance between a politics of desire and an Althusserian (rationalist) politics. This

by now that such a 'supplement' is never automatic, or guaranteed by anything, but is predicated on a 'taking hold' in which the central role is played by the ideological discourse.

4. The Subject and the Void

In the two previous sections of this chapter, our attention was focused on the role played by the issue of contingency in Althusser's theorisation of the articulation between ideology and the unconscious, and more generally on the relevance of the point of view of contingency in his theory of the constitution of the subject. One of the questions that is generally raised by Althusser's theory of ideology, and one that we did not confront, is that he seems to leave no room for any agency or, which amounts to the same, that Althusser moves the subject to a constituted position, and that in his reflection any opportunity for the subject to free himself from the subjection that constitutes him as subject is negated. The goal of this and the next sections is to challenge the generally accepted view of Althusser as a thinker who denies any possibility for human action (or agency, as it is normally called in the Anglophone context) and to contest the connected charge of functionalism levelled at his theory of ideology.

The aim of this section is to argue that Althusser *does* possess a theory of what I will call 'disinterpellation', a theory that should be read as a materialist theory of the transformation of the subject. This theory, which of course is not presented by Althusser as a 'theory', is premised upon an arrangement of terms that form a constellation that will become increasingly important to Althusser's philosophy, as 'void' and 'beginning'; but it is also strongly attached to the theme of the 'rupture', or in general 'break', 'displacement' and 'irruption', in a way that has largely gone unnoticed in the secondary literature. What I intend to bring to the fore is that Althusser locates the possibility of a disinterpellation in the relation

'something else' will be the theme of the next section.

between the ideological consciousness and the real, in a way that is diametrically opposed to the Hegelian idea of a development of consciousness, and that emphasises, as the condition of such a disinterpellation, the contingent 'irruption' of the real in the field of consciousness itself. According to the reading I want to propose, by following this thread in Althusser's philosophy it is possible to show that, in Althusser, there is a preoccupation with the moment of the rupture, on the part of the interpellated subject, with the ideology that interpellates it, which remains quite distant from the idea of an epistemological break with ideology in general.

In order to understand this crucial aspect of Althusser's philosophy, it is necessary to move both the problem of the real (understood as that which is misrecognised by ideology) and the notion of the void (and its derivatives) to the centre of the analysis. If, in his research on the subject of the unconscious, Althusser refused to read the void as subject (the Lacanian lack), it is fundamentally because in the Althusserian conceptual framework the void in fact plays an opposite role. As we are going to see, the void is the concept, or the notion, through which Althusser attempts to identify the moment in which the interpellated subject breaks with its own subjection as the moment of an 'emptying out', of a 'distance taken'²⁶⁷. The void, here, is productive (in a fundamentally non-dialectical way), as it is indeed the moment of the collapse of the dialectics itself. Althusser, by linking void and real, arrives in the end to posit the problem of the subject as 'beginning', which appears to be the Althusserian alternative to the idea of subject as origin. But is not the idea of the subject as beginning exactly the idealist (Kantian, and Fichtean above all) and existentialist idea of a capacity to act that defines every and any man? If it is true that the subject as beginning, as the capacity to initiate, is a fundamentally idealistic motif, the fundamental difference between such an approach and Althusser's position is that the 'beginning' is dependent on something external, a contingency, and is premised upon the disruption of the forms in which the subject 'lives' its own world.

If we compare this thread in Althusser's thought, developed between 1962 and 1967, with the more famous ISA essay, in which there is certainly no question

²⁶⁷ Cf. L. Althusser, *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, trans. B. Brewster (London and New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971), p. 62.

of any 'beginning', we may conclude that Althusser changed his mind on this. But not only will the problem of 'beginning' and 'void' be paramount in his subsequent works (see ch. 4 and 5); we will also see in the following section that the problem of the rupture, and the related problem of the subject, re-emerges in *Sur la reproduction* as a complication of the notion of interpellation. Here, Althusser produces an analysis of the way in which 'the real' produces an effect upon the interpellated subject, introducing the idea of a 'play' between interpellations. And it is in this 'play', which I will call the field of 'overinterpellation', that Althusser again approaches the problem of the rupture of the subject with its own subjection(s).

To understand how Althusser elaborates the idea of a disinterpellation, we need to refer to a 1962 essay on theatre, 'Bertolazzi and Brecht'²⁶⁸. It is true that this essay was written earlier, when the notion of interpellation had not yet been coined. But there are precise and cogent reasons to look back at it: in the years in which Althusser writes about ideology (post '66), he returns to use many of the terms that he deployed in that essay²⁶⁹. Furthermore, especially in his works on art, he speaks of a 'distance' that art allows us to take, which seems to rework, from a non-epistemological point of view, the idea of a 'rupture' with ideology. It is in the article on Bertolazzi and Brecht (BB) that these ideas are presented for the first time, and it is also there that Althusser clearly speaks of the effect, on the ideological consciousness, of this 'distance'.

The general topic of this essay is the possibility of a materialist theatre. Behind this apparently aesthetic preoccupation, however, the real core of the argument consists, I believe, in the very problem of the 'rupture'²⁷⁰. Althusser's attention is in fact attracted by the symmetry of two ruptures: one internal to the drama,

268 L. Althusser, 'The "Piccolo Teatro": Bertolazzi and Brecht' (hereafter BB), in FM, pp. 131-150.

269 Cf. the articles on theatre and art included in EPP II, pp. 553-620.

270 It is remarkable that Althusser in this essay uses 'rupture' to describe the 'break', and not 'coupure'. According to the *Essays on Self-Criticism*, Althusser's theoreticism was caused by the reduction of the rupture to the *coupure*, i.e. by the reduction of a more complex, historically determined and nuanced break to a clear-cut epistemological break. In this essay, Althusser is talking exactly about the 'rupture' in this sense, and this circumstance indicates that this reduction is by no means a characteristic of all the essays included in *For Marx*.

and the other external, that is, the one that affects the spectator; and in both cases it is a matter of a rupture that is provoked, not by a development of the consciousness, but by an 'irruption of the real'. Arguing against the critics that, in Paris, described *El Nost Milan* as a 'melodrama', Althusser is fascinated by the structure of Strehler's *mise-en-scène*. The latter, in fact, organised the play as an alternation of two temporalities, one void – that of the masses – and one 'full', that of the drama in itself, revolving around Nina, her father, and the Togasso. We can understand why Althusser is fascinated with such a *mise-en-scène*: by simply juxtaposing two 'stories' – that of the sub-proletariat and that of the consciousness of Nina and her father – it breaks with a conception of history as continuity and as a development²⁷¹. This has an important consequence for the relationship between consciousness and history: far from being a 'melodrama', *El Nost Milan* presents, through its structure, a *critique of melodrama*:

The true relationship is constituted precisely by the absence of relations [...]. We are dealing with a melodramatic consciousness criticised by an existence: the existence of the Milanese sub-proletariat in 1890. Without this existence it would be impossible to tell what the melodramatic consciousness was; without this critique of the melodramatic consciousness it would be impossible to grasp the tragedy latent in the existence of the Milanese sub-proletariat: its powerlessness²⁷².

What Althusser is trying to emphasise is that the *mise-en-scène* exposes the real relation of the consciousness (here: Nina's and her father's) and what exists, i.e., the reality of a miserable condition that is also their own. In other words, Althusser finds here, on the one hand, an interpellated consciousness, and on the other the 'reality' of the conditions of existence of those consciousnesses. And the

271 Vittorio Morfino has recently analysed the dynamics of temporality in V. Morfino, 'Escatologia à la cantonade. Althusser oltre Derrida', *Décalage* 1:1 (2014), where he argues that Derrida's argument against the metaphysical structure of temporality in Marxism fails to cope with the non-teleological dialectics proposed by Althusser as the true Marxist dialectics. My reading is not incompatible with Morfino's theses: they are actually a necessary premise of my argument. See also E. Balibar, 'Eschatology versus Teleology: The suspended dialogue between Derrida and Althusser' in *Derrida and the Time of the Political*, ed. P. Cheah and S. Guerlac (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009).

272 FM, p. 135.

very ruin of Nina's father (who tried to kill the Togasso in the name of bourgeois values) represents, according to Althusser, the non-dialectical character of such a consciousness, which does not supersede any conflict, but only runs towards its own ruin. The final moment in which Nina refuses the gesture of her father represents, for Althusser, the impossibility of a superior reconciliation with the real, and is the moment in which the necessary rupture with ideology occurs. Here it is important to note the way in which Althusser describes Nina's refusal. He emphasises the 'sudden' reversal in her behaviour towards her father, and such a reversal is the moment in which she breaks with the melodramatic (bourgeois) schemes of her interpellation, within which her father kept her all her life:

When Nina turns on her father, when she sends him back into the night with his dreams, she is breaking both with her father's melodramatic consciousness and with his 'dialectic'. She has finished with these myths and the conflicts they unleash. Father, consciousness, dialectic; she throws them all overboard and crosses the threshold of the other world, as if to show that it is in this poor world that things are happening, that everything has already begun, not only its poverty, but also the derisory illusions of its consciousness. This dialectic, which only comes into its own at the extremities of the stage, in the aisles of a story it never succeeds in invading or dominating, is a very exact image for the quasi-null relation of a false consciousness to a real situation. The sanction of the necessary rupture imposed by real experience, foreign to the content of consciousness, is to chase this dialectic from the stage. When Nina goes through the door separating her from the daylight, she does not yet know what her life will be; she might even lose it. At least we know that she goes out into the real world, which is undoubtedly the world of money, but also the world that produces poverty and imposes on poverty even its consciousness of 'tragedy'. And this is what Marx said when he rejected the false dialectic of consciousness, even of popular consciousness, in favour of experience and study of the other world, the world of *Capital*²⁷³.

We will come back shortly to the parallel between Nina and Marx. Let us notice, for now, that Althusser is clearly locating the moment of rupture in Nina's consciousness in an *experience*, which is the experience of the real as that which is

273 FM, pp. 140-141.

external to the dialectics of consciousness. Such an experience (in the drama, it is the experience of her father's useless ruin) is the experience of the 'rupture', as the real is not 'retrievable' within the consciousness itself – there is no possible *Aufhebung*. At the same time, Althusser is not denying that Nina's act is premised upon a 'prise of consciousness'. What is important is, on the contrary, that such a taking of consciousness is dependent upon a rupture. Here Althusser associates 'rupture' and 'beginning':

Nina, who is for us *the rupture* [rupture] and *the beginning* [commencement], and the promise of another world and another consciousness, does not know what she is doing. Here we can truly say that consciousness is delayed - for even if it is still blind, it is a consciousness aiming at last at a real world²⁷⁴.

Is it not a matter, here, of a *transformation* of the interpellated subject? Now, this transformation is 'activated' by an encounter with the real, external to ideology, which can only appear as a sudden 'rupture', and it is this rupture that is, for Althusser, the possibility of a (new) beginning. What is all the more interesting is that it is in fact Nina's rupture that provides the model for Marx's rupture with ideology. The parallel is striking, and consolidates the idea that Althusser sees the rupture as the consequence of an irruption of the 'real' in the consciousness. If we look back at the essay 'On the Young Marx', which we discussed in the previous chapter, we can notice that the terms are almost identical: 'the contingency of Marx's beginnings was this enormous layer of ideology beneath which he was born, this crushing layer which he succeeded in breaking through', and this break with ideology was possible for the 'irruption' of the real history in the consciousness itself²⁷⁵.

274 FM, p. 142, my emphasis.

275 Cf. *supra*, ch. 2, § 2, 'Marx's Contingent Beginning'. The passage to which I am referring here is the following: 'if we are truly to be able to think this dramatic genesis of Marx's thought, it is essential to reject the term 'supersede' and turn to that of discoveries, to renounce the spirit of Hegelian logic implied in the innocent but sly concept of 'supersession' (*Aufhebung*) which is merely the empty anticipation of its end in the illusion of an immanence of truth, and to adopt instead a logic of actual experience and real emergence, one that would put an end to the illusions of ideological immanence; in short, to adopt a logic of the irruption of real history in ideology itself, and thereby [...] give at last some real meaning to the personal style of Marx's experience, to the extraordinary sensitivity to the concrete which gave such force of convic-

What is striking in this parallel between Nina and Marx is, above all, the clear emphasis on the experience; but it is also the fact that, here, the model of the rupture – and it is not *coupure* – ties together the idea of a contingent beginning that follows an encounter, deemed to be an irruption of the real within the sphere of consciousness. If we consider the chronology of *For Marx*, this essay confirms what we suggested earlier; i.e., that the theory of the *rupture*, which entails the notions of contingent beginning, of irruption, is actually elaborated before the idea of the epistemological *coupure*. Given the parallel between Nina and Marx, established by Althusser, it is impossible not to draw the conclusion that such a theory has a broader meaning to him than an epistemological *coupure*: it points, one can say, to the crucial fact that the rupture is also, or in the first place, a rupture within the field of experience, within the field of ideology, with a particular, historically determined, 'ideological schema', or, indeed, interpellation.

It should be clear at this point that Althusser is far from denying any agency to the human beings – Nina is, after all, acting. They might well be dominated by ideology, but because ideology is a structure that misrecognises the real, the encounter with the real – in whatever form – can produce a rupture and a beginning. It is possible, though, to argue at this point that Althusser is only applying such a model to 'characters', and this is in fact quite true. But Althusser takes a step further towards a theory of disinterpellation when he takes into account the second rupture, which we talked about at the beginning of this section; the rupture that involves the spectators. Here, in fact, Althusser conceptualises the exact effect of the encounter with the real, of the irruption of the real in the field of ideological consciousness – and again, it is not a matter of science/ideology, but of a restructuring of the ideological perception.

Althusser, in the second part of the article, discusses the Brechtian notion of the *Verfremdungseffekt* in parallel with the idea, 'fundamental in Marx', according to which, as we saw, a phenomenology of consciousness is impossible²⁷⁶. Here he introduces a strict parallel between the estrangement and the production of a new consciousness. Such a production is, for Althusser, premised upon the very

tion and revelation to each of his encounters with reality'. FM, p. 82.

276 FM, pp. 143-144.

structure of the play, as it is in Bertolazzi's *El Nost Milan*:

For him [Brecht] no character consciously contains in himself the totality of the tragedy's conditions. For him, the total, transparent consciousness of self, the mirror of the whole drama is never anything but an image of the ideological consciousness [...]. In this sense these plays are decentred precisely because they can have no centre, because, although the illusion-wrapped, naïve consciousness is his starting-point, Brecht refuses to make it that centre of the world it would like to be²⁷⁷.

In so doing, i.e., in de-centring consciousness, Brecht makes the 'real' that lies outside the circle of ideology appear as something that cannot be recuperated by ideology itself, as something that is irretrievably outside – a remainder. But what is paramount here is that Althusser reads the estrangement effect as the effect of the 'perception', on the part of the spectator, of this 'invisible' remainder, that has the power to transform the consciousness of the spectator:

these remarks give us a more precise idea of the problem posed by the Brechtian theory of the estrangement-effect. By means of this effect, Brecht hoped to create a new relation between the audience and the play performed: a critical and active relation. He wanted to break with the classical forms of identification, where the audience hangs on the destiny of the 'hero' and all its emotional energy is concentrated on theatrical catharsis. He wanted to set the spectator at a distance from the performance, but in such a situation that he would be incapable of flight or simple enjoyment. In short, he wanted to make the spectator into an actor who would complete the unfinished play, but in real life. This profound thesis of Brecht's has perhaps been too often interpreted solely as a function of the technical elements of estrangement [...] but it is essential to go beyond the technical and psychological conditions to an understanding that this very special critique must be constituted in the spectator's consciousness. In other words, *if a distance can be established between the spectator and the play, it is essential that in some way this distance should be produced within the play itself*²⁷⁸.

The distance which Althusser is talking about here is at the same time, the distance between the self-consciousness in the play (i.e. of a character) and the real

277 FM, p. 145.

278 FM, p. 146.

conditions outside it, and also, crucially, the distance that is created within the spectator himself, in his or her consciousness. Is this not the very moment of disinterpellation? Here Althusser is reading this estrangement as the moment in which the self-consciousness of the spectator is confronted with something that is outside it: this very decentring of the structure of the play is, in the end, the decentring of the ideological consciousness itself, the rupture with one's own interpellation. What this theatre renders possible is exactly the production of an internal distance between the ideological consciousness of the spectator and itself – one can even say, the void of a distance taken. It is remarkable that here Althusser speaks of the estrangement as the moment of the rupture without reducing this rupture to an epistemological truth-effect. On the contrary, such a rupture is the result of a perception that is rendered possible by the structure of the play. One can say that what is at stake here is the experience of the real beyond the ideological reality of recognition, which does not find any satisfaction in the recognition between the spectators and the heroes. In a sense, the estrangement-effect becomes here the non-epistemological equivalent of the *coupure*. But what is important is that Althusser locates, in this moment of estrangement, the moment in which the spectators break with his or her own subjection, or interpellation, and can transform themselves. The presence, in the play itself, of the 'real' as that which remains outside the consciousness is what makes the otherness of such a real visible to the consciousness of the spectator²⁷⁹.

Now, exactly in the idea of the estrangement as the effect of the irruption of the real in the consciousness of the spectator lies Althusser's theory of disinterpellation. The moment of the disinterpellation consists in the very distance taken, or the moment of an emptying-out of the consciousness. In other words, this moment is possible for Althusser as the moment of the void of subject. The idea of the void, introduced at this point, is not arbitrary. It is not used in the BB essay, but in a letter written at the same time as 'Lenin and Philosophy' (1968), Althusser writes that he would translate the *Verfremdungseffekt* as '*decalage*', a term that is also used in 'Lenin and Philosophy', where philosophy is described as the 'void of

279 Cf. FM, p. 146.

a distance taken²⁸⁰. The estrangement is a 'moment of void' because it is the break with ideology, which *a horreur du vide*²⁸¹.

It is in this moment – which is perhaps, for Althusser, only a moment – that the transformation of the subject can occur. Althusser speaks here of this moment of rupture, which can constitute a beginning, as the moment in which a subject can become an actor:

If [...] the theatre's object is to destroy this intangible image, to set in motion the immobile, the eternal sphere of the illusory consciousness's mythical world, then the play is really the development, the production of a new consciousness in the spectator – incomplete, like any other consciousness, but moved by this incompleteness itself, this distance achieved, this inexhaustible work of criticism in action; the play is really the production of a new spectator, an actor who starts where the performance ends, who only starts so as to complete it, but in life²⁸².

It is quite evident that the very least that one can say is that Althusser possessed a veritable theory of disinterpellation, and that he did not simply deny human agency to human beings. On the contrary, one can even ask whether, in the end, this idea of disinterpellation, or of the creation of *another* spectator, is not in fact a theory of an active subject. Surely what Althusser says here is that subjects have the possibility of liberating themselves from their subjection: the spectator is free to 'complete' the drama in real life, s/he can do it and can also not do it. But here it is not a matter of asserting the subject as a pure act, in an idealistic fashion. Rather, what is at stake for Althusser is how the moment of a distance with one's 'lived' world can occur. This theory is more of a theory of the *void of the subject*, of the moment in which individuals can actually reject their own subjection. It is materialistic, as there is no such thing as a pure deciding subject: every decision, every beginning, is dependent upon an irruption of the real, an encounter, a contact, on the part of the spectator, with that which lies outside the field of vision set

280 Cf. L. Althusser, 'Sur Brecht et Marx', in EPP II, p. 569.

281 Like the Hegelian dialectics. See chapter 1.

282 FM, p. 151.

up by his ideological circle. It is the contact with the real, which corresponds to the moment of the decentering of 'consciousness', that is the precondition of a beginning.

5. The Development of the Theory of Ideology and the Limits of Interpellation

In the research carried out in the 'Three Notes', Althusser put forth a rather functionalist definition of interpellation in regard to the economic and political structure by saying that ideology has the task of 'filling' the *Träger* function requested by the latter²⁸³. At the same time, however, the concept of 'situation', if undeveloped, already introduced the principle of a variability of the ideological formation. One of the problems, there, was that Althusser, preoccupied with the issue of the articulation between ideology and the unconscious, did not clearly investigate the way in which ideology itself is articulated to the economic and political structures. At the end of the third note, however, Althusser had already indicated the path of his future enquiry by stating that discourses can have real effects via their articulation.

In the following years, Althusser developed exactly this point, trying to revise the Marxist theory of the State in order to clarify the way in which the process of reproduction takes place. Now, as paradoxical as it may appear to those who regard Althusser's theory of ideology as functionalist, it is by reflecting on the problem of reproduction that Althusser provides a correction to his own incipient functionalism, a correction that interests us insofar as it produces a modification – left largely untheorised by Althusser himself – of the concept of interpellation, and hence of the subject.

The basic question posed by Althusser in the following years can be summarised in this way: where and how are the conditions of the reproduction of pro-

283 Cf. *supra*.

duction secured? To answer this question, he introduces the famous concept of Ideological State Apparatus, clearly taking it from Gramsci²⁸⁴. To explore the complication of the scheme of interpellation, I will refer not to the famous ISA essay, but to the original manuscript from which it was culled²⁸⁵. Referring to the manuscript (SR) permits us to take a different standpoint to the one of the ISA article, i.e., the point of view of class struggle. As is well known, in the article class struggle is quite marginal, and Althusser seemed to insist on it forcefully only in the Afterword; by contrast, SR is entirely written from the point of view of class struggle, as Althusser makes explicit already in the Preface²⁸⁶. This circumstance makes SR more attentive to the internal dynamics of the Ideological State Apparatuses with respect to the article. Althusser, in fact, pays much more attention to the process of the constitution of a State Ideology following the seizure of power by a determinate class, and to the internal differences in terms of temporality between the seizure of power and the construction, or the re-adjustment, of an adequate ensemble²⁸⁷ of ISAs, which requires a long and constant class struggle²⁸⁸.

An important consequence of such an approach is the introduction of the concept of tendency within the political dynamic of the class struggle: the dominant class, argues Althusser, tends to unify, or strives to unify, the ideological ap-

284 I do not intend to discuss the implications of Althusser's reformulation of Gramscian concepts here, nor I intend to examine the overall modification of the Marxist theory of the State that Althusser here attempts. The definition of the ISA and its difference from the RSA will be assumed as known. É. Balibar, 'Hégémonie ou Ais', in G. Labica (ed.), *Dictionnaire critique du Marxisme* (Paris: PUF, 1985).

285 This manuscript has eventually been translated into English last year (L. Althusser, *On the Reproduction of Capitalism: Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses*, trans. G.M. Goshgarian (Verso: London and New York, 2014), hereafter SR), but was originally published in French in 1994 (L. Althusser, *Sur la reproduction* (PUF: Paris, 1994)). It is quite strange that only very recently some attention has been paid to the differences between the manuscript and the article. An attentive scholar like Elliot, who saw the manuscript before it was published, failed to notice its consequences on the notion of interpellation. Also De Ipola, in his *Althusser, l'adieu infini* (Paris: PUF, 2012), overlooks *Sur la Reproduction*, which results in a misreading of the development of Althusser's theory of ideology. De Ipola locates in the eighties the abandonment of the 'reproductionist' thesis on ideology, which in fact is *already* rejected in SR.

286 SR, p. 2: 'Since the analyses in Volume 1 depend, in certain cases, on principles to be worked out in Volume 2, I ask readers to grant a kind of theoretical and political "credit". I shall try to honour the obligation thus incurred in Volume 2, in which I shall broach the problems of the *class struggle in capitalist social formations*'.

287 I use on purpose this word.

288 Cf. in part. SR, chapter 6, pp. 70 ff.

paratuses that it finds already in place by modifying them, or by introducing new ones. A crucial aspect is, however, the fact that the ISAs are thought of as a heterogeneity, and not as a simple unity. Whilst the Repressive Apparatus (the State in the strict sense) can be thought of according to the metaphor of the One, the Ideological State Apparatuses are of the order of the Many²⁸⁹. It follows from these premises that Althusser regards the unity of the State Ideology itself as problematic, or, better, as *tendential* and as a result of class struggle in the domain of ideology. We find here, in another form, the problem of the non-contemporaneity of the historical time, as what is emphasised is the non-automatic correspondence between the economic mode of production and the ideological superstructure, which is relatively autonomous and endowed with its own temporality (on this, see ch. 2).

In the following analyses, Althusser introduces an aspect that is absent from the ISA essay. After explaining that the Ideological Apparatuses 'realise' the State Ideology, he points out that the total process of reproduction has an impact on the functioning of the ensemble of the ISAs, and conceptualises these effects as an internal subversion of the ideology that is supposed to 'realise' itself in the ISAs:

we must distinguish between, on the one hand, the determinate elements of the State Ideology that are realised in, and exist in, a determinate apparatus and its practices, and, on the other, the ideology that is 'produced' in this apparatus by its practices. To mark this distinction terminologically, we will call the former ideology the 'Primary Ideology', and the latter – a by-product of the practice in which the Primary Ideology is realised – the 'secondary or subordinated ideology' [...] these secondary ideologies are produced by a conjunction of complex cause, among which figure, alongside the practice in question, the effects of other external practices, of exterior ideologies; and in the last instance, however dissimulated, the distant effects, which are actually very close, of class struggle²⁹⁰.

From this point of view, Althusser can hardly be criticised for his functionalism,

289 SR, pp. 74-81, where Althusser insists that every single apparatus comprises different functions and is always a *complex* system that cannot be analysed in isolation.

290 SR, p. 83.

as what is introduced here is the problem of a *relation of forces* (between struggling classes) within the moment of the reproduction of the conditions of production. If the State Ideology realises itself in the ISAs, and if their task is to 'inculcate' the dominant ideology, this process is not at all a smooth one – on the contrary. Althusser clearly recognises that the functioning of the Ideological State Apparatuses cannot be conceptualised in isolation from the other elements of the social formation, and the effect of this point of view lies in the production of subordinated ideologies (that can be local or global), in contrast with the Primary Ideology. Althusser in fact writes: 'that this does not take place without “contradictions”, and that, in particular, the ideological sub-formations “produced” in the apparatuses by their own practices should sometimes “make the gears grate and grind” is inevitable²⁹¹[...], adding in a note that it is so 'for good reason, if we recall the effects of the class struggle that operate in them [in the ISAs] to “produce” these ideological sub-formations²⁹². In other words, Althusser does not, here, reduce ideology to the dominant ideology²⁹³, but locates in the ideological reproduction – i.e., in the moment of the constitution of the individuals as subject – the possibility of a subversion of the dominant ideology, or of its transformation.

Expanding on this point, in *Introduction à la philosophie pour les non-philosophes*²⁹⁴ Althusser links the possibility of a subversion to the effects of the class struggle, which constantly impedes the closure of the dominant ideology:

there is diversity in the materiality of ideologies, a diversity that, because it could not be totally unified in the ancient dominant ideology, neither can it be reabsorbed in the unity of the new dominant ideology. This is why it seems only fair to recognise in principle the dialectics of this process of unification by inscribing this recognition in the open plurality of the ideological state apparatuses. Open, because one can never say in advance what the development of class struggle will be.²⁹⁵

291 SR, p. 88.

292 SR, p. 88, fn. 32.

293 This is a classical critique of Althusser's ISA essay. For example see Benton, *The Rise and Fall of Structural Marxism*, p. 98-107. The critique was restated by Elliott.

294 L. Althusser, *Introduction à la philosophie pour les non-philosophes* (Paris: PUF, 2014). The editors date the manuscript 1976-78. Henceforth, IPH.

295 IPH, p. 238. Here is the original: 'il y a du divers dans la matérialité des idéologies, et un divers qui, n'ayant pu être unifié totalement dans l'ancienne idéologie dominant, ne peut non

If the introduction of this perspective, *which is present in Althusser's writings from the beginning*, renders null the allegation of functionalism, it nonetheless forces us to ask whether the very concept of interpellation is adequate enough to describe the dynamics – understood very much etymologically, as *dynamis*, force-relation – in which the individuals are caught. One of the problems is that Althusser elaborated the notion of interpellation before introducing, in the 1968 study, the perspective of class struggle, and that it kept this notion intact even after introducing the crucial idea of a plurality of ideologies in the ISAs, or of the existence of a non-totalisable plurality of ideologies in the social formation. After having dealt at length with the plurality of the ISAs in SR, in fact, Althusser introduces – at the end – his theory of ideology based on the notion of interpellation, as it was elaborated in the 'Three Notes'. But the fact that Althusser stops at the theory of ideology in general (a second volume on the class struggle in capitalist formations was foreseen, but was never written), leaves *de facto* the aspect of the concrete and material constitution of the subject unresolved (that is, it leaves unexplored the fact that ideology never exists in general, but always in concrete and determinate formations, which are always class or regional ideologies). The question that one can ask here is the following: what are the consequences of the (non-functionalist) perspective opened up in SR on the conceptualisation of the subject?

My idea here is that such a perspective not only allows us to reject the thesis of Althusser's functionalism, but also that it forces us to implement the notion of interpellation by introducing another concept, which I will call 'overinterpellation'. By this term I mean to highlight that, in the very analyses put forth by Althusser, the underlying principle is that individuals are never interpellated as subject, but always as *subjects* – *that is, that individuals are always constituted as*

plus être entièrement résorbé dans l'unité de la nouvelle idéologie dominante. C'est pourquoi il me paraît juste de reconnaître dans le principe la dialectique de ce procès d'unification en inscrivant cette reconnaissance dans la pluralité ouverte des appareils idéologiques d'État. Ouverte, car *on ne peut pas préjuger du développement de la lutte de classe*'. It goes without saying that here Althusser is distancing himself from Marx, or at least from some passages where Marx suggests that it is well possible to say in advance what the unfolding of the class struggle will be.

subjects not by one interpellation, but by manifold and sometimes contradictory interpellations. The schema of interpellation remains, of course, the same; but one of the consequences of the idea of the open plurality of the ISAs, or of the production of different ideologies within the ISAs themselves, is that the individual is caught in a network of 'central signifiers', in a network of different ideological discourses in which the imaginary recognition takes place.

To flesh out the idea of overinterpellation, let us take into account chapter XII of SR ('On Ideology'). Here Althusser introduces the thesis according to which 'ideology has no history'²⁹⁶, which does not mean – as it did for the Marx of *The German Ideology* – that it has no history because it is a mere illusion, but that it is trans-historical. Althusser argues, following the 'Three Notes', that ideology has a definite structure, i.e., that it functions by the category of 'subject': ideology interpellates individuals as subjects, and 'the category of the subject is constitutive of any ideology only insofar as every ideology has the function, which defines it, of "constituting" concrete subjects'²⁹⁷. Here the category of subject is not only the philosophical modern concept of subject (the Cartesian ego); it refers to the structure of ideology, that is, to the fact that a discourse is ideological only insofar as it is structured around a centre (the central signifier), which is the subject of said discourse, and which is present in person. 'Subject', then, is a category that refers to the internal organisation of the discourse. Althusser, in fact, points out that 'even if it does not appear under this name (subject) until the advent of bourgeois ideology, above all, with the advent of juridical ideology, the category of subject (which can function under other names, such as the soul, God, etc. in Plato) is the constitutive category of every ideology, whatever its determination (regional, or in term of class), and whatever its historical date, since ideology has no history'²⁹⁸.

As one can easily evince from this passage the idea of the interpellation of individuals as subject is by no means restricted to the interpellation of individuals as *bourgeois* subject, which is, for Althusser, the determinate concept that occupies the category of subject in a determinate historical period. The notion of inter-

296 SR, p. 175.

297 SR, p. 188.

298 SR, p. 188.

pellation is formal: it only states that individuals are constituted through a recognition, which is also a misrecognition of oneself, as free, as the origin of certain deeds and thoughts by means of which they *also* accept the performativity expressed by the determinate ideological discourse itself – for example, if I am interpellated as a citizen, I will behave according to the prescriptions (rights and duties) attached to such a category, etc., and I will think, very likely, that the political freedom that I enjoy as a citizen is the most important value of all, etc. (But this is also true for a Communist militant, who recognizes himself or herself in the discourses of Communist apparatuses)²⁹⁹.

Shortly afterwards, Althusser introduces the thesis of the material existence of ideology, which was presupposed by the theory of the Ideological State Apparatuses expounded in the previous chapters, and formulates the order of 'real determination' of ideology upon individuals:

the subject acts insofar as he is acted by the following system (set out in the order of its real determination): ideology existing in a material ideological apparatus, prescribing material practices regulated by a material ritual, whose practices exist in the material acts of a subject acting in all good conscience in accordance with its beliefs³⁰⁰.

What about, at this point, what Althusser called 'secondary ideology'? In another passage, Althusser links it to problem of the concrete constitution of the subject, thus connecting (implicitly) the issue of primary and secondary ideology to what we might call, by analogy, the primary and secondary interpellation:

it may be objected that the subject in question could act differently; let us recall that we said that the ritual practices in which a primary ideology is realised can 'produce' (in the form of by-products) a 'secondary' ideology – thank God, since otherwise neither revolt

299 This means that there are two levels of misrecognition. One is formal: I am the origin of my deeds and thoughts, and in this sense the theory of interpellation is clearly directed towards the tradition issued by the *ego cogito et sim*. But then there is the misrecognition that pertains to the *content* of a certain interpellation, that varies according to classes and regions of ideology. The crucial point is that there is no pure formal interpellation, because ideology in general simply does not exist (only the *concept* of the structure of ideology in general does).

300 SR, p. 187.

nor the acquisition of revolutionary consciousness nor revolution would be possible³⁰¹

Let us notice, first of all, that Althusser is referring to the same subject. This means, evidently, that the same individual is interpellated at the same time by two different ideologies. It is true that here Althusser refers to the situation in which different interpellations are active as a peculiar situation; yet, in light of what we saw earlier, this is actually the normal situation (primary ideology is only tendentially a totality), and what varies is, actually, only the relation of force between the different interpellations. We must recognise then that Althusser's theory admits to, in principle, the possibility of multiple interpellations, or of what we called over-interpellation, even if this concept is present only in the 'practical' way; and that the 'acquisition of a revolutionary consciousness' finds its condition of possibility in a conflict of interpellations.

Such a concept points, also, to the introduction of the logics of the 'always-already', which is but the reintroduction of the principle of the materialistic dialectic in the domain of interpellation. It is this logic, let us notice in passing, that renders the accusation of a presupposition of an individual preceding the interpellation quite feeble. If using the notion of the individual is unavoidable, we must not think of the individuals as pre-existing entities. Althusser points this out quite clearly when he says that 'individuals are always-already interpellated by ideology as subjects [...] individuals are 'abstract' with respect to the subjects they always already are'³⁰². Moreover, if we interpret the logical precedence of the individual in the description of the process of interpellation as an ontological priority, it becomes impossible to grasp the concept of overinterpellation, since it is such a fundamental presupposition of this concept that the operation of interpellation is always exerted upon other interpellations, and never on anything that is not always-already subject.

One of the passages in which Althusser puts the concept of overinterpellation to work most clearly is an autobiographical one. Here Althusser attributes a

301 SR, p. 187.

302 SR, p. 192.

crucial importance to the 'open plurality' of interpellations:

What do we mean when we say that ideology in general has always-already interpellated as subjects individuals who are always-already subjects? [...] this means, concretely, the following: when religious ideology begins to function directly by interpellating the little child Louis as a subject, little Louis is already-subject – not yet religious, but familial-subject. When legal ideology (later, let us suppose) begins to interpellate little Louis by talking to him about, not Mama and Papa now, or God and the little Lord Jesus, but Justice, he was already a subject, familial, religious, scholastic, and so on [...] when later, thanks to auto-heterobiographical circumstances of the type of the Popular Front, Spanish Civil War, Hitler, 1940 Defeat, captivity, encounter with a communist, and so on, political ideology (in its differential forms) begins to interpellate the now adult Louis as a subject, he has already long been, always-already been, a familial, religious, moral, scholastic and legal subject [...] and is now, lo and behold, a political subject! This political subject begins, once back from captivity, to make the transition from traditional Catholic activism to advanced – semi-heretical – Catholic activism, then begins reading Marx, then joins the Communist Party, and so on. So life goes. Ideologies never stop interpellating subjects as subjects, never stop 'recruiting' individuals who are always-already subjects. The play of ideologies is superposed, criss-crossed, contradicts itself on the same subject: the same individual always-already (several times) subject. Let him figure things out, if he can ³⁰³.

The concept of overinterpellation is necessary, I think, to bring into relief the fact that, in the concrete process of reproduction of the conditions of production, it is always a matter of a multiplicity of interpellations. Through such a concept it becomes possible to stress the continuous variation of the ideological interpellations (dependent upon class struggle, whose effects 'are never foreseeable in advance'), of the diverse and virtually contradictory constitutions of the individuals as subjects³⁰⁴. Above all, it becomes possible to stress that the subject itself is never of the order of the One, is never a unity, but of the order of the Many³⁰⁵ – and such a multiplicity must not be considered as a simply given multiplicity, but as a dynamic one (in the etymological sense of the word), eventually dependent upon a

303 SR, p. 193.

304 This is perhaps the right place to recall that history is for Althusser a process without subject *because* history is *full* of (conflicting) subjects.

305 The same way contradiction is.

political relation of forces. It is not entirely correct, I think, to state that the subject in Althusser is always of the order of the State, as many have argued, (most recently Badiou)³⁰⁶ since it is clear that the subject itself is not determined by a single ideology, but rather in the struggle itself between different interpellations, the unstable unity (a unity in dominance, to use Althusser's formulations) of a plurality of ideological discourses. In fact, we may even say that the concept of overinterpellation makes it clear that if it is true that the individual is always abstract with respect to the subject, the subject is abstract with respect to the subjects that a single individual always (already) is.

We can ask, at this point, if, for Althusser, the overinterpellation of the subjects leaves them a 'space' of freedom. This point is particularly dangerous, if anything because of the intrinsic polysemic character of the concept of freedom. However, this idea of freedom is introduced by Althusser himself, even if much later, in an unpublished note on the ISA. Here he develops the same idea that was present in SR of a multiplicity of interpellations. I quote it in its entirety to make the continuity apparent:

ideology acts by interpellating the individuals as subjects or rather, as the individuals are always-already subjects, by interpellating the subjects as subjects, i.e., by displacing the point [*en deplaçant le lieu*] of their interpellation. So a child, subject of identity (Pierre, Nicolas, etc.), is very early interpellated as a moral subject (you must do this and not that...), and later as scholastic, juridical, ideological, political, military, scientific etc. [...] I recall that it is an ISA that interpellates it, displacing the point of application of its interpellation as subject³⁰⁷.

A few lines below, Althusser introduces the idea of an 'objective freedom' due to the multiplicity of the interpellations:

it is sufficient to indicate the multiplicity of the interpellations to immediately make appear, between the different subjects, a play in

306 A. Badiou, *Metapolitics*, trans. J. Barker (London and New York: Verso, 2005), p. 63.

307 ALT2. A29-06.01.

*which the objective freedom of every individual is inscribed*³⁰⁸

In these passages we find the same idea that we already encountered, i.e., the idea of a 'play' as a space that is free from a single determination, an idea that is embedded in the concept of structural causality and that could be traced back to the symmetry of over- and under-determination³⁰⁹.

The problem raised by the idea of an objective freedom is, however, whether it should not be implemented by a theory of 'subjective' freedom. It is clear that, for Althusser, individuals are always subjects: a certain individual is the bearer, so to speak, of many subjects. It is not too simplistic to ask the very basic question: how can an overinterpellated subject render this objective freedom effective and real? Even when speaking of 'objective freedom', Althusser does not pose this problem – arguably because it sounded too existentialist to his ears. Yet to say that the overinterpellation opens up a space of *freedom* can have meaning only if we admit that the individual can operate a choice of some kind, otherwise the theory of the overinterpellation will reduce the individual to multiple dependency, a multiple determination, without him/her being capable of doing anything with such an over/underdetermination. In other words, if we do not admit that individuals can act upon their own interpellation, the idea of an objective freedom becomes aporetic, being only a more complex determinism – but then, why speak of a 'freedom'?

In reality, even if Althusser never speaks of a subjective freedom, this idea is clearly admitted by him, and the emphasis on the objective side of freedom mainly has the goal of subordinating – or better to say, tying – the subjective freedom to its objective side. Let us consider again the above mentioned passage. The subject, writes Althusser, is caught in a 'play' of overinterpellations, which overlap and sometimes contradict each other (as in the case of the primary and secondary overinterpellation). And he adds: 'let him figure things out, if he can' (*à lui de se débrouiller*). This unmistakably points towards a capacity of the interpellated in-

308 ALT2. A29-06.01, my emphasis.

309 Cf. *supra*, ch. 2.

dividual to negotiate their own interpellation, i.e., their being a subject. But what does this '*à lui*' refer to? In a way, it can be tempting to interpret it as pointing towards a 'residue' of the process of interpellation, getting Althusser close to theories such as Dolar's, or Žižek's³¹⁰. However, the very idea of a residue risks objectifying the *lui*, whereas Althusser seems to refer here to a capacity, and not to a 'thing'. The very term used by Althusser is interesting. On the one hand, '*se débrouiller*' is a verb in the infinite mode, and as such it stresses the continual process of 'untying' the knots of the network of interpellations. It is, significantly, a reflexive verb that alludes to an activity upon oneself, and such an activity is rendered by a Latin prefix (*de*), which indicates a 'moving away'. The fundamental idea behind it is therefore very similar to that of 'emptying out', or at least of a distance that the individual can take from their own interpellations – in other words, the same idea that Althusser used in the conceptualisation of the transformation of the subject in the article on Bertolazzi. Again, here we find the idea that the ideological contradictions cannot be 'overcome': '*se débrouiller*' is diametrically opposed to the Hegelian idea of a progression of the consciousness.

A capacity to '*se débrouiller*', therefore, seems to be a fundamental part of Althusser's theory of interpellation. It is, however, this aspect – the connection between objective and subjective freedom – that in his theory of ideology in the end is left undeveloped by Althusser. One may wonder whether Althusser did not pursue this line because he was afraid of conceding too much to a theory of subjective freedom – in other words, to existentialism. The answer is, I think, that he was.

310 M. Dolar, 'Beyond Interpellation', *Qui Parle* 6, 2 (1996).

Chapter 4.

Beginning from Nothing. Althusser's Machiavelli

1. Introduction

The last two chapters have been concerned with the most familiar aspects of Althusser's philosophy, and my reading attempted both to account for the presence of contingency and to draw the effects that such a presence can produce on our reading of the 'classical' Althusser. In the remaining two chapters, I will primarily be concerned with posthumously published writings, in which Althusser directly takes the issue of contingency into account.

It is commonly recognised that after 1965 Althusser's philosophy underwent a shift in perspective, which mainly regards his concerns with science and philosophy and their relationship with politics. It is well-known that soon after the publication of *Reading Capital* and *For Marx*, Althusser criticised his own 'theoreticism', arguing that he had neglected, or underplayed, the relationship between 'theory' and 'politics'³¹¹. The most evident sign of Althusser's retraction was the substitution for the definition of 'dialectical materialism' (Marxist philosophy) as the 'theory of theoretical practice' with a new definition. In his famous lecture 'Lenin and Philosophy', Althusser redefined philosophy as 'class struggle in theory', thus incorporating 'politics' in the definition of philosophy itself³¹².

We will return to Althusser's definition of philosophy in the following chapter, when we shall confront the shift, which occurred in the final years of

311 Cf. Althusser's foreword to the Italian translation of *Reading Capital*, dated 5th of December, 1967, in L. Althusser and É. Balibar, *Leggere il Capitale*, trans. R. Rinaldi and V. Oskian (Milano: Feltrinelli, 1968), p. 8. The self-criticism is developed further in L. Althusser, *Essays in Self-Criticism*, trans. G. Lock (London: NLB, 1971).

312 L. Althusser, 'Lenin and Philosophy' [1968], in Id., *Essays in Self-Criticism*, pp. 15-48.

Althusser's activity, toward the idea of a 'philosophy for Marxism', as opposed to both the idea of a Marxist philosophy and the idea of a 'new practice of philosophy' (which corresponds to the second definition). As far as the question of contingency is concerned, for now our attention must be directed to another crucial moment. In 1972, Althusser delivered two courses (consecutively) at the ENS, the first on Machiavelli and the second on Rousseau's *Second Discourse*. In both cases, it is a matter of a 'return': Althusser had already taught a course on the Florentine in 1962 and had also taught Rousseau on at least two other occasions³¹³.

In many ways, Althusser's reading of Machiavelli (and, to a minor extent, of Rousseau) at the beginning of the seventies can be regarded as an attempt to bring together two different trends in his philosophy. On the one hand, we have seen in Chapter 2 that necessity and contingency are the categories that define history as an 'overdetermined process' of displacements and condensations, and that 'irruption' and 'beginning' defined the structural recrystallisation of the 'whole' on 'qualitatively new bases'. On the other hand, in Chapter 3, we have seen that Althusser's account of the constitution of the subject through the operation of interpellation is such that it also poses the issues of overinterpellation and disinterpellation. The result of Althusser's attempt to give a thorough account of the reproduction of the social formation and of the moment of revolution (which should have been dealt with in the second and never written volume of *Sur la Reproduction*) is that the 'subject' is moved centre-stage. Now, what is the relation between the 'subject' and the domain of politics? As we are going to see, in his meditation on Machiavelli during the seventies, Althusser introduces the notion of 'subject' in a different, and certainly positive way (yet not unproblematic), in the context of a deep problematisation of the relationship between 'theory' and 'politics'³¹⁴. It is

313 These courses are now collected in L. Althusser, *Politique et Histoire de Machiavel à Marx. Cours à l'École normale supérieure de 1955 à 1972*, ed. F. Matheron (Paris: Seuil, 2006), henceforth PH. The 1962 course on Machiavelli (editorial title 'Machiavel (1962)' is in PH, pp. 193-254. Althusser lectured on Rousseau in many occasions: in 1955-1956, in the course on 'Les problèmes de la philosophie de l'histoire' (PH, pp. 107-127), in 1965-1966 (as we saw in chapter 2, PH, pp. 300-368), and finally in 1972 (L. Althusser, *Cours sur Rousseau* (Paris: Les Temps des Cerises, 2013)).

314 In one of his articles on politics, S. Lazarus, in 1985, identified Althusser's position in the following way: 'there is a position, that of Althusser, which holds that materialism is the scientific

tempting to argue that Althusser changed his position about the subject from an outright rejection to an endorsement. Yet this is not entirely accurate precisely because, as noted in Chapter 3, there is no 'outright' rejection: in the article on Bertolazzi, was not the question precisely that of the *transformation* of the subject into an actor? My point in this chapter is that through Machiavelli, in the seventies, Althusser again took up this line and attempted to link philosophy and science to this 'transformation', introducing the idea that theory is not only qua science, a 'dissolution' of the subject³¹⁵, but also a *political interpellation*. I am aware that this expression cannot be found in Althusser. But, as we shall see, it is a necessary concept that Althusser himself produces. The problem lies precisely in the change of status undergone by theory through the reading of Machiavelli, a change that Althusser sought to account for with the expression 'thinking under the conjuncture', which we will confront in the third part of this chapter.

However, this problem emerges against the background of a general deepening of Althusser's reflection on the issue of contingency in Machiavelli, which started almost a decade earlier. As the writings that are now at our disposal show, Althusser began working on Machiavelli at the beginning of the sixties, when – in the same year in which he was lecturing on structuralism – he gave a course on Machiavelli at the ENS. This circumstance allows us to trace the development of Althusser's reading of Machiavelli and to follow the vicissitudes of the 'vocabulary of contingency' throughout his confrontation with the question of politics. Thus, Althusser's return to Machiavelli in 1972³¹⁶ is at the same time a return to a theme that he already explored, a deepening of this theme and a reorganisation of his own discourse around the question of the 'subject', which in the meantime had moved centre-stage.

An important moment in this confrontation is represented by his reading of

knowledge of the real, that it is the science of the real [...] Materialism is therefore a political commitment because it is scientific [...] this is the reason why Althusser, when asked about politics, replies either mentioning science, or his commitment to the party'. S. Lazarus, *L'intelligence de la politique* (Paris: Al Dante, 2013), p. 143. Yet in the seventies Althusser's reflections go precisely in the opposite direction.

315 Cf. É. Balibar, 'Althusser's Object', *Social Text*, 39 (1994), p. 159.

316 L. Althusser, *Machiavelli and Us*, ed. F. Matheron and trans. G. Elliott (London: Verso, 1999). Henceforth, MU.

Rousseau's *Second Discourse* in a course held immediately after his second confrontation with Machiavelli in 1972³¹⁷. This year represents a decisive moment for the development of Althusser's materialism of contingency, as it is in these two courses that the notions of beginning, void and encounter are further developed and in a sense gathered together to form a 'problematic' that will later be named 'materialism of the encounter'³¹⁸. But, in the seventies, the question of contingency is mobilised to directly tackle the relationship among theory, history and politics and, through them, the question of the 'subject' in a way that remains largely absent in the writings of the eighties, where at stake is the formulation of a 'philosophy for Marxism'. Such a circumstance, according to my reading, renders Althusser's materialism of the encounter of the seventies autonomous from the elaborations of the eighties, which we will confront in the following chapter.

2. Althusser's First Reading of Machiavelli: the '*commencement à partir de rien*'

In 1962, Althusser taught a course on Machiavelli at the ENS. Until that moment, his teaching and research had mostly concentrated on French philosophy,

³¹⁷ I am not going to see in detail this course in this chapter, mainly because it overlaps with what I said about Rousseau in chapter 2, and also because I already talked about this course in my review appeared in *Radical Philosophy* in 2013 (S. Pippa, 'The impossible origin', *Radical Philosophy* 178 (Mar/Apr 2013)). It is nonetheless important to stress that Althusser further develops again through Rousseau the vocabulary of contingency precisely in 1972, at the same time that he returns to Machiavelli. However, it is only in his reading on Machiavelli that the interrelationship between theory, politics and subject is brought to the fore, no doubt because Althusser thought that Rousseau, after having produced an 'unprecedented mechanism of genesis' in the *Second Discourse*, 'retreated' in *The Social Contract* in an 'ideological' discourse (See L. Althusser, 'Rousseau: the Social Contract', in Id., *Politics and History*, trans. B. Brewster (London and New York: Verso, 2007), pp. 113-160). A comparison between Althusser's reading of the *Second Discourse* and *The Social Contract* would certainly constitute, I think, an interesting path for future research. On Althusser and Rousseau, cf. A. Levine, 'Relire "L'impensé de Jean-Jacques Rousseau" de Louis Althusser', in *Rousseau et le Marxisme*, ed. L. Vincenti (Paris: Publications de la Sorbonne, 2011), pp. 25-44, and B. Bernardi, 'Un Rousseau pour en cacher un autre. Althusser lecteur du Second Discours', in the same book, pp. 63-80.

³¹⁸ What is not introduced (in 1972) is the Epicurean *clinamen*, which stands at the centre of the writings of the eighties. We will confront Althusser's relationship with Epicurus in the next chapter.

especially on the Enlightenment and the tradition of philosophy of history. In the theoretical space delineated by this project, Machiavelli was not included. Yet, in 1962, Althusser encountered Machiavelli during a journey in Italy, precisely in Romagna, the same land where Cesare Borgia – the hero of *The Prince* – began his failed attempt to conquer Italy. In a letter written in 1962 to his Italian translator Franca, Althusser explained his relationship with Machiavelli in rather personal terms:

I believe that it was even necessary that I plunged into the void, in order to ultimately attain the solution of this beginning from nothing [*commencement à partir de rien*], which had become the form of my problem³¹⁹.

According to F. Matheron³²⁰, the first course on Machiavelli can be regarded as the starting point of Althusser's meditation on the problem of the 'beginning from nothing'. In a sense, Machiavelli represented, as of 1962, a complement to Althusser's reflection on Marx, which in those years (1960-1965) centred around the problem of the constitution of the science of history and the redefinition of Marxist philosophy. Needless to say, Machiavelli had very little to do with a science of history and with philosophy understood as a 'theory of theoretical practice'. Yet his conception of 'chance' strongly resonates with Althusser's attempt to overturn the idea of a progressive dialectics of history and to reformulate the relationship between necessity and contingency, which took shape precisely at that time³²¹.

In the 1962 course on Machiavelli, we are confronted with a first exploration of Machiavelli's thought that has the goal of fleshing out the idea of 'beginning from nothing'. The problem that Althusser makes his own is not, certainly, the ontological problem of generation *ex nihilo* of being; nor is it the problem of

319 L. Althusser, *Lettres à Franca (1961-1973)*, ed. F. Matheron and Y. Moulier Boutang (Paris: STOCK/IMEC, 1998), p. 225 (letter dated 29th of September, 1962).

320 Cf. F. Matheron, 'La récurrence du vide chez Louis Althusser', *Futur Antérieur*, 'Lire Althusser Aujourd'hui' (1997), in part. p. 38 ff. Matheron's seminal article (in addition to his editorial work, obviously) has played a significant role in my reading of Althusser.

321 Cf. *supra*, ch. 2.

the transformation of a social formation due to the 'encounter' of different and unrelated elements that we saw in Chapter 3³²². Rather, it is the problem of the contingent 'beginning' of a political process of foundation of a new state, which is, of course, the problem to which *The Prince* is devoted. In the light of what we have seen in the previous chapter, such an interest on the 'beginning' attests that such a term, as well as the related problem of contingency, was also confronted by Althusser at the level of 'political philosophy' (but this terminology needs to be abandoned, as we shall see in a moment). That is to say that at the same time in which 'beginning', 'rupture', 'necessity of contingency' and 'void' were deployed in his conceptualisation of Marxism and of the materialistic dialectics, Althusser was confronting the same problem, in more directly political term, through Machiavelli.

The chronology is complicated, but the encounter with Machiavelli seems to predate the essays of *For Marx* about the dialectics (1962-1963), even if it follows the essay 'On the young Marx' (1960), where the issue of necessity/contingency/beginning is for the first time laid out³²³. It is doubtless, indeed, that part of the fascination exercised by Machiavelli on Althusser was due precisely to the strong resonance with the issue of 'contingency' and 'beginning' that Althusser was *already* developing, and that in turn the reading of Machiavelli prompted him to further develop this theme in his elaboration on the dialectics³²⁴. However complicated the chronology may be, it is certain that Machiavelli played a major role in the following of Althusser's thought, even if it remained a 'secret' source for all of his readers beyond the small group of his students and collaborators³²⁵.

322 Even though the two problems, as will be clearer shortly, are evidently not unrelated.

323 See *supra* ch. 2, §2.

324 For example, Machiavelli is mentioned in 'Contradiction and Overdetermination', in L. Althusser, *For Marx*, trans. B. Brewster (London and New York: Verso, 2005), p. 93.

325 Cf. E. Terray, 'Une rencontre: Althusser et Machiavel', in S. Lazarus (ed.), *Politique et philosophie dans l'œuvre de Louis Althusser* (Paris: PUF, 1993).

2.1 Machiavelli as '*mauvaise conscience*'

The notes on which the 1962 course is based show that Althusser's first approach to Machiavelli oscillates between a straightforward reading, which for many aspects remained at the level of *explication de text*, and an attempt to draw more profound philosophical implications from Machiavelli³²⁶. Althusser oscillated between a historical (even historicist) interpretation of Machiavelli as the '*mauvais conscience*' of the philosophy of natural law and an interpretation of his concepts as concepts that can have value on their own³²⁷.

At the first level, Althusser argues that the theoretical condemnation of Machiavelli as an 'empiricist', i.e. as someone who has not attained the level of 'theory' (condemnation that Althusser finds in Spinoza, Fichte and Croce, taken as example; more in general, Althusser also has in mind Hobbes and Locke, or Rousseau³²⁸) is due to the fact that he remains, for historical reasons, foreign to the tradition of natural law. This tradition corresponded, for Althusser, to the moment of constitution of politics as a 'theoretical object':

if we turn to these theoreticians, we realize that Machiavelli is alien to the world of their concepts. The whole political theory is made of some specific concepts: state of nature, social contract, contract of association, contract of submission, civil state, political sovereignty, etc. These concepts, and the problematic related to them (nature of social bond, origin of society, end and destination

326 In addition to Matheron's article (which deals only partially with the 1962 course), other writings on Althusser's first reading of Machiavelli are: T. Negri, 'Machiavel selon Althusser', *Futur Antérieur*, 'Lire Althusser aujourd'hui' (1997); Id., 'Pour Althusser. Notes sur l'évolution du dernier Althusser', *Futur Antérieur*, 'Sur Althusser. Passage' (1993); F. Del Lucchese, 'On the Emptiness of an Encounter. Althusser's Reading of Machiavelli', *Décalages* 1: 1 (2014); F. Raimondi, *Il Custode del Vuoto* (Verona: Ombre Corte, 2012), cap. 4. The most comprehensive study of Althusser's relationship with Machiavelli is Mikko Lahtinen's monograph *Politics and Philosophy. Niccolò Machiavelli and Louis Althusser's Aleatory Materialism*, trans. G. Griffiths and C. Köhli (Brill: Leiden and Boston, 2009), which deals with the 1962 only partially.

327 PH, p. 197. It is only the first thread that will be made public in the lecture 'Solitude of Machiavelli' in 1977, of which the main themes are already fully present here. The lecture is in MU, pp. 115-130.

328 Cf. PH, pp. 195-196.

of political power) are therefore constitutive of every political theory in the strict sense of the word. They constitute *politics qua theoretical object* [*Ils constitue proprement la politique comme objet théorique*]³²⁹.

The reason why the theoreticians of natural law have demoted, so to speak, Machiavelli to the rank of 'empiricist' lies for Althusser in the very nature of their philosophy as an 'ideology'. That is, in the fact that such philosophy has as its own task to conceptually justify the new historical fact of the modern state, grounding it in an anthropology or in a philosophy of history³³⁰. In other contemporaneous courses and notes, Althusser characterises the modern political philosophy (sometimes also including Spinoza in it), as a transcendental philosophy of the 'origin'³³¹. This concept, which we have already referred to at length in previous chapters, is in fact charged, within the realm of political philosophy, of the same function that, according to Althusser, it plays in Hegel: the function of grounding the analysed reality in an essence, from which the same reality under consideration is then 'deduced' and justified. Althusser offers the following explanation:

it is in terms of essence that the philosophy of natural law 'naturally' deals with the essence of society, of the essence of law [*droit*]

329 PH, p. 198.

330 Cf. for instance PH, p. 258 ff., pp. 301-303.

331 The following passage sums up effectively Althusser's position towards modern political philosophy: 'I want to indicate here, *en passant*, the reason why the theory of law and of politics that we know underwent, during the XVIIth and XVIIIth centuries, a certain philosophical development; or else, why this theory of law was, as history showed, from Hobbes to Locke, Kant and Hegel, the privileged form of the existence of philosophy tout court. Why, in fact, the philosophy of natural law could, at a certain point, represent and embody philosophy tout court? Because the dominant philosophical form, the matrix of every philosophical question, the question constitutive of philosophy itself, was essentially *juridical*. Since the XVIIIth century, a subject of rights [*sujet de droit*] is placed at the centre of philosophy, from the *ego cogito* to the transcendental subject; it can judge about the truth because it belongs to it by right and by origin. The philosophy of natural law, which develops, in the theory of natural rights as an original right, the main categories that philosophy had borrowed from juridical ideology, merely returns to philosophy what philosophy had borrowed from the object elaborated and developed by the philosophy of natural law. If philosophy of natural law was so important for philosophy, it is because it did nothing else than working out, philosophically, the categories of juridical ideology that then dominated the philosophical categories [...] This explains why the philosophy of natural law – as can be seen in Hobbes, Locke and Rousseau – could provide philosophy tout court with so many philosophemes, for example to Kant, Fichte and Hegel. But rather than philosophemes, philosophical categories in the strong sense [...]'. ALT2. A31-05.02.

and of the essence of political power as modified, transformed forms of the essence of man, of human individual [...] The titles of validity, of everything and above all of truth, are to be looked for in the origin, which is the nature [...] Nature is the evident identity of being and essence, and the evidence of this identity is the original right [*droit*], the simple self-position of the essence³³².

At this level of analysis, Machiavelli's importance is recognised (as Althusser often stressed) in a sort of 'negative value', i.e. in the light that he can cast upon the dominant tradition of political philosophy, especially in what their 'theoretical dispositive'³³³ covers: the violence of what Althusser refers to as the 'primitive political accumulation', i.e. the real conditions of the foundation of the absolute monarchies in the modern Europe³³⁴. This strain in Althusser's analysis is fundamentally historicist: Machiavelli's realism, opposed to the 'ideological' character of the philosophy of natural law, is traced back to the objective historico-geographical conditions. By insisting on the anachronism of these conditions (i.e. Italy's backwardness with respect to France and Spain, for instance, in regard to the process of unification), Althusser's interpretation – *mutatis mutandi* – is a sort of variation on the Marxist *topos* of the temporal anachronism, deriving from Marx's conceptualisation of Germany backwardness in the XIXth century³³⁵.

At the same time, however, Althusser's analysis touches upon Machiavelli's modification of two central questions that occupied him in these years: the status of anthropology and of philosophy of history³³⁶. These two points are

332 ALT2. A31-05.02.

333 I follow Elliott's translation of 'dispositif' with 'dispositive' (a word that in fact does not exist in standard English) in his translation of *Machiavelli and Us*.

334 PH, p. 247.

335 This historicist line will remain present in Althusser's interpretation of Machiavelli, alongside the more theoretical interest in what Althusser will later call his 'theoretical dispositive'. The idea that Machiavelli is the 'bad conscience' of the dominant tradition of modern political philosophy is in the 1978 lecture 'Solitude of Machiavelli', the only public talk given by Althusser on the Florentine (see in part. MU, p. 123). Also in *Machiavelli and Us* Althusser oscillates between a theoretical reading and a historicist interpretation. Cf. for instance the end of chapter 4, on the political practice of the new prince of the new state founded by the new prince, where Althusser writes that 'it suffices to know the history of the constitution of national states to appreciate that Machiavelli does nothing but think the conditions of existence, and the class conditions, for that form of transition between feudalism and capitalism which is absolute monarchy' (MU, p. 103).

336 Needless to say, they are at the centre of both *For Marx* and *Reading Capital*.

notable, debated issues in Machiavelli's scholarship: is there, in Machiavelli, a theory of human nature? And is there not a philosophy of history taken directly from Polybius?

With regard to the first point, Althusser's interpretation is that, in Machiavelli, one can surely find an anthropology, one that identifies the nature of men with desire. But he emphasises – and this is quite an interesting move – that this anthropology does not ground Machiavelli's theoretico-political discourse, as in Machiavelli the objects of enquiry are always the social groups rather than single men. For Althusser, this difference is not merely a *quantitative* difference, but a *conceptual* difference that renders Machiavelli's reference to 'human nature' theoretically null:

Machiavelli's anthropology does not ground his political theory, because it is not a veritable anthropology [...] Machiavelli talks very rarely about 'man', or about 'human nature' [...] he talks about men in the plural. And this plural does not indicate a mere generalisation [...] but designate men considered as groups inserted in social and political relations. For example the question of the infinity of human desire. Machiavelli talks about it as if it was an originary attribute of human nature, but in reality his examples are always taken from concrete political situations, in the struggle of the two humours that constitute the people [...] in other words, the infinity of human desire indicates a conflictual situation without exit [sans issue], the bad infinity of a dialectics without sublation³³⁷.

Interestingly, Althusser twists Machiavelli's naturalistic theory of the two 'humours', according to which the social field is always divided into two antagonist social groups ('popolo' and 'grandi') in an anti-Hegelian (but also anti-Marxist) figure of the historico-political dialectics without supersession. This move renders evident that Althusser is willing to rule out any interpretation of Machiavelli in a 'humanist' vein. For Althusser, the point is not that in Machiavelli one can find *another* conception of man, different from the one that one can find, for example, in Locke or Rousseau. Rather, the point is precisely that, at the level of theory, the struggle of socially determined groups is prioritised over the question of the 'es-

337 PH, p. 239.

sence of man', or that Machiavelli's 'anthropology' translates, as it were, into a more basic assumption that is entirely political³³⁸. The point that Althusser stresses is, indeed, that Machiavelli obtains his examples from the *concrete* reality and grounds his political theory on concrete examples, often contradicting each other³³⁹, rather than on an abstract (and ideological) idea of an essence of man³⁴⁰.

With regard to the question of philosophy of history, Althusser's reading is paramount. It will also be at the centre of the second chapter of *Machiavelli and Us*, attesting the continuity, on this point, of Althusser's reflection on the Florentine. It is well-known that Machiavelli took from Polybius the theory of the so-called anacyclosis, according to which a determinate succession of governments is repeated throughout time³⁴¹. Here, Althusser's argument parallels the one concerning anthropology. He admits that there is a 'philosophy of history' in Machiavelli, but argues that it does not ground his political theory. His attention, in fact, goes to the *suppression*, on the part of Machiavelli, of the very 'laws of history' from which the Florentine set out to think; in other words, Althusser sees in Machiavelli a real 'overcoming' of the question of the philosophy of history.

Althusser remarks that Machiavelli, even if he starts by invoking Polybius' theory, actually exposes the *abstract* character of Polybius' typology. First, because Machiavelli says explicitly that this 'infinite process' of the cycles is always interrupted by a dialectics of 'conquest' and 'struggle' that always involves other states that can invade another state etc.³⁴²; second, and more importantly, because Machiavelli's object of enquiry (in *The Prince* and in *The Discourses*) is precisely

338 PH, p. 240: 'The content [given by Machiavelli] to the empty anthropological concept of human desire has only a feeble relationship with a theory of human nature, but a strong one with the conflictual state of balance of the existing social forces. I would gladly conclude that the absence of a genetic deduction of social and political forms from a theory of human nature reveals the factitious character of Machiavelli's anthropology'.

339 PH, p. 238.

340 The idea of 'reasoning by examples' is taken up and developed, in the wake of Althusser, by F. Regnault in an article appeared in the *Cahiers pour l'Analyse*. This mode of thought is made by Regnault, and by Althusser, the veritable sign of Machiavelli's realism (or materialism), as opposed to the philosophical enquiry based on the abstraction 'man'. See F. Regnault, 'La pensée du Prince', *Cahiers pour l'Analyse*, 6, 2 (1967), available at the following url: <http://cahiers.kingston.ac.uk/pdf/cpa6.2.regnault.pdf>.

341 The reference to Polybius is to be found in N. Machiavelli, *Discorsi sopra la prima deca di Tito Livio* (Milano: BUR, 2011), I, 2, pp. 64 ff.

342 PH, p. 243.

a state that is *not* included in Polybius' typology: a new state that, combining the advantages of the other forms of government, at the same time is capable of *escaping* the dialectics of history³⁴³. What must be recognised in this (certainly cursory) reading of Machiavelli's relationship with the philosophy of history is that Althusser sees in Machiavelli a precise articulation between history and politics, which is, in reality, a non-articulation: it is rather one of 'disarticulation' and 'interruption'. By 'disarticulation' I mean that Althusser emphasises the fact that Machiavelli thinks of his new state as *not* included in the 'philosophy of history' from which he sets out. Between 'history' (of course, thought under the categories of a philosophy of history', in this case Polybius') and the political foundation of a state, Machiavelli 'excavates' a 'gap': the foundation is not included in the cycles of history. But 'interruption' is also detectable, in the sense that for Althusser the political goal of Machiavelli is to found a 'new state' capable of interrupting the cycles of history: in other words, one that is capable of annulling the dialectics of history. By this move, Althusser points out that Machiavelli suppresses any determinism, any 'necessity' governing the fate of his state, and at the same time he abandons any faith in the 'course of history' and in the sense of an abstract and necessary 'fatality':

Not unlike his anthropology, the cyclical theory of history cannot ground Machiavelli's politics unless it negates itself and its content, in order to become one and the same with the reality described by Machiavelli and his project of a New State capable of escaping, by means of its internal constitution [...] the fatality of the abstract infinity, which is then deprived of any sense and usage³⁴⁴.

These two remarks on anthropology and on the philosophy of history are not merely critical but have also a positive content, which consists of freeing Machiavelli's conceptual space from any 'origin'. Althusser's reading does not aim to

343 PH, p. 243: 'the theory of cycles is called into question by the constitution of a mixed government, which combines the advantages of the other three good governments: prince + grandees + people. How to interpret this synthesis is not as the synthesis that gives us the hope to escape to the law of the infinity [of the repetition of the cycles]'.

344 PH, p. 243.

prove that Machiavelli is the thinker of the 'autonomy of politics'³⁴⁵ in the sense of 'laws of politics' that would be valid in general. Rather, it aims to grasp his theorisation of the 'absolute beginning' of a new state without thinking it by means of an 'origin'. In other words, Althusser's interest rests, at this point, more on Machiavelli's attempt to reject to inscribe or subsume politics under an anthropology or a philosophy of history, than in the more typical understanding of Machiavelli as a thinker of the autonomy of politics from ethics or religion, although of course this latter aspect is present in Althusser's reading.

2.2 Anti-Hegelian Void

The other significant aspect of Althusser's 1962 reading is his usage of the notion of the 'void', which emerges in his analysis of Machiavelli's conception of chance (*fortuna*). We already encountered it both in Althusser's thesis on Hegel and in the essay on theatre; this course, chronologically, is placed between those two writings. It is at this point (1962, i.e. *before* the essay on theatre, where it is also present³⁴⁶) that the notion of 'void' assumes for the first time an anti-Hegelian function. In this sense, it is in this course that we find the conceptual shift that establishes the 'void' in a non-Hegelian perspective, which would remain a constant in Althusser's use of the 'void' in the subsequent years.

In order to see how Althusser deploys the notion of the 'void', we need to turn to his treatment of the Machiavellian couple 'fortune-virtue'. Initially, Althusser mobilises an Aristotelian vocabulary, namely the couple 'matter-form', to account for Machiavelli's thought. Matter is not, however, the physical matter, but rather the historical and political matter, 'circumstances and men'³⁴⁷; the task of the prince is, argues Althusser, to give 'a new form to the existing matter'³⁴⁸. Here lies, at a first level, Machiavelli's anti-utopianism:

³⁴⁵ This question is never addressed by Althusser.

³⁴⁶ Cf. *supra*, ch. 3.

³⁴⁷ PH, p. 202.

³⁴⁸ PH, p. 207.

Machiavelli's anti-utopianism is manifest in this realist preoccupation: the national unity will be established with men as they are, with the *Italian matter as it is, starting from its reality and from its chaotic diversity itself*. Not projection of a utopia upon a matter, but a search for the insertion of the political plan in the matter itself, in the existing political structures themselves³⁴⁹.

The point is not to oppose an ideal form (a Platonic idea) to an existing reality or to impose an essence, itself conceived as a 'stronger' reality, over a second-rate reality, but to start from the 'matter' as it currently is (i.e. from the '*realità effettuale della cosa*') in order to insert in it the '*plan politique*'. What interests Althusser in this 'theory of insertion', as we may call it, are two points: 1) 'the radical exteriority of the form to the matter'³⁵⁰ and 2) what is *behind* this very theory of the exteriority. For Althusser, it presupposes a certain conception of matter or, better, a certain conception of 'matter' (always in the sense of historical 'matter', as defined above) *qua* fortune. The textual place where this conception is substantiated is, for Althusser, the *revue* of principalities in the first chapter of *The Prince*. Machiavelli's analysis in this chapter is not, in fact, a simple review; on closer inspection, this review appears to be performed in order to demonstrate that, whilst the formation of a unitary state is an indispensable necessity, none of the currently existing Italian principalities is able to accomplish such a task and measure up to this necessity. What is significant is that Althusser interprets this theoretical move as Machiavelli's break with the Aristotelian (and Hegelian, at least from Althusser's perspective) concepts of matter-form as *potentia-actus*:

Matter, as a whole [*dans son ensemble*], requires a new form, but matter is in such a disorder, it is so much absence of any form, it holds so little in itself the outline, the design if this form, the central point where it could start to rise, that it is *impossible* to locate in advance in the matter *the place of the birth of the form*. The political matter Machiavelli talks about when he thinks of the Italian situation it's not even comparable with Aristotelian *potentia*, which is at the same time absence of form but aspiration for the form, and holds [...] the outline of it within itself. It is even less comparable with to the inner form that we find in the Hegelian moment of his-

349 PH, p. 207.

350 PH, p. 208.

tory (which ripens, without knowing it, the implicit form that, once the old form has been rejected, will appear in the advent of the new epoch). No: *matter is pure void of form, pure formless wait for the form. Italian matter is an empty potentia, waiting that a form be brought and imposed from outside*³⁵¹.

Matter is an 'empty *potentia*': the teleology implicit in the couple *potentia-actus* is called into question and displaced by Althusser via the notion of 'void'. The void is therefore placed, at least in this text, at a decidedly ontological level, and it is possible to define it for the moment in a negative way as an absence of teleological necessity³⁵². It is possible to object, however, that positing a break between matter and form is not a legitimate move: there is no such thing as a matter deprived of form, as there is no form without matter (not even in Aristotle, if we forget the Pure Act). But what Althusser is emphasising here is that, for Machiavelli, Italian states represent a corrupted matter, that is, a matter which is progressively losing its form, without there being, behind this form, such a thing as an aspiration to another form. No process of reconstitution is visible here; we are not in a situation analogous to the one described by Hegel at the time of Napoleon in the *Phenomenology*.

However, Althusser does not limit himself to characterise this Machiavellian ontology of the matter-fortune in a negative way. The aspect that we must not overlook is that the 'void' is not *sic et simpliciter* an absolute void. It is, instead, representative of the void of causality that is identified with the primacy of contingency. In other words, matter-fortune, as void (or devoid) of causality, marks the primacy of contingency over all the teleology of history and at the same time over any possibility of grounding the necessity of the political order bypassing the horizon of contingency. In fact, Althusser introduces here the concept of *commencement*, to be understood as the transformation of the concept of the 'origin' following its submission to the primary and fundamental horizon of contingency:

351 PH, p. 208.

352 We find the same idea in Althusser's works on Rousseau, in particular in the 1972 *Cours sur Rousseau*.

The purely negative state of general impotence of the little Italian States [...] is such that it certainly imposes the plan of national regeneration by means of the constitution of a New State, but at the same time it renders *impossible, or almost impossible, to assign to this process its point of application*, its beginning [*commencement*]. [...] Why this general review of the existing principalities [...] if not because Machiavelli is incapable of anticipating, starting from this matter, the place of birth, the beginning [*commencement*], the concrete conditions of beginning of the New Form? The necessity of a thorough inventory of the negative existing forms is nothing else than the recognition of the radical contingency of the application of the new form to the existing matter. In other words, the necessity of the new form has, as its own condition, the radical contingency of its own beginning [*commencement*] and of its own birth³⁵³.

As is clear, the negativity, of which the first part of the text speaks, does not hint at Hegel. In the following part of the passage, in fact, the concept of *commencement* is connected to its own ontology, i.e. an ontology in which the place of the 'ground' is paradoxically occupied by contingency. The 'empty matter', to use Althusser's words³⁵⁴, finds its own *positive* counterpart in the idea of the 'radical contingency of beginning'. The '*rien*' that haunts Althusser in his letter to Franca from which our analysis started must be at the same time comprehended both 1) as an absence of teleological causality and 2) as an expression that stands for the 'radical contingency of beginning'.

If the idea of a 'void of form' bars the way to any Hegelian conception of history, the very reading of Althusser, based as it is on matter and form, introduces the question of 'virtue'. Althusser's analysis of 'virtue' is, when compared to his analysis of fortune, quite short. As it is well-known, the Machiavellian conception of virtue does not have anything to do with the moral connotation that the term has in moral philosophy, or even in the (quite Aristotelian) common sense. For Machiavelli, the virtue of the prince is an utterly political capacity of pursuing his political goals. Althusser obviously recognises that Machiavelli's virtue is defined on a political level and not in a moral sense. Yet, at the same time, he seems to read the Machiavellian 'virtue' in two different ways. Talking about it, he writes:

353 PH, pp. 207- 209.

354 PH, p. 214.

to establish an order. To preserve it. A human and political necessity against the irrational. A continuity. To build a stable time and a stable political reality. To build necessity. Virtue is then the psychological-characterological required by this enterprise [...] The figure of the consciousness that corresponds to the establishment of this historical necessity [...] the voluntarism of virtue as condition of possibility of the constitution of this order of historical necessity³⁵⁵.

This reading of 'virtue' in terms of consciousness and voluntarism is quite interesting, especially if we bear in mind that Althusser always opposed any form of voluntarism, and that he always opposed also any philosophy of consciousness. But this reading is not, in reality, Althusser's last word on 'virtue'. He is interested, more than in a definition of it, in the definition of the relationship that it has with 'fortune'. In fact, this 'psychological' line of interpretation is immediately 'doubled' by another, which submits, so to speak, 'virtue' to the primacy of contingency:

at the same time that Machiavelli depicts in this way the vocation of Virtue and its task with respect to the irrational matter of Fortune [...] he feels that this Virtue, that must be the *origin* of any necessity, is itself *submitted*, in the man who must be its bearer [*porteur*], to a *radical contingency*³⁵⁶.

This passage attests quite clearly to Althusser's non-voluntarist reading of Machiavelli. What interests Althusser is not that 'virtue' is affirmed as the origin of necessity³⁵⁷, but rather the opposite: that 'virtue', qua 'origin' of necessity, is itself suspended to the contingency of fortune. It is not a 'pure' origin but rather 'impure' - a 'finite' origin, we may say. The characteristic of Althusser's reading is not just that 'virtue' must face the contingency of the situation. This is certainly included in Althusser's reading and is also something that has been recognised as Machiavelli's theoretical contribution to the development of the modern political

355 PH, p. 229.

356 PH, p. 229, my italics.

357 That is, Althusser does not appear to be interested in the fact that Machiavelli stresses the human, rather the 'cosmological' or 'providential' nature of 'necessity', as more 'humanist' readings could stress. He is interested in something else, i.e. in the 'contingency of the beginning', and in the effects of Machiavelli's way of thinking, as we shall see in the next section.

reason³⁵⁸. But this course demonstrates that Althusser, from very early on, was interested in the fact that Machiavelli conceptualises the 'appearance' of a man endowed with 'virtue', i.e. the 'new prince', *as contingent*. The end of the course shows this central point very well: 'Machiavelli', argues Althusser, 'finds himself in the impossibility to show the link between the necessity that calls for the New Prince and the radical contingency of his *surgissement*'³⁵⁹.

Before leaving the 1962 reading, it should be mentioned that Althusser, whilst certainly attracted by the idea of the 'radical contingency of the beginning', at the same time is not perhaps entirely prepared to follow it to the end. Nothing seems to confirm this ambiguous relationship more than this note (not included in the course):

Machiavelli, a blind thought [...] a consciousness without science and without theory, a phenomenological consciousness contemporaneous of the advent of a problem [...] who sees it through a sort of conceptual fog but without being capable of fixing its status³⁶⁰.

It has been argued that, at this point (i.e. in 1962), Althusser could not endorse Machiavelli's radical contingency due to his idea of a 'structural' determinism, or because of his attachment to the 'science of history' that he was at the time elaborating³⁶¹. This seems to be confirmed by the note cited above. However, this interpretation, while certainly identifying one of the tensions in Althusser's discourse during these years, is too one sided and does not recognise the conceptual space that this reading *already* opens up. In effect, much depends on the possibility of dating the referenced note, which, as I stated, is not part of the course. It is possible, even if it is hardly verifiable, that the note was written before the course and not after (as it stands in the publication in the book). Yet, as far as the question of

358 Cf. R. Esposito, *Ordine e conflitto in Machiavelli e Hobbes* (Napoli: Liguori, 1984), pp. 204-205, cit. In V. Morfino, *Il tempo e l'occasione. L'incontro Spinoza-Machiavelli* (Milano: LED, 2002), p. 158, fn. 70.

359 PH, p. 232.

360 PH, p. 254.

361 Negri, 'Machiavel selon Althusser', p. 140. I argued against the idea of a strict determinism in the Althusser of the sixties in chapter 2.

contingency is concerned, this philological issue is less important than the fact that Althusser *does* read the conception of the 'void' as absence of causality, and the idea of a radical contingent beginning, in a *positive* way; this authorises us to comment that this reading, however 'tentative' or even 'quick', is in a sense foundational with regard to the development of Althusser's relationship with Machiavelli in the seventies. It is to these developments that we shall now turn.

3. The 'Vacillation of Theory'. Machiavelli between Contingency and the Subject

The second reading of Machiavelli began in 1972, again with a course at the ENS. Althusser revised the manuscript of the course until the last years of his philosophical activity, turning into what is now published as *Machiavelli and Us*. The history of the writing of the book merits some attention. The first, and substantial, revision of the 1972 manuscript occurred in 1975-76 and primarily concerned the first chapter of the book, in which Althusser confronts the readings of Machiavelli proposed by Gramsci and Hegel, and in which *The Prince* is opposed to *The Communist Manifesto*³⁶². After the first revision, Althusser amended the text again in the eighties, mostly by adding to it the word 'aleatory', in keeping with his elaboration of aleatory materialism (with which we deal in the following chapter). However, the late additions do not change the structure of the book but can be taken as a further 'aleatory' inflection of the issue of contingency that, as we shall see, is already present in the manuscript from 1972³⁶³.

The second reading stands both in continuity with the first one and also ex-

362 I will analyse this point in detail in the last part of this chapter.

363 In this section, I will focus mainly on *Machiavelli and Us*, privileging in it what I consider the 'political' core of the materialism of politics outlined throughout it, leaving in the background the later corrections and additions that Althusser made to the main manuscript, which are homogeneous to the so called 'aleatory materialism' and date from the eighties; I will also refer to some unpublished notes that can help us clarify the main text under investigation and that tackle the same problems. The goal is to bring out the specifically political dimension of Althusser's engagement with Machiavelli in this phase. It is my conviction that this aspect is not essentially modified by the later additions, which operate as an ontological inflection that does not affect the political stakes of the text.

pands quite significantly on it. Whilst the vocabulary of contingency is again central to *Machiavelli and Us*, there are significant differences. In the first place, it is clear that Althusser has more closely examined the whole works of Machiavelli, and it is also evident that the confrontation with Gramsci's reading is one of his central preoccupations³⁶⁴. Furthermore, Althusser reads Machiavelli according to his conception of philosophy as 'class struggle in theory', that he had elaborated in the meantime, emphasising that Machiavelli, in his writings, takes the side of the 'people' in the class struggle against the 'grandeess', both in *The Prince* and in *The Discourses*³⁶⁵.

However, if Althusser is attentive to the internal political determination of Machiavelli's theory, in reality his reading *exceeds* this definition of philosophy³⁶⁶. In fact, I am tempted to suggest that Althusser, through Machiavelli, produces *another* definition of philosophy³⁶⁷, one that can be called 'philosophy of the *fait à accomplir*'. In effect, the '*fait à accomplir*' becomes, around 1972, a new term in Althusser's reading of Machiavelli, which is now placed side by side with the other term, i.e. the 'beginning'. In the 1972 course on Rousseau – returning again on the difference between Machiavelli and the theoreticians of natural law – Althusser clearly expresses the duality of his new reading:

For Machiavelli the national unity is not an accomplished fact [*fait accompli*], but a deed to be accomplished [*fait à accomplir*]³⁶⁸ [...]

364 As noticed by Negri. Cf. Negri, 'Machiavel selon Althusser', p. 155.

365 In this way, Althusser aims to end the disputes (historically numerous) about the real political status of Machiavelli's theory, i.e. whether he is monarchist or republican. For Althusser, *The Prince* and the *Discourses* must be read as dedicated to two different moment: *The Prince* regards the moment of the foundation of a new state, and the *Discourses* are instead about the duration of the state itself. In both cases, according to Althusser Machiavelli is on the side of the people, and his theory finds its centre of gravity in the idea that the 'prince' should side with the people, if he wants his state to last. MU, pp. 64-65.

366 I will not be concerned here with Althusser's reading of Machiavelli on the basis of his definition of philosophy as 'class struggle in theory'. This would be an interesting reading, but it would take me too far from the issue of contingency and beginning.

367 In addition to the two previous ones, i.e. 'theory of theoretical practice' and 'class struggle in theory'.

368 Personally I would translate it literally as 'fact to be accomplished', in order to stress its symmetrical opposition to 'accomplished fact'; but it does not seem to be acceptable in English. I will translate it as 'philosophy of the deed to be accomplished', being understood that 'deed' is always, within this phrase, '*fait*'.

Machiavelli's thought had to take upon itself, for specific political reasons, this unprecedented and radical theoretical task of thinking the conditions of possibility of the existence of what did not yet exist, i.e. of *thinking the radical beginning* [...] it follows that Machiavelli's object exists as [sur le mode de] a political objective, of a political objective [...] Machiavelli must think the deed [*fait*] to be accomplished, he must think in the deed to be accomplished, in the element of the deed to be accomplished, in the problem of the deed to be accomplished, on the one hand; and on the other, which amounts to the same, Machiavelli must think the beginning as such and must think in the beginning, in the element of beginning, in the element of the question of the beginning. Here are the two decisive terms: the deed to be accomplished and the beginning³⁶⁹.

Thus, the 'philosophy of the deed to be accomplished' can be thought of in direct opposition to what Althusser calls the 'philosophies of the accomplished fact', i.e. those philosophies that have the objective of grounding the *existing* reality in an essence or in an origin. In this passage, Althusser focuses on the theoreticians of natural law, yet this difference is far more than a historical distinction between them and Machiavelli³⁷⁰. Now what interests Althusser is not so much that Machiavelli exposes the violence of the 'primitive political accumulation' but that Machiavelli thinks '*in another element*'³⁷¹. It is interesting to note that while introducing a new term (*fait à accomplir*), in addition to the 'beginning', Althusser states that they are the same concept in Machiavelli. This points to the fact that Machiavelli thought of the task of founding of a new state precisely in terms of 'beginning' in Althusserian terms, i.e. not as something grounded in the historical reality as its *telos* but as something that is constitutively tied up with the contin-

369 L. Althusser, *Cours sur Rousseau* (Paris: Le Temps des Cerises, 2012), pp. 47-48, my emphasis. In some other notes Althusser insists on the same crucial point, that marks for him the possibility to posit politics as a thought outside the space of the State (in fact, as an abolition of the present *state of affairs*), stressing that Machiavelli 'pense un fait non-accomplì' (ALT2. A31-05.05). Badiou refers to Althusser and to the problem of thinking politics within and outside the space of the state in his *Metapolitics*, trans. J. Barker (London and New York: Verso, 2011), pp. 58-67. However, he does not refer to Althusser's study of Machiavelli.

370 As it still was in the 1962 course.

371 See for instance the following passage, taken from some notes on Machiavelli: 'he reflects on the conditions of possibility of the accomplishment of a non-accomplished deed [*fait*]. What is paradoxical is that this reflection on the non-accomplished deed [*fait*], instead of making him speak the language of right (and of philosophy), in other words, of the idealistic ideology of justification and guarantee, *forces* him to give up ideology. It allows him to 'say' directly something that resembles the 'true', unlike all the bourgeois ideologies, which only put forth allusive ideological notions (active in the immediate ideological milieu) or philosophemes'. ALT2. A31-05.05.

gency of the beginning or what Althusser has also called, in the 1962 course, the 'beginning from nothing'.

The introduction of this new point of view in the reading of Machiavelli produces capital consequences – which I will call 'vacillations' - on Althusser's philosophy. In what follows, I will concentrate on three aspects that emerge in *Machiavelli and Us*, namely, the reformulation of the relationship between theory and conjuncture, the idea of the 'gap' within theory and its relationship to the problem of the 'subject'.

3.1 First 'Vacillation': Theory and Conjuncture

At the beginning of *Machiavelli and Us*, Althusser argues that in Machiavelli there exists a 'theoretical dispositive' that completely overturns the status of 'theory' and produces what he calls a 'vacillation of theory'. Althusser begins by stressing two points. First, he maintains that Machiavelli is, as is generally admitted, a realist. That is, he thinks the 'effective truth of the thing', putting aside any 'imaginary' conception of politics³⁷². Second, and more importantly for Althusser, Machiavelli puts in place a theoretical discourse that is not concerned with the *general* concepts of politics. Rather, this discourse focuses on a specific and singular political practice that, in his case, was the political practice of the prince that could unify Italy. Althusser argues that in Machiavelli there exists

a theoretical dispositive [...] that breaks with the habits of classical rhetoric, where the universal governs the singular [...] to grasp the true character of this dispositive [...] we must jump a step: abandon a conception that brings in only theory for one that brings in practice and, since we are dealing with politics, political practice [...] through the examination of a political problem Machiavelli offers us something quite different from the examination of a theoretical problem. By that I mean that his relationship to the political problem in question is not theoretical, but political. And by political relationship I mean not a relationship of political theory, but one of political practice. For Machiavelli, it is a necessity of political

372 MU, p. 7.

practice itself that this relationship involve elements of political theory. *But it is the viewpoint of political practice alone that fixes the modality of the relationship to the elements of political theory*³⁷³.

Thus, the point that interests Althusser is that Machiavelli does not think or write of politics in general, but instead puts in place a political apprehension of reality that is dominated by a *specific* political problem. The result is that the elements of 'political theory' sustaining Machiavelli's discourse function *only* in relation to the 'viewpoint' of political practice. In what can perhaps be considered as a self-criticism (given that Althusser had written a book precisely on Montesquieu's foundation of the science of politics³⁷⁴), Althusser fleshes out this 'vacillation of theory' by referring to Montesquieu:

we then appreciate that Machiavelli is a different thinker from Montesquieu. What interests him is not 'the nature of *things* in general (Montesquieu), but, to give the expression all its force, 'la *verità effettuale della cosa*', of *the thing* in the singular – the singularity of its 'case'. *And the thing is also the cause, the task, the singular problem to be posed and resolved [...]* Yes, Machiavelli's object is knowledge of the laws of history or politics, but at the same time this is not true: for his object, which is not an object in this sense, is the formulation of a concrete political problem³⁷⁵.

This passage is crucial: it is clear that Althusser, in his reading of Machiavelli, is no longer as interested in the opposition between science and ideology as he previously was (in the so called phase of 'theoreticism'). His focus is now on the difference universal/singular: in the expression 'the effective truth of the matter', he stresses the '*cosa*', the singular thing that is at stake. It is evident (we will come back to this) that in this appreciation of Machiavelli's way of thinking, the 'vacillation of theory' is also the 'vacillation' of the discourse of 'science' as Althusser had conceptualised it in *For Marx* and *Reading Capital*, where the 'thing' in question

373 MU, pp. 16-17.

374 Cf. *supra*, ch. 1.

375 MU, p. 16, trans. mod.

was a 'real object' and not a 'thing' that is also a 'task', as in this case.

The important and, from my perspective, capital consequence of this 'shift' or 'vacillation' relates precisely to the 'knowledge' of the conjuncture, which is of course a crucial term in Althusser's work, as we saw in Chapter 2. With Machiavelli, Althusser argues that to put political practice above theory also means to change our relationship to the conjuncture, in what we may call a displacement from above to underneath, from outside the conjuncture to its inside. The following passage details the meaning of this relationship change:

to think in terms of the category of conjuncture is not to think on the conjuncture [...] to think under the conjuncture is quite literally to submit to the problem induced and imposed by its case [...] The terms must be inverted; Machiavelli does not think the problem of national unity in terms of the conjuncture; it is the conjuncture that negatively, yet objectively, poses the problem of national unity³⁷⁶.

At a first level, thus, Althusser argues that to think under the conjuncture means to submit to the *objective* problems that it poses. In the case of Machiavelli, the problem is posed negatively because Italy was not a state, and Machiavelli's problem was that Italy had to become one. This insistence on the objectivity is, however, quite delicate. It is evident that Althusser insists on it in order to avoid any subjectivism, but it seems difficult to argue that the problem of national unity was 'objective'. After all, for many people, it was not at the time, and it did not become one for long. Furthermore, to say that it is posed objectively yet 'negatively' seems to introduce precisely what Althusser had ruled out in his previous reading, i.e., the reference to a sort of objective finalism, as the conjuncture itself seems to include, within it, its own solution. However, if we refer to another passage, in which Althusser adds other elements that qualify the expression 'thinking under the conjuncture', the risk of reintroducing a sort of teleology is dismissed. In this passage, Althusser argues that, once we assume this new 'attitude of thought to the conjuncture' (to paraphrase Hegel),

376 MU, p. 18.

the conjuncture is not the mere summary of its elements, or enumeration of diverse circumstances, but their contradictory system which poses the political problem and *designates* its historical solution, ipso facto rendering it a political objective, a practical task. *Therewith, in next to no time [dans le meme instant et mouvement] the meaning of all the elements of the conjuncture changes: they become real or potential forces in the struggle for the historical objective, and their relations become relations of force.* They are assessed as relations of force, as a function [*en fonction*] of their engagement, with a view to the political objective to be attained. The whole question then becomes: in what form are all the positive forces currently available to be rallied, in order to achieve the political objective of national unity?³⁷⁷

Thus, the shift from a scientific apprehension of the conjuncture to the 'political' apprehension of the conjuncture changes the status of the elements of the conjuncture themselves: they become *forces* instead of being merely *elements*. The conjuncture itself becomes a relation of forces and a 'texture' of different conflicting forces, and the political problem becomes the form of their organisation for the achievement of the historical solution. But it does not seem that 'theory', in this case, can be considered a 'recording' of the objective, yet negative, problem posed by the conjuncture. Here Althusser is suggesting something more radical: that theory, when it becomes political, does not just 'know' but '*designates*' the solution. In other words, the shift that transforms the elements in forces is one and the same with the transformation of 'theory'. This shift from 'knowing' to 'designating' is not fully fleshed out by Althusser, but it is absolutely key to the transformation that affects theory when submitted to the point of view of political practice. For instance, in 'Contradiction and Overdetermination', where 'theory' was understood in the sense of an objective knowledge, Althusser insisted on the theme of the weakest link, described as the specific place that had to be attacked in order to produce the dismemberment of the whole. But here there is something more than the indication of the weakest link: what is at stake is the 'creation' of a way out of a historical situation. 'Designation' is something more than the act of 'showing'; it is both the creation of a solution *and* the 'gathering' of the forces necessary to attain the

³⁷⁷ MU, p. 19, trans. mod, my italics.

goal. And the idea of a 'designation', we should notice, is also central for displacing any objective teleology. The centrality that Althusser assigns to 'theory' (the very act of designating a way out) in fact breaks with the presupposition that the solution is included in the conjuncture itself. If we wanted to retrieve Althusser's terms from the sixties, we may say that the 'solution' must be conceptually constructed, and *it cannot be read directly* in the conjuncture.

3.2 Second 'Vacillation': the Gap

The questions of the designation of a 'way out' and of the vacillation of theory does not exhaust itself in the transformation of the conjuncture in a relation of forces. In the third chapter of *Machiavelli and Us*, Althusser's attention shifts to the question of the 'absolute novelty', which constitutes the other pillar of his interpretation (together with the idea of the '*fait à accomplir*'). Althusser argues that Machiavelli's discourse is, in some senses, ambiguous on this point. In fact, on the one hand,

[Machiavelli's] political objective is quite openly avowed and clear. In these circumstances it seems as if the answer should be equally simple and evident. Italy must be unified under an existing ruler; and this is Machiavelli's move at the end of *The Prince*, when he addresses Lorenzo de' Medici³⁷⁸.

But soon after, Althusser points out that, on the other hand,

this solution encounters a minor obstacle: the fact that Machiavelli [...] never stops insisting on the twin theme of the New Prince and the New Principality, on the pair of theme, as if intended to signal something essential³⁷⁹.

378 MU, p. 55.

379 MU, p. 55.

This insistence on the 'novelty' signals, according to Althusser (who departs, by insisting on this, from most of the interpretations of *The Prince* which emphasise the appeal to Lorenzo³⁸⁰) that for Machiavelli there is no solution apart from this *absolute* novelty, which is the foundation of a new state by an individual who becomes a prince. The crucial aspect about this 'novelty' is precisely that it does not stand in *any* relationship with the existing situation, i.e. with the conjuncture analysed by Machiavelli. What is paramount for Althusser is that this novelty is not thought by Machiavelli in terms of a dialectical overcoming or in terms of a 'linear genesis'³⁸¹, but in terms of a radical beginning which, as the 'beginning' that we already found in Chapter 2, is not itself contained in what comes before it³⁸². Between the 'novelty' and the 'beginning' on the one hand (but the two terms have the same valence in Althusser) and the given state of affairs on the other, there is precisely a hiatus, or a leap, which Althusser reads in terms of 'void':

the problem of *The Prince* is [...] the problem of beginnings [*commencement*]. The question that has forever haunted philosophy, and always will – with what should one begin? – Machiavelli replies quite non-philosophically, but with theses not lacking in philosophical resonance: one should begin with the beginning. *The beginning is ultimately nothing* [*rien*]. [...] Not nothingness [*néant*], but the void [*vide*]³⁸³.

The terminology used by Althusser in this case – especially the terminology that he does not want to use – is important. '*Néant*' is in fact the term that Sartre used to mean consciousness, and it is precisely this 'subjectivist' meaning that Althusser intends to reject. Besides, this meaning of 'void' is also very close to Althusser's

380 This point distinguishes Althusser's reading from Gramsci's. We will return to this.

381 These expressions are not present in the text, but it is evident that they constitute the polemic background of Althusser's interest in Machiavelli.

382 It is important to note that the question of the 'beginning' exceeds, as it were, the historical or even historicist reading of Machiavelli. It is not, in other words, that Althusser registers that for Machiavelli 'it happened' that there was no solution 'around' in his specific circumstance. It might well be that this was the case, but for Althusser this circumstance has a more important philosophical value, insofar as it is a break with an apprehension of history dominated by teleological categories, and in particular – needless to say – with the Hegelian dialectics.

383 MU, pp. 67-68.

reading of the relationship between void and consciousness in the young Hegel, from which Hegel (in Althusser's reading) drew the idea of a teleological dialectics going from void to plenitude³⁸⁴. So, Althusser takes care to distance himself (quite indirectly, it should be admitted) from any dialectical conception of the void, be it Sartrean or Hegelian³⁸⁵.

In fact, this void mentioned at the end of the passage is nothing other than the 'void' that we encountered already in the 1962 course. As such, it must be read in terms of a 'void' of *objective* causality³⁸⁶, which is now related by Althusser to the fact that Machiavelli rules out, in his analysis of the Italian conjuncture of his time, all the *present* 'forces', i.e. all the existing principalities, judging them inadequate for the political task of unifying Italy. The innovation with respect to the first reading in 1962 is, however, that Althusser focuses more forcefully on the tension established, in Machiavelli's theory, between the 'necessity' of a solution and the 'void' of causality. Althusser indeed emphasises that there is a historical necessity, in Machiavelli's analysis, to resolve a 'contradictory situation'. As we have seen above, Machiavelli's 'case' is imposed objectively by his conjuncture³⁸⁷. Now, if Machiavelli starts from 'nothing', it is precisely because for Althusser he assumes to the end this absence of causal or logical relationship between the 'novelty' which would 'resolve' the present contradiction, and the contradiction itself. In other words, the 'deed to be accomplished' exists as a 'novelty', or as a 'beginning', in Machiavelli *precisely because* Machiavelli breaks with the causal and logical links between the 'before' and the 'after', between the contradiction and its 'supersession'.

Now, the logical space of this 'causal' link is taken up by Machiavelli's theory of the 'encounter' (Althusser's word) between fortune and virtue, i.e. between a 'propitious conjuncture' and a 'virtuoso individual'. Althusser's reading of Ma-

384 Cf. *supra*, chapter 1.

385 Of course, I mean here according to Althusser's reading of Hegel especially in his master's thesis. Cf. chapter 1.

386 Cf. also L. Althusser, 'II. Machiavel', *Lignes*, 18: 1 (1993), p. 104.

387 But it is only the contradiction, or the historical impasse, to be objective: the solution is not objective in the same sense, as it is not contained in the conjuncture, it is not in the process of 'being born' from the ruins of the present conjuncture itself, but it is only designated by 'theory'.

chiavelli's concept of 'occasione', which defines precisely the 'good moment' that a certain individual needs to 'seize' in order to accomplish a task, is evidently connected with what we already noted about the 'encounter' in Chapter 2, where a new structure was said to 'take hold' following a non predetermined 'encounter' between different 'elements'. It is precisely this theory of the 'encounter' between a conjuncture and an individual which 'represents' conceptually the 'void' of causality which is radically assumed by Machiavelli, because this theory of the encounter has as its 'ground' a radical contingency: it can happen and it can also not happen. Needless to say, Althusser reads this theory of encounter, which is not elaborated as such by Machiavelli, as the rejection of any presupposition or the radical rejection of the 'origin'³⁸⁸.

The counterpart to the assumption of the 'beginning from the void' is found by Althusser in the fact that Machiavelli, in the text of *The Prince*, refrains from assigning a name to the new prince, and to locate geographically the place from which he will start. It is here that Althusser individuates the other consequence of Machiavelli's dispositive, i.e. the effect of thinking the 'deed to be accomplished' under the primacy of contingency, or, which amounts to the same, as a 'beginning'. In fact, Althusser reads Machiavelli's choice to leave the precise coordinates of the decisive 'encounter' unspecified as *the point where politics appears* within the text itself:

Here we have the crucial point of this theory, where politics appears in person: in the form of a *determinate absence*. Formally, the theory is presented as an absolutely general theory, a theory of the fortuna/virtù encounter, and the variations of correspondance/non-correspondance between its terms: an abstract theory. This abstract generality can be seen in the fact that if Machiavelli defines the two terms fortuna and virtù, and the law of their corresponding and non-corresponding encounter, he leaves the names of the protagonists in this encounter completely blank; he provides them with no identity. The geographical space where the encounter is to occur and the individual who is to encounter fortuna there, have no

388 Later on, returning on the encounter between fortune and virtue, Althusser argues that the encounter must be conceived as a pure 'result' without cause, but in almost every note taken on Machiavelli between the seventies and the eighties Althusser stresses the rejection of the 'origin', and its replacement with the 'beginning' as what can and cannot be, in other words as a contingent event. Althusser, 'II. Machiavel', p. 105.

name: by definition they are unknown. Not unknown like the unknown quantities of an equation, x, y , where it suffices to solve the equation to know [sic]. They are absolute unknowns because Machiavelli says nothing about them. [...] But at the same time he puts in place *the protocols and forms for the encounter between a propitious conjuncture and a virtuoso individual*: an encounter that is possible and necessary.[...] It means that this encounter will occur, but outside existing states and rulers; hence somewhere in Italy, in a bit of Italy that cannot be an existing state³⁸⁹.

On the basis of what we have seen above (the first vacillation), the effect of the primacy of the political point of view on theory was a transformation of the conjuncture in a relation of forces and an overturning of the classical dominance of the universal over the singular. Now, in this passage, the question is another: it has to do with the localization/non-localization of the encounter, i.e. with the relationship between 'theory' and politics. We should be very careful here: what Althusser is saying is not that the names of the place and of the person *are* left blank by Machiavelli, but rather that they *must be left blank*. The real point here is that, for Althusser, this condition is a crucial condition for 'theory' in its relationship with the 'beginning'/'encounter', and not merely an empirical one. Here we should point out two things: first, that Althusser basically overturns the conclusion that a more straightforward reading of *The Prince* could draw, i.e., for example, that Machiavelli recognises the impossibility of the solution, appealing to a prince that may (or may not) come one day, though no-one knows when; second, that he also reverses his own idea, expressed in the note included earlier regarding Machiavelli's incapacity to locate the place of the 'beginning' due to a lack of a 'science of history'. Now, this 'incapacity' is not assessed as a weakness, but as a precise choice on Machiavelli's part. But the question, at this point, is the following: why does Althusser consider it an essential condition for this 'theory'? The reason is that only in this way, i.e. in the very renunciation to think of it completely, the 'real novelty' qua novelty can be 'thought'. As Althusser writes,

this thinking of the disjuncture [*écart*] stems from the fact that Machiavelli not only formulates, but thinks, his problem politically,

389 MU, p. 76-77.

that is to say, as a contradiction in reality that cannot be removed by thought but only by reality. It can be removed only by the sudden appearance, necessary but unforeseeable and inascribable [...] of the concrete forms of the political encounter whose general conditions alone are defined. In this theory that ponders and preserves this discrepancy [*décalage*], room is thereby made for political practice [...] by the discrepancy *between the definite and indefinite, the necessary and the unforeseeable*. This discrepancy thought and unresolved by thought is the presence of history and political practice in theory itself³⁹⁰.

And in another unpublished note, Althusser is even more explicit about the fact that this is an essential condition:

the refusal to close the gap [*écart*] in thought is the recognition of the *necessary role of concrete and unpredictable invention of history*, the recognition that solely the history of political practice can resolve this 'contradiction', close this gap³⁹¹.

In this second note, we can see quite clearly the connection (absent in Machiavelli) between contradiction and contingency. The *construction* of the conjuncture as a relation of forces, or as a 'contradiction', *cannot* lead to the closing of the gap because this would mean, for Althusser, to resolve in theory, i.e. idealistically, the contradiction itself. The 'gap' is crucial precisely because it means the refusal of any 'laws of history' or, as we could say by referring to Althusser's own formulations, the recognition of the 'necessity of contingency' that no theory can fully anticipate. Contingency is necessary precisely because the solution is not included in the contradiction, because there must be an 'encounter' that brings about a new beginning.

390 MU, p. 80, my emphasis.

391 ALT2. A31-05.05, my emphasis.

3.3 Third 'Vacillation': the Subject.

In many ways, this reading of Machiavelli echoes what we have seen in Chapter 2 about the 'beginning' and the theory of the encounter. The terms by which Althusser conceptualises the 'beginning' here are basically the same: the 'encounter', in both cases, has a fundamentally anti-teleological valence and breaks with a classical model of mechanical or expressive causality by introducing a constitutive role for contingency. There are, however, differences. To begin with, we should note that, through Machiavelli, the contingency of the encounter has been pushed to its limits, while also introducing what we did not find in the letters to Diakine: terms such as '*rien*' (beginning from nothing) and 'void' are given central importance. Yet we had already stressed, when we referred to Althusser's reading of Rousseau in 1965-1966, that the 'encounter' of the letters to Diakine paralleled with the notion of 'accident' in Rousseau, which established the primacy of contingency over necessity³⁹². The main difference between the theory that Althusser sketched in 1966 is, however, the point of application: now the 'vocabulary of contingency' has been redeployed in a political dimension.

Now, this political shift is responsible for what we can call a 'third' point of vacillation in Althusser's discourse, which revolves around the question of the 'subject'. We have seen in the previous chapter that 'subject' is a concept that concerns 'ideology' and that the 'subject' is produced by an interpellation which has a precise structure. In *Machiavelli and Us*, the question of the subject returns in Althusser's discourse as an effect of the 'vacillation' of theory that we have seen so far.

We should note, in fact, that in this book, Althusser consistently uses the word 'subject' when he talks about the 'prince', who is always said to be the subject of the political practice³⁹³. In light of Althusser's previous philosophy, the very use of the word 'subject' is quite striking; what is perhaps even more striking is

392 Cf. *supra*, ch. 2.

393 Cf. among others, MU, pp. 22, 24, 26, 80.

that Althusser never problematises this concept on the basis of his previous formulations³⁹⁴. However, it seems evident that there is a new orientation in Althusser's philosophy. In fact, not only does Althusser apply it here, in the context of his study of Machiavelli; but he uses the concept 'subject' also in the context of his first substantive introduction of the materialism of Epicurus, which occurred in the same years in which he was revising the manuscript of *Machiavelli and Us* (in 1976, when the revision is focussed on the passages in which the subject figures prominently³⁹⁵). In a passage from the recently published *Être Marxistes en Philosophie*³⁹⁶, Althusser writes:

according to Epicurus, it is the deviation, the swerve, which is at the beginning of the world. The deviation and not the rule (*norme*): a thought which represents a radical critique of every rule, logical, moral, juridical, political or religious, which wipes out the theatre of the world of all these prejudices, and let things happen according to the necessity of the deviation and the aggregation [...] *the central point of this theory [...] is the encounter*, which is developed concept of contingency [...] what I mean is that, with his thesis of deviation-encounter-hold, Epicurus has given us the means by which to understand precisely what the idealists aimed to understand, and failed to: *that is, the irruption [surgissement] of a subject, him and not another*³⁹⁷.

The passage is quite significant, above all if we consider that later on the materialism of Epicurus will be used by Althusser as an '*assiette*' for a new 'philosophy for Marxism' without any reference to the question of the 'subject'³⁹⁸. Here, on the contrary, Althusser not only states that the materialism of Epicurus is concerned with the beginning of a new subject; he also claims that the question of the subject can only be 'resolved' by materialism. Now, it is highly plausible that this emphasis is on the relationship between contingency/encounter/beginning *and* the subject is motivated by the contemporaneous revision of the manuscript on Machiavelli; but

394 See *infra*.

395 I.e. in the first chapter of MU.

396 L. Althusser, *Être Marxistes en Philosophie*, ed. G.M. Goshgarian (Paris: PUF, 2015), written 1976-1978.

397 Althusser, *Être Marxistes en Philosophie*, p. 239, my emphasis.

398 Cf. *infra*, chapter 5.

it is at the same time also clear that at this point of his reflection Althusser sees the materialism of contingency as a possible way to re-conceptualise the subject.

Yet, in *Machiavelli and Us*, Epicurus is never mentioned, and Althusser is in reality recognisably ambiguous with the term 'subject'. His uncertainty is detectable when he relates the 'subject' with the 'vacillation of theory', as the following crucial passage shows:

The space of pure theory, assuming that it exists, contrasts with the space of political practice [that of Machiavelli]. To sum up this difference, it might very schematically be said, in terms that should be transformed, that the first -theoretical – space has no subject (the truth is valid for any and every subject); whereas the second possesses meaning only *via its possible or requisite subject*. [...] Leaving aside the ambiguous term *subject*, which it would be advisable to replace by term *agent*, let us say that the present space of an analysis of the political conjuncture, in its very texture [*contexture*], comprising opposed and intermingled forces, *makes sense only if it arranges or contains [ménage ou contient] a certain place, a certain empty place [un certain lieu vide]: empty in order to be filled, empty so as to have inserted in it the action of the individual or group who will come and take a stand there [....] empty [vide] for the future*. I say empty, though it is always occupied. I say empty, to mark the vacillation of *theory* at this point. Because it is necessary for this place to be filled³⁹⁹.

This passage is striking in many ways. First of all, let us note that it is located in the first chapter, which is exactly the one heavily reworked in 1975-76. Furthermore, let us note that Althusser here ties together the idea of the conjuncture as a relation of forces and the idea that 'theory' now has to arrange a 'void' that must be filled by a subject. This idea corresponds with what we have addressed earlier: the fact that theory has to designate a 'way out' of the conjuncture. Now, Althusser argues that this 'way out' appears precisely *within theory in the form of a 'void'*. In what sense is it a void, and what does Althusser mean by 'void'? It is clear that the 'void' here is *theoretical*. It is not the type of void that we found in the previous course, where it was a question of a (ontological) 'void' of causality. But the two 'voids' are clearly related: the theoretical void is the 'gap' that we have seen in the

399 MU, p. 20, my emphasis.

previous section, and it is the counterpart of the void of causality.

The question that is raised by this passage, however, concerns Althusser's view that this theoretical void regards the subject. If we consider the passage regarding Epicurus (written around the same time), we could conclude that the subject of which Althusser speaks is the subject that 'irrupts' and whose irruption is recognised by theory precisely by the 'gap' that it arranges. The problem is that this reading leaves aside the fact that Althusser himself is absolutely uncertain as to the status of this 'subject': he writes 'subject', then 'agent' and then 'individual' and 'group of individuals'. It is as if, at this point and by this very uncertainty, Althusser was trying (to paraphrase Althusser himself) to signal something essential.

This uncertainty as to the status of the 'subject' can be tackled from a different angle, which brings us to another question related to Althusser's idea that the 'gap' is an essential precondition of this new theoretical discourse that he discovers in Machiavelli. The question that we should ask, in fact, is: is this theory still *theoretical*, or is it not? It must be admitted that Althusser does not help us to resolve this problem: all that he says is that there is a vacillation of theory, which remains, after all, a *negative* definition. Yet it is unquestionable that, if we look at it from the point of view of the subject, it is not theoretical in the sense in which a science is, as it involves a subject. In the quotation that we have seen above (at the end of the previous section), Althusser offers perhaps a hint to resolve, or at least clarify, this point. There, he argued that, in Machiavelli's discourse, politics appear *in person*, but in the form of a determinate *absence*. What he means is clear: the political beginning of a new state and a new prince, i.e. the activation of a political process with a political subject (Althusser is clear all along the text that the prince is a subject), appears as an absence, as a blank, at the centre of Machiavelli's discourse; and we have seen that this blank, or gap, is to be related to the 'necessity of contingency', as the space of the unpredictability of the 'encounter'. But the way in which Althusser phrases his argument can make us think of another place (and time), where almost the same words were used. The crucial expression to which I

am referring is 'politics appears *in person*, in the form of a determinate *absence*'⁴⁰⁰. Now, in the theory of discourses elaborated in 1966, Althusser had defined ideology as that discourse in which the central signifier 'is present in person' and organises the discourse around itself as a centre⁴⁰¹. Here, in the case of Machiavelli's *The Prince*, the situation is formally the same: the discourse is organised around a centre, but with the crucial difference that in it the 'centre' is empty. It would be tempting to say that the blank that the 'prince' (which is general, not specified) is, or functions here as an empty signifier. This would mean that the 'discourse' of *The Prince* (or, more generally, of a theory that is submitted to a vacillation of this type) has a structure that is formally equivalent to that of ideological discourse; formally, it is an ideological discourse. But the important part of this analogy is not what brings the two discourses close to one another; rather, it is their difference: the fact that, in the case of this Machiavellian 'theory', the signifier is empty. As we know, according to Althusser's theory of ideology, the individual is always-already subject and always-already interpellated. But in this case we are in a different situation: this signifier (the new prince), in Althusser's interpretation, is empty, because nobody 'recognised' himself in it, yet *there must be 'someone'* who 'takes a stand', i.e. who 'recognises' him/herself in it. As such, the difference between this empty signifier and the central signifier of the ideological discourse is that this empty signifier, precisely because it is empty, inserts, so to speak, or 'creates', a new 'place' to be occupied; and, more to the point, it inserts an 'empty place' that can disrupt the play of the recognition(s) that always-already constitutes the 'subject' through the operation of the interpellation, as in Machiavelli's case the new prince is the 'subject' that can found a new state, and bring about a revolution of the present state of affairs.

This projection of a theory elaborated in an entirely different context by Althusser and some of his collaborators on the text of *Machiavelli and Us* may seem quite arbitrary, but it is not. Not only because Althusser brings in the discussion, in the very first part of the book, the forms of 'writing' of Machiavelli (i.e. a

⁴⁰⁰ Determinate, because Machiavelli outlines very precise protocols for the new prince: how he should behave, what he should do, etc. But an absence, because in the discourse himself it is a blank.

⁴⁰¹ See *supra*, chapter 3.

discourse), but also because (as we shall see in a moment) he uses, in a different place and almost *en passant*, the concept of 'interpellation'. In a sense, this conceptual difficulty regarding the subject is the same with the problem of the status of this discourse. This discourse seems to remain, so to speak, in between a theory and an ideology. Like theory, it has no subject, but like the ideological discourse, it is organised in such a way that it entails a subject. What is significant in this clearly unresolved question concerning the status of the discourse and the status of the subject is that it is the very relationship between politics and the 'subject' that is at stake. In the next sub-section, I will try to further follow this path by reading Althusser's confrontation with Gramsci about the double viewpoint inscribed in *The Prince* as the place where we can find Althusser's theory of the political subjectivation. I will return then to the question of contingency, from the new point of view gained through this new perspective.

3.3.1 The Prince as a Manifesto

In the first chapter of the book, Althusser insists on a question that constitutes what he considers one of the main difficulties of *The Prince*. This difficulty regards the duplicity of the point of view that is inscribed in the text:

what is quite remarkable is that the place fixed upon by Machiavelli for his text, the place of his viewpoint, is not the Prince, who is nevertheless determined as the 'subject' of political practice, but the people⁴⁰².

The pages of the first chapter of the *Machiavelli and Us* about this duplicity of the

402 MU, p. 24. This duplicity of the viewpoint is responsible, according to Althusser, for the different interpretations of Machiavelli as a monarchist or as a republican. But Althusser's interest is not in engaging with such interpretations; as we said, for Althusser Machiavelli takes side with the people: he is not interested in *any* prince, but in the prince that is good for the people, because only in this way can a state last (and the national unity be stable).

point of view are amongst the most intricate of the entire book. It is not immediately clear how Althusser judges this double viewpoint; only it is clear that according to him there exists objectively an internal distance between the political point of view (the people) of *The Prince* and the place of political practice (the prince). This question refers also to the quite classical problem in Machiavelli's scholarship, i.e. whether he is republican or not. Althusser's interpretation, as we already suggested, is that Machiavelli definitely sides with the people, and that in the aftermath of the 'beginning' the new prince can only hope to establish a lasting state if he supports the 'people' against the 'grandi'. However, this is not the level at which Althusser tackles the problem in the first chapter. The questions that we need to address are the following: is this, for Althusser, a limit of Machiavelli's thought? Or is it rather a strength? And what is the relationship between this duplicity and the problem of the subject?

To address this problem, we need to turn to Althusser's comparison between *The Prince* and *The Communist Manifesto*. In fact, in the introduction, Althusser argues that *The Prince* can be considered as a manifesto⁴⁰³, that is, as a text that consciously assume a specific political (being a political manifesto) viewpoint. The problem of this manifesto is, precisely, the fact that it has inscribed in it the double viewpoint of which we just talked about. Althusser registers this para-

403 Recently, T. Negri has remarked that this double point of view (that he takes from Althusser) constitutes the absolute limit of Machiavelli. Negri argues that *The Prince* is, like the *The Communist Manifesto*, a manifesto that puts in place a 'materialist teleology': 'The manifestos of Machiavelli and Marx-Engels define the political as the movement of the multitude and they define the goal as the self-production of the subject. Here we have a materialist teleology. [...] in the Machiavellian project there is an ineluctable distance between the subject (the multitude) and the object (the Prince and the free state) [...] Althusser recognizes finally that both texts effectively bring the theoretical proposal to the level of praxis; both assume the present as empty for the future, "vide pour le futur" (p. 62), and in this open space they establish an immanent act of the subject that constitutes a new position of being', M. Hardt and T. Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 2000), pp. 63-64. As a reading of Althusser's Machiavelli, Negri's passage is rather problematic. Negri overlooks the role of the contingency of the constitution of the subject. What Negri does, however, is to bring to light the problem of the distance that surely lies at the heart of the Machiavellian project, in which the prince is not the people, but in order to last has to put in place a popular politics. But as far as Althusser is concerned, this problem of the distance does not constitute a specific political problem, and as such is never discussed. That is, Althusser does not talk about the possible limitations of Machiavelli's idea of state for a specific communist politics, and this constitutes certainly a limitation of his reading. However, it seems to me that the fact that Althusser does not talk about this attests that in this 'distance', or duplicity of the point of view, he finds rather something positive, what we might call the consequence of a non-historicist articulation of politics and history. -

dox:

this manifesto, which seems to have for its sole interlocutor a future individual, an individual who does not yet exist, is in fact addressed to the mass of the common people. A manifesto is not written for an individual, especially a non-existent individual: it is always addressed to the masses, in order to organize them into a revolutionary force⁴⁰⁴.

Althusser seems, at this point, to follow Gramsci. It was Gramsci, in fact, who first argued that *The Prince* should be interpreted as a manifesto⁴⁰⁵. But Gramsci, as Althusser recognises, also argued that it is also a *utopian* manifesto, for two reasons. The first reason is because Machiavelli thought that the situation was objectively revolutionary, whereas history effectively demonstrated quite well that it was not (to be sure, this is not a good reason: it could have been a mistaken theory...). The second reason is more important: Gramsci argues that the utopian element of *The Prince* lies in that Machiavelli attributed the task of accomplishing the constitution of the national-popular state⁴⁰⁶ to an external person, and not to the people themselves, as instead *The Communist Manifesto* did. As Althusser writes, the latter 'speaks a very different language...'⁴⁰⁷.

The fact is that even if Althusser seems to follow Gramsci on this point, in reality his argument as a whole moves precisely in an opposite direction⁴⁰⁸. In fact, as we saw in the previous sections, Althusser insists that from Machiavelli's dispositive we can draw a vacillation of theory and not a utopia (which is always, more or less openly, an ideological compensation). But the fact that Althusser con-

404 MU, p. 25.

405 A. Gramsci, *Note su Machiavelli* (Roma: Editori Riuniti, 1996), pp. 3-4.

406 Cf. MU, pp. 27-28 for the passage in which Althusser refers to this part of Gramsci's argument.

407 MU, p. 28.

408 Cf. V. Morfino, 'History as a permanent revocation of the accomplished fact', in *Encountering Althusser*, ed. K. Diefenbach et al. (London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2013), p. 69. Cf. also M. Lahtinen's reading of Althusser's remarks on the utopian character of Machiavelli's text, in M. Lahtinen, *Politics and Philosophy*, pp. 136-139. Lahtinen's reading stops halfway, so to speak, arguing that Althusser follows Gramsci. This is true, perhaps, at the level of the *littera* of the text, but not in the substance.

siders this duplicity absolutely paramount – and not a limit – emerges through his comparison between *The Prince* and *The Communist Manifesto*. Referring to the latter, Althusser stresses that in the text of *The Communist Manifesto*, the point of view of the political practice and the point of view of politics are one and the same: the point of view of the proletariat⁴⁰⁹. Now, the point that we should not miss is that the central question that interests Althusser in this (perhaps too brief, but brilliant) comparison, effectuated through a detour via Gramsci, is not the Gramscian opposition 'utopia/non-utopia'; it is, instead, *the question of the subject*. It is on this issue that Althusser opposes the two manifestos. On the one hand, in *The Communist Manifesto*, argues Althusser, the proletariat is conceived as a 'subject' of history and figures (consequently) in the theoretical discourse 'in presence', whereas in Machiavelli, as Althusser points out, the people is not a subject: 'history must be made by the Prince from the point of view of the people, but the people is not yet "the subject" of history'⁴¹⁰. What is central is the fact that Machiavelli, by establishing an irreducible distance between the prince and the people, refuses (in Althusser's reading) the very idea that the people can become the subject of history. When Althusser writes that for Machiavelli the people is not 'yet' the subject of history, we need to read this 'yet' neither in a temporal sense, not in a defective sense; but in a logical, and for Althusser positive, sense. It seems clear that, for Althusser, the duplicity of the point of view is the mark of the refusal to conflate history and politics together, precisely in the way in which *The Communist Manifesto* does. Now, if we bear in mind that to Althusser the mark of the ideological discourse is exactly the presence, in the discourse, of the subject 'in person'⁴¹¹, the conclusion that we should draw here is that Althusser is actually overturning Gramsci's discourse: it is *The Communist Manifesto* that is ideological, or also a utopia, but for a reason that is different from Gramsci's argument against *The Prince*; that is, for the conflation of history and politics, or in what we can call the 'suturing' of politics to history.

More to the point, it seems to me that we should interpret Althusser's ap-

409 MU, pp. 26-27.

410 MU, p. 27.

411 Cf. *supra*, chapter 3.

preciation of the double viewpoint in *The Prince* as the necessity, for Althusser, to maintain the separation between politics and history. Now, is not this separation precisely the counterpart of the idea of the inscription of a void within theory? If, in fact, the two places were one and the same, how could it be a matter of *arranging a void in theory*? There would be, instead, no void to be occupied; there would only be the *indication* of a subject 'already there', tasked to bring about the new principality (or, in the case of the proletariat, communism). It would not be a question of the 'contingent' constitution of a subject precisely because the subject is already there, in the conjuncture itself, as the proletariat qua socio-historical entity is already present as a political subject.

It is at this point that another side of Althusser's discourse seems to interfere with his own insistence on the absolute contingency of the 'encounter' between a propitious conjuncture and a virtuoso individual. We have seen, in fact, that Althusser argues that the place of political practice in Machiavelli's theory, the prince, is blank because the encounter is contingent. In the first chapter, Althusser re-asserts this idea forcefully, when he says that the prince is for Machiavelli 'a pure aleatory possibility-impossibility'⁴¹². Yet, at the same time, Althusser stresses what we may well call the subjective conditions of the encounter, represented by the fact that *The Prince*, as a manifesto, is written *for* the people: it is 'always addressed to the masses, in order to organize them into a revolutionary force'⁴¹³. This connects with the passage in which the subject was introduced, where Althusser added that the 'void' is there *for* a subject, an individual or a group of individuals 'to take a stand in it'. Althusser here introduces the idea that the dispositive of Machiavelli, and by extension of a theory that assumes a political perspective in the way that we have discussed so far, *interpellates* individuals and invite them to occupy the empty place that itself designates. Machiavelli's text, writes Althusser,

is gripping [*saisissant*] because – as much as any writing can – his text practically, politically, implicates and involves us. He *interpellates* us from a place that he summons us to occupy, as potential [possible] 'subject' (agents) of a potential [possible] political prac-

412 MU, p. 26. 'Aleatory' is a late addendum (which does not change the meaning of the phrase).

413 MU, p. 25.

tice. This effect of captivation [*saisissement*] and *interpellation* is produced by the shattering of the traditional theoretical text, by the sudden appearance of the political problem as a problem, and of the political practice in it as a practice⁴¹⁴.

The use of the concept of interpellation is capital and, at the same time, problematic. As in the case of the ambiguous usage of subject, individual or group of individuals, Althusser uses 'interpellation' without relating it to his previous conceptualisation of ideology. The two things are, quite evidently, connected, and attest to the theoretical qualms of Althusser concerning the concept of subject. Yet, it is clear that here that Althusser is not referring to the interpellation of individuals as subjects in terms of a 'reproductive' interpellation emitted by the ideological state apparatuses. Even less, he is speaking about 'subject' in negative terms. On the contrary, this subject is what is required in order to activate the political practice. The question that we might ask, at this point, is the following: is not Althusser arguing that this is a 'political interpellation'? The passage seems to be clear about it: the interpellation in question here has to do with *becoming a subject of a possible political practice*. From this point of view, the duplicity of the point of view between the people and the prince can be interpreted as the equivalent of becoming a political subject, by occupying the 'void': in Machiavelli's theory, the place of the prince. For Althusser, this duplicity is the opposite of a utopia: on the contrary, it is the correlated, within theory, of the 'political subjectivation', of the answer to a political interpellation in which an individual does not initially recognise himself. In other words, the distance between the people and the prince 'represents' within theory the space that must be 'crossed' to become a political subject.

But now this question arises: is this occupation of an empty place an act of decision on the part of the subject? Even if Althusser does not use the term, the passages that we have seen so far suggest that it is ('taking a stand'; '*prendre position*' is very similar to making a decision for something rather than for something else). This implies that the 'subject', for Althusser, is not fully constituted and without any 'freedom'; otherwise, it would be impossible for it to occupy the empty place. Such a conclusion is, let us note, in line with of our reading of the in-

414 MU, p. 32.

terpellation in Chapter 3, where we sought to disentangle the interpellation from a reading that placed it in the realm of the unconscious, and where we saw that the subject can 'decide' (Althusser used the verb '*se débrouiller*'⁴¹⁵) between the many interpellations that constitute him not as a subject, but as subjects⁴¹⁶. Therefore, it seems that Althusser is arguing that the process of 'constitution' of the political subject depends on the decision of occupying the void designated by theory. But what Althusser does not fully conceptualise is precisely what happens, on the part of the subject, in this process of filling the empty space. Is it a break with the previous interpellations? It is tempting, at this point, to refer to what Althusser stated about the transformation of the subject into an actor in his article on Bertolazzi and Brecht. There, the process of constitution of the actor was premised about a rupture with one's interpellation, which Althusser described precisely as a 'beginning'. In the case of Nina, she was 'for us' a 'rupture and a beginning', which corresponded to the emptying out of the subject, to the rupture with the *specific* subject that she was (in that case, a subject that lived under the mystification of the bourgeois ideology). In the spectator, the rupture followed Nina's rupture but also exceeded it, in the sense that it had consequences on real life. Now, here we would have the same process. The occupation of a space on the part of the subject corresponds *precisely* to his transformation from a subject to another subject, on the part of the same individual. It is, in other words, a process of 'subjectivation', as what is at stake is the passage from being a certain type of subject, historically determined by its class provenance and other factors to another type of subject, i.e. a political subject, defined only by the 'task'⁴¹⁷.

This aspect of Althusser's relationship to Machiavelli, as is evident, exceeds a reading of the Florentine, where of course the very problem of the 'subject' is totally absent, for evident historical reasons. But this aspect is also what distinguishes Althusser's reading from Gramsci's. The crucial difference is that whereas Gramsci sees in the externality of the prince to the people the mark of the utopia, Althusser reads in it the very correlate, so to speak, within theory, of the operation

415 Cf. *supra*, ch. 3.

416 We referred to this by the concept of overinterpellation.

417 MU, p. 26.

of the transformation of the subject, i.e. the subjective conditions of the beginning of a new political process. It is for this latter reason that Althusser insists on the fact that in Machiavelli we can find a '*mise-en-scène*' of politics⁴¹⁸: not only because he describes politics in the making (certainly he does that), but also a *mise-en-scène* because his writing brings to light, and inscribes in itself, the subjective conditions of the activation of the political practice, by introducing the 'gap' and leaving it open. In this sense, Machiavelli does not describe, but shows objectively, for Althusser, the necessary transformation of the subject (which is not the case with *The Communist Manifesto*).

At this point, we should return to the issue of contingency. There seems to appear, at this point of Althusser's reflection, a certain tension. Our reading of the interpellation as the subjective moment of the constitution of a political subject in fact seems to contradict the other idea that we found in Althusser, and that is most forcefully expressed in the passage about Epicurus quoted above. The political subjectivation is not contingent in the sense of an objective contingency: it is a decision. Certainly, we can say that a decision is a choice which is 'contingent'. But Althusser uses the word contingency, in his reading of Machiavelli, always only in an objective sense, relying on Machiavelli's objective conception of contingency, which he constantly stresses. The point is that the 'void' or 'gap' seems to function on two levels. It functions at the ontological level, as the indication of the 'necessity of contingency' and as the impossibility to locate (by means of a science, for instance) the specific place and time of the encounter between a propitious conjuncture and a virtuoso individual. But at the same time, it also functions at a subjective level, as what we may call the 'interpellating void'. These two meanings are not carefully distinguished by Althusser, but they are objectively inscribed in his reading of Machiavelli. The point is that insofar as 'theory' (in this new form) inscribes in itself a 'gap', at the same time it also brings to the fore that the contingency of the beginning has a necessary, yet not sufficient, condition: that this place, designated by it, *is occupied through a subjective act*. For Althusser, the decision of occupying the empty space is not the only condition of a 'beginning', and it is in the insistence on the objective side (the propitious conjuncture) that his

418 ALT2. A31-05.05.

reading is not voluntaristic. It is never only a matter of pure decision: it is an encounter between a *propitious* conjuncture and a 'subject'. In this sense, the 'beginning' of a new state, or of a revolutionary process, requires both subjective and objective conditions.

The question, however, that Althusser seems to overlook is how separate or connected these two sides, the objective and the subjective, are. In fact, Althusser's insistence on the sudden appearance of a new prince (especially in chapter III of *Machiavelli and Us*), which involves the encounter between a virtuous individual and a propitious conjuncture, seems to be almost contradicted by his insistence on the occupation of the empty place (in chapter I). This contradiction, or at least tension, comes from the fact that Althusser does not relate the two sides, the objective and the subjective, from the fact that he does not fully articulate them. What seems to remain unthematized, and yet objectively present in Althusser's discourse, is that, as far as history is concerned, the subjective conditions are also 'always-already' part of the objective conditions. If a 'group of individuals' decides to occupy the place of a possible political practice, they can well become an active force in the conjuncture itself; they can participate in the *constitution* of a propitious conjuncture. From this perspective, the 'margin' of objective contingency is actually – or can be – restricted. Yet if Althusser oscillates between the subjective act of responding to a political interpellation, and also stresses, with Machiavelli, the 'absolute limits beyond which it is not possible to master *fortuna*'⁴¹⁹, it is perhaps possible to read, in this 'gap' between the two sides, not totally thematized by Althusser, not so much Althusser's failure to relate two points of views present in his reading of Machiavelli, but more so Althusser's idea of politics. Althusser 'repeats' the almost tragic conception of history which is Machiavelli's, in a sort of 'tragic' revolutionary realism of the impossible, in which the possibility of 'making history' is only partially in the hands of men. It is in the *decalage* between the necessity of a new beginning and the absence of every 'guarantee' whatsoever that Althusser, after Machiavelli, places politics.

419 MU, p. 79.

Chapter 5.

Practice and Contingency in the Late Althusser. Towards an Aleatory Materialism

1. Introduction

In this chapter, I will attempt an interpretation of 'aleatory materialism', proposed by Althusser in the last phase of his career as a possible 'philosophy for Marxism'. Aleatory materialism⁴²⁰ was elaborated by Althusser in the eighties, but was only discovered much later, in 1994, when a substantial portion of his unpublished texts was released for the first time. All the texts that deal *explicitly* with aleatory materialism as a philosophy for Marxism belong to the eighties, and were written after June or July 1982. The changes in style and references that one can find in these texts, coupled with the fact that they were written after 1980, when Althusser disappeared from the philosophical scene, led many to question their status as part of Althusser's oeuvre, and to think that they belonged to 'Althusser after Althusser' - such is the heading under which some of these texts are collected in the edition of the *Écrits philosophiques et politiques*, published in 1994⁴²¹. Yet,

420 For reasons that will become clearer in the course of the chapter, I prefer the denomination 'aleatory materialism' to the more common Anglophone denomination 'materialism of the encounter', which is the label under which the 'late Althusser' has become known to the public after the translation of his posthumous writings in L. Althusser, *Philosophy of the Encounter. Later Writings 1978-87* (London: Verso, 2006), hereafter PHE. As we have already seen, the notion of 'encounter' is introduced by Althusser already in the late '50s. By contrast, the notion of 'aleatory' becomes central to Althusser reformulation of materialism only after 1978. The relationship between 'encounter' and 'aleatory' in this last phase will be explored in the course of this chapter.

421 Cf. F. Matheron's editorial note in L. Althusser, *Écrits philosophiques et politiques*, Vol. I (Paris: STOCK/IMEC, 1994), pp. 19-20 (henceforth EPP I). According to F. Matheron, 'the break [between the writings of the eighties and the previous texts] is, a sense, evident'. However, Matheron is cautious in affirming a complete break, and in fact his articles on Althusser do a good job in highlighting a continuity of themes in Althusser's philosophy. See in particular F. Matheron, 'La récurrence du vide chez Louis Althusser', *Futur Antérieur*, 'Lire Althusser Au-

as recent studies have started to show, and as this thesis has sought to bring to light, the themes and notions that form the core of these late writings – notions such as void, contingency and encounter – are also present in the earlier writings, a fact that renders it at least problematic to talk about a sudden and sharp rupture occurring around 1980.

However, the stressing of a certain continuity, which has to do with the pre-occupation with contingency, should not obfuscate the difference that nonetheless remains⁴²². For all the continuity, what is certainly new after 1980 is, first of all,

jourd'hui' (1997).

422 Following the discovery of the unpublished manuscripts of Althusser, two main lines of interpretation emerged. They find their typical proponents in L. Sève and T. Negri. The former argued that the 'late' Althusser was no longer Althusser, a comment in which a negative appreciation of the late production was implicit. See L. Sève, 'Althusser et la dialectique', in *Althusser Philosophe*, ed. Pierre Raymond (Paris: PUF, 1997). By contrast, T. Negri proposed a positive reading of what he called Althusser's *Kehre* in the articles published in *Futur Antérieur* (T. Negri, 'Pour Althusser: notes sur l'évolution du dernier Althusser', *Futur Antérieur*, 'Sur Althusser' (1993) and Id., 'Machiavel selon Althusser', *Futur Antérieur*, *Lire Althusser Aujourd'hui* (Paris: l'Harmattan, 1997). Both interpretations are – and in fact wanted to be – unilateral, and strongly depend on the personal philosophical position, *vis à vis* Althusser(ianism), of the two philosophers. To refer to the more recent works, we can take into account the two most important authorities in Althusser's scholarship in the Anglophone world, i.e. W. Montag and G. Elliott. In Montag's last book, for example, we find the idea that aleatory materialism is a tendency already present in *For Marx*; Montag, especially in his last work, tends to reduce the philosophical meaning of aleatory materialism to a messianism of Benjaminian type (W. Montag, *Althusser and His Contemporaries* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2013), p. 185). This is also something that Elliott suggests, hinting at a negative appreciation of aleatory materialism based on a comparison with Althusser's former writings (G. Elliott, 'Postscript' to the new edition of Id., *Althusser. The Detour of Theory* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2009), pp. 317-371). Other important works on the late Althusser include those authored by André Tosel and J-C. Bourdin. See A. Tosel, 'Les aleas du matérialisme aléatoire dans la dernière philosophie de Louis Althusser', in *Sartre, Lukács, Althusser: des marxistes en philosophie*, ed. E. Kuvélakis and V. Charbonnier (Paris: PUF, 2005); Id., 'The hazards of aleatory materialism and the philosophy of the encounter', in *Encountering Althusser. Politics and Materialism in Contemporary Radical Thought*, ed. K. Diefenbach et al. (London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2013), pp. 3-26, which is a reworking of the previous one; and Id., 'Matérialisme de la rencontre et pensée de l'événement-miracle', in *Autour d'Althusser. Penser un matérialisme aléatoire: problèmes et perspectives*, ed. A. Ibrahim (Paris: Le Temps de Cerises, 2012); J. C. Bourdin, 'Matérialisme aléatoire et pensée de la conjuncture', in *Althusser: une lecture de Marx*, ed. J-C. Bourdin (Paris: PUF 2008) and Id., 'Ce que fait la rencontre aléatoire au matérialisme (et à la philosophie)', in *Autour d'Althusser*, ed. Annie Ibrahim (Paris: Le Temps de Cerises, 2012). Also important are the works of V. Morfino, who engaged in a systematic study of the late Althusser and in creative reinterpretation of the materialism of the encounter in the direction of an ontology of relation, above all in light of his study of Spinoza and Machiavelli. See, among others, V. Morfino, 'Il materialismo della pioggia di Althusser. Un lessico', *Quaderni Materialisti*, 1 (2002); Id., 'Spinoza: an ontology of relation', *Graduate Faculty Journal*, 27 (2006), 103-27; V. Morfino and L. Pinzolo, 'Le primat de la rencontre sur la forme', *Multitudes*, 21 (2005), 149-158; V. Morfino, *Plural Temporalities. Transindividuality and the Aleatory between Spinoza and Althusser* (Chicago and New York: Haymarket Books, 2015). See also L. Pinzolo, *Il materialismo aleatorio. Una filosofia per Louis Althusser* (Milano: Mimesis, 2012).

that Althusser now *explicitly* identifies the issue of contingency as the *crucial* weakness of Marxism, as is clear from a never-published interview, in which Althusser argues:

I believe that *the fundamental theoretical question for Marxism is the absence of a theory of contingency*. It is Marx's relationship to Epicurus, via the intermediation of Machiavelli and Rousseau, and a good deal of historians – but not theoreticians⁴²³.

Furthermore, also new is the fact that this problem revolves around the issue of the definition of a *philosophy for Marxism*. The two main theses that characterise aleatory materialism are, indeed, 1) that there exists a misrecognised tradition of thought which posits the issue of contingency as its centre of gravity; 2) that this tradition, with which Marx has an ambiguous relation, may offer up some elements with which it is possible to elaborate a philosophy on which the future – or the survival – of Marxism as theory ultimately depends⁴²⁴. As is apparent, a thesis on the *history* of philosophy overlaps with a *philosophy*: aleatory materialism is, in Althusser's writings, both a thesis on the history of philosophy and a philosophy⁴²⁵. But a thesis on the history of philosophy is also a thesis on philosophy, and a thesis on philosophy cannot but depend upon a theory of philosophy⁴²⁶. As I

423 R. Hyland, 'Conversation with Althusser. 2 Juillet 1982', ALT2. A46-05.04, my emphasis.

424 Even if Althusser eventually left the Party in 1978, during the eighties he continued to consider himself a Marxist. Some of his writings (as for instance 'Les Thèses de Juin', ALT2. A29-06.01/02/03/04, 1986, or 'Du matérialisme aléatoire', ALT2. A29-06.09, 1986) are (overly) optimistic as to the possibility of a radical renewal of Marxism, both from a theoretical and an organizational point of view. Drawing on the experiences of new movements outside Europe – especially the Liberation Theology – Althusser seems to conceive of his new philosophy as a response to the new scenario. It is interesting to note that one of the leaders of Liberation Theology, Leonardo Boff, listed Althusser, along with Gramsci, among his most important source of inspiration. See F. Navarro, 'Presentation' to Louis Althusser, *Sur la philosophie*, ed. Fernanda Navarro (Paris: Gallimard, 1994), excluded from the English translation. The archives show that Althusser discussed about Liberation Theology with his friend Stanislas Bréton. See ALT2.A29-05.01, ALT2.A29-05.02.

425 On this, cf. in part. J. C. Bourdin, 'Matérialisme aléatoire et pensée de la conjuncture' and Id., 'Ce que fait la rencontre aléatoire au matérialisme (et à la philosophie)'.

426 Althusser sometimes argues that such a theory of philosophy is in itself philosophical, for example in L. Althusser, *Philosophy and the Spontaneous Philosophy of the Scientists*, ed. G. Elliott (London and New York: Verso, 1990), p. 79, 100-101. Yet in other places he says that a theory of philosophy would be a *scientific* theory, rendered possible by Marx's science. This point is forcefully endorsed as late as 1976-78, in L. Althusser, *Être Marxistes en philosophie* (Paris: PUF, 2015), p. 275. (Henceforth EMP).

will try to show, it is only by understanding the relationship between aleatory materialism and philosophy that it is possible to understand its meaning, and at the same time to gain a perspective from which to assess its relationship with the whole of Althusser's writings.

This chapter is premised upon the idea that to understand Althusser's proposal of an aleatory materialism, it is necessary to clarify the political and theoretical reasons that led Althusser to propose such a new materialism in the eighties. Obviously, to justify this idea is tantamount to developing it; so, I will try to defend this idea by proposing a genealogy of this materialism that links it to the specific conjuncture of the debates on the 'crisis of Marxism', in which Althusser was involved at the end of the seventies, and at the same time, to his previous reflections on the structure of philosophy, and what he calls 'the philosophy-effect'.

The general argument of this chapter is that the move to this new materialism is not to be seen as a pure and discouraged surrender to the contingency of the world, but as the attempt to construct theoretically – and then, in a sense that will be clarified, philosophically – the *primacy of practices* (in the plural) over theory, and that in proposing it as a philosophy for Marxism, Althusser's aim was to anchor Marxism, conceived as a theoretical and political practice, in what he considered to be ungraspable by 'traditional' philosophy, materialism included. If the problem that lies behind aleatory materialism is the problem of articulating the primacy of practices over theory, then the category of contingency that Althusser now establishes as the central problem of Marxism can be seen not only as an ontological category, but also as a political category, to the extent to which politics is always involved when theory takes into account its own relation to the dimension of practice. From this perspective, aleatory materialism can be seen as a 'last re-commencement' of Marxism, an attempt that was carried out at a time when the hiatus between Marxist politics and Marxist theory seemed to many to be too deep to be bridged, and when many were too eager to drop Marxism to embrace the new *vague* of post-modernism.

2. The 'Aleatory' in the Political Writings on the Crisis of Marxism

In his recent monograph on Althusser, Warren Montag quite rightly argues for the necessity of reading Althusser 'in his own conjuncture', in the theoretical context in which his work was produced and in which it produced its effects⁴²⁷; quite surprisingly, however, in Montag's book – as well as in much of the secondary literature – aleatory materialism is not read in the context of the debates about the crisis in Marxism in which Althusser participated and intervened, both in France and in Italy, and in which the idea that it was necessary to address anew the burning issue of the status of philosophy in Marx(ism) took shape. It is in this context, in fact, that Althusser argues that the crisis of Marxism, to be overcome, imposes on 'theory' the task to re-think its link with the 'aleatory dimension' of history, and it is here that the word 'aleatory' appears for the first time with a strong philosophical valence⁴²⁸.

For our purposes, the texts related to Althusser's intervention in the Italian debate in 1978 are quite revealing. The conjuncture was marked at that time by the break between the Communist Party of the Soviet Union and the Communist Parties of Western Europe, a rupture whose occurrence was due to the decision of the Italian, French and Spanish Communist Parties to adopt a strategy that would soon be called 'Eurocommunism', which entailed the dropping of the concept – and strategy – of the 'dictatorship of the Proletariat' and the decision to become part of the political dialectics proper to liberal democracy⁴²⁹. This split frames

427 Montag, *Althusser and His Contemporaries*, pp. 7-8.

428 Hereafter, I will refer to the texts dating between 1977 and 1978 under the general label 'texts of the crisis'. In particular, they comprise 'Enfin la crise du Marxisme!' [ECM], 'Marxisme comme théorie finie' [MTF], 'Le Marxisme aujourd'hui' [MAJ]. The English translation is available in Althusser, *Philosophy and the Spontaneous Philosophy of the Scientists*, pp. 269-280. I will refer to the French text, as the English translation is incomplete, now all available in L. Althusser, *Solitude de Machiavel et autres textes*, ed. Yves Sintomer (Paris: PUF, 1998). Many of the arguments Althusser discusses in them were anticipated, in spirit if not in letter, in L. Althusser, *Ce qui ne peut plus durer dans le parti communiste* (Paris: F. Maspero, 1978), collecting a series of articles originally published in *Le Monde* between the 24th and the 27th of April 1978.

429 See L. Althusser, *22e Congrès* (Paris: F. Maspero, 1977) and É. Balibar, *On the dictatorship of*

Althusser's public intervention, much as in the early '60s the split between the PCUS and the PCC framed his first intervention in the debates in the PCF. This new conjuncture, however, also had to do with a situation of economic crisis within capitalism itself, and with the rise of social and political movements not directly linked to the Parties and which, as Althusser writes, were no longer reducible to the classical forms of politics, in that they were not understandable through the classical Marxist distinction between Party and trade unions⁴³⁰.

In the face of these difficulties in understanding the political scenario, Althusser's reaction was not, as has been maintained, ambivalent⁴³¹. On the contrary, he claims that it is necessary to subject Marx to a 'materialist critique' and to purge him of all the idealistic elements still present in his thought: 'with such a critique', he writes, 'we would be in the position to find in Marx all that which is inspired by an idealistic idea of the Meaning of History'⁴³², which means a philosophy of history in which time was conceived as a linear unfolding of an Original Subject towards an End – that is, Communism. Far from aligning himself with the rising post-modern *vulgata*, Althusser calls for a *renewal of Marxist theory* on the basis of an interpretation of it as a 'finite theory' [*theorie finie*]. This expression, certainly a reference to the idea of the 'end' of Marxism that was at the time circulating, does not mean, for Althusser, that Marxist theory is 'over', but that it can remain alive by radically assuming the finitude of its object, i.e., the singular *present* conjuncture. It is in this context that Althusser asserts the need for what we might call an 'aleatory answer' to the new situation⁴³³:

the Proletariat, trans. G. Locke (London: NLT, 1977 [1976]). On the vicissitudes of Eurocommunism, see the interesting volume by F. Claudin, *L'eurocommunisme*, trans. A. Valier (Paris: Maspero, 1977). Althusser defended the 'dictatorship of the proletariat' also in a lecture recently published: L. Althusser, 'Conférence sur la dictature du prolétariat à Barcelone', <http://revueperiode.net/un-texte-inedit-de-louis-althusser-conference-sur-la-dictature-du-proletariat-a-barcelone/>.

430 ECM, p. 269: 'not only the unity of the communist movement is threatened and its ancient organizational forms destroyed, but its history is put into question and, by extension, also the traditional practices and strategies are'.

431 Elliott, *The Detour of Theory*, pp. 256-300, and more recently I. Garo, "'Il pleut". Matérialisme de la rencontre et politique du vide chez le dernière Althusser', in *Autour d'Althusser*, pp. 164-185. Elliott recognizes his misreading of Althusser's stance towards Eurocommunism in the 'Preface to the second edition' (Elliott, *The Detour of Theory*, p. xi).

432 MTF, p. 292.

433 That the conjuncture is the object of Marxist theory was already asserted in *For Marx*, especially in 'Contradiction and Overdetermination', through Lenin. The difference now is that

only a finite theory can be open to the contradictory tendencies that it detects in capitalist society, open to their *aleatory becoming*, to the unforeseeable surprises that have always marked the history of the working class movement [...] open and therefore capable of seizing in time the *incurable imagination of history*⁴³⁴.

Two things should be noted here. The first is that Althusser uses, for the first time in connection with Marxist theory, the term 'aleatory', which comes to designate what Marxism needs to take into account in order to find a way out of the crisis. This holds, in the writings of the crisis, both for theory in the strict sense and for the organisational structure of the Communist movement, which Althusser regards as consistent – for better or worse – with the basic theoretical structure of Marxist philosophy. The second point worth noting is the mention of the need for a 'materialist critique'. What kind of materialism is implied here? The answer, even if it is not pronounced explicitly as such, is nonetheless clear. This materialism is linked immediately, by the appeal to the 'finitude' of the theory, to the aleatory: 'materialist critique' and 'aleatory becoming' are to be joined together. And this, evidently, already suggests the soon-to-become explicit alliance between materialism and the aleatory⁴³⁵.

The need for an 'openness' also manifests itself in these writings through the recurrence of a metaphor: *the metaphor of 'listening'*. It appears at two crucial points. The first is when Althusser argues that, in order to reconnect with what may seem to be, from the point of view of traditional Marxism, 'totally unforeseen political initiatives',

it is not a matter of 'enlarging' the existing politics, but of being

Althusser insists much more on the 'aleatory' and on the finite object of Marxism, instead of arguing for the necessity of a rigorous definition of the protocols of scientificity of Marxism.

434 MTF, p. 286.

435 Althusser expands on this in 'Marx in His Limits' (PHE, pp. 7-162), which focuses, as the title suggests, on the weak points of Marx's theory, in order to open up the possibility of an extension of Marxist theory in a non-idealistic sense (in particular: theory of the State, ideology, fetishism, politics). It is an incomplete work that, unfortunately, terminates on the announcement of a treatment of the issue of politics.

able to listen to politics there where it takes place⁴³⁶.

In another passage, then, 'listening' and 'aleatory' are directly linked together:

Marxism, even when it was living, was always in a critical position [...] because it was always engaged in and surprised by the movement of the masses, and open to the demands of the unpredictable history of their struggles. Now more than ever [...] the masses are on the move. *Il faut se mettre à leur 'écoute' pour les comprendre*⁴³⁷.

The significant thing is that the metaphor of 'listening' is connected, in these texts, to the emerging problematic of the aleatory. The goal that Althusser seems to set himself is not simply to produce a critique of Marxism, but a critique capable of producing a veritable breakthrough, a breakthrough that is condensed in the formula 'change of language'⁴³⁸. It is a matter of finding a new language, and this new language cannot be but a new philosophy, as Althusser himself admits by taking on the Marxian formula about the necessity of 'settling accounts with our previous *philosophical* consciousness'⁴³⁹.

Here there is a sort of double movement: in a sense, the idea of the need for a new language or a new 'philosophy' that is taking shape here brings Althusser back to the sixties, when what was at stake was the project of giving Marxism its own philosophy. But this 'return' to a search for a philosophy entails a double difference with respect to the original project. In fact, it entails a radical reformulation of the status of philosophy and of materialism, as well as the idea that it is no longer a matter of *extracting* Marx's own philosophy from his texts, but of

436 MTF, p. 289, emphasis added.

437 MAJ, p. 308. The last sentence is missing in the English translation.

438 'The third way to react to the crisis is by taking distance historically, theoretically and politically, so as to be able to discover in it, even if it is not simple, its meaning, its valence, its sense. If we attain this, we can then change our language', ECM, p. 272. A change of language in face of the crisis means here both changing the language by which the crisis itself is described (the opening up of new paths vs the end of something) but *also* it means to find new categories, new concepts, to conceptualize the possibilities of acting upon the new historical scenario on which the old ones had already lost their 'grip'.

439 MAJ, p. 308.

elaborating a new 'philosophy' that, going with Marx beyond Marx himself⁴⁴⁰, allows Marxism to have a 'hold' on its own outside, on what remains, in the context of the crisis, theoretically and politically ungraspable for it.

3. Materialism and Practices

3.1 Silence and Logos

It is not by chance that the metaphorical image of 'listening' runs throughout the Althusserian writings on philosophy dating from the years immediately before and after these texts on the crisis of Marxism. In fact, this metaphor represents a *topos* that innervates, without being fully thematised, the Althusserian meditation on the essence of philosophy, to the point that it constitutes the final word as to what (or who) the truly materialist philosopher is, in the brief text entitled 'Portrait of a Materialist Philosopher'⁴⁴¹.

We find this metaphor at a crucial point of Althusser's reflection, in a text written in 1975-76, the *Initiation à la Philosophie pour les non philosophes*⁴⁴², which is characterised by a constant tension that traverses the definition of philosophy, the very object of the book. When Althusser writes this 'textbook', he already holds the definition of philosophy as 'class struggle in theory', premised upon the dichotomy idealism/materialism that in this book mirrors, sometimes too simplistically (but we should remember that the textbook was intended for non-philosophers), the dominant/dominated one, in reference to the people⁴⁴³. What is interesting for us is that in this book Althusser introduces for the first time the idea that materialism is best described as a *philosophy of silence and listening*:

440 'The demands of the crisis make us see what is missing in Marx': but this is not a plea to leave Marx behind.

441 PHE, p. 296.

442 L. Althusser, *Introduction à la philosophie pour les non philosophes* (Paris: PUF, 2014). Henceforth IPH.

443 Cf. for instance IPH, p. 49, p. 81.

How can philosophy be one and given over to [*livrée à*] two contradictory tendencies, the idealistic tendency and the materialistic tendency? [...] Because there exists another way of philosophising, different to the one that belongs to idealistic philosophers, a practice of philosophy that, far from removing it from the world, *places philosophy in the world* and reconciles it with all the people. [...] [T]here exists a practice of philosophy that, far from bringing to men a Truth from above, in a language unintelligible to the workers, can remain silent [*sait se taire*] and learn from the people, from their practice, from their suffering, from their struggles. The materialistic philosophers know that their philosophy will come to them from outside [*du dehors*]: so they remain silent and listen⁴⁴⁴.

This passage is crucial if one is to follow the constitution of an opposition between idealism and materialism that does not trace the traditional Marxist one (being-thought)⁴⁴⁵. The latter, to be sure, is not criticised here, and to a certain extent is endorsed; yet it begins to appear as non-primary. In fact, Althusser defines here not so much the operative practice of a materialist philosophy (what such a philosophy should do and how), but what is *behind* this practice; and what is behind, like a sort of general attitude, almost an ethical orientation, is the silence and the listening that let practices come to the fore in their making.

Such an ethos of 'listening' represents the materialistic pole of the constitutive opposition of philosophy, on which Althusser still relies in this book. The opposite of listening, however – that is, the 'speaking' and, by extension, the 'word' – is mobilised by Althusser, both here and in other contemporary texts, also as the *general* essence of philosophy. It is along the lines of this opposition that we need to interpret the emphasis that Althusser puts on the act of 'saying' (and, to a minor extent, on the act of seeing), as the fundamental and most defining characteristic of Western philosophy, whose central figure is the *logos*⁴⁴⁶:

444 IPH, pp. 51-52, my emphasis.

445 I refer to Lenin and Engels. In particular, Althusser seems to be thinking both to V. I. Lenin, *Materialism and Empirio-criticism: critical comments on a reactionary philosophy* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1967 [1908]) and to F. Engels, *Ludwig Feuerbach and the Outcome of Classical German Philosophy* (London; printed in U.S.S.R.: Martin Lawrence, 1934 [1888]).

446 Althusser's association of *logos* and speech is, evidently, a Derridian theme. In a sense, one can say that Althusser is 'politicising' Derrida, by connecting *logos*/speech to the political stakes of philosophy. We will see this point in the following of this chapter.

That philosophy feels the need to speak, or rather, assumes the responsibility of speaking and consigning what it has to say to separate, identifiable treatises, derives from the fact that, in its profound historical conviction, it considers it has an irreplaceable task to accomplish. This is to speak the Truth about all human practices and ideas. Philosophy believes that no one and nothing can speak in its name, and that if it did not exist, the world would be bereft of its Truth. Because for the world to exist, it is necessary for such truth to be spoken. This truth is *logos*, or origin, or meaning. And since there are common origins between *logos* and speech (between *logos* and *legein*, Truth and discourse, or, put another way, since the specific, stubborn existence of *logos* is not materiality or practice or any other form, but speech, voice, word), there is only one means of knowing *logos*, and hence Truth: the form of discourse⁴⁴⁷.

What Althusser construes through this metaphorical opposition (listening-speaking) is, as it appears from the passages just quoted, a determinate relationship: that is, the problem of the relationship between philosophy and practices. Of course, the problem here is that the relationship between philosophy and practices is not demonstrated, but only stated. But the question is also another. In the first passage the pair materialism/idealism occupies the entire field of philosophy, and it is only the materialistic tendency that is defined on the basis of the ethos of 'listening'. By contrast, in the second passage, it is philosophy itself that is defined as *logos*, as 'saying'. At this point, a sort of tension appears in Althusser's discourse, which regards the relationship between materialism and philosophy. Is materialism included in the notion of philosophy as 'saying', or is it not? And does the idea of materialism as 'listening' imply a different structure of materialist philosophy, one that would separate it from the *structure* of philosophy as 'saying'? Althusser never answers these questions. But what I would like to suggest is that aleatory materialism is charged with resolving this problem, which Althusser comes progressively to see as unsolved by the concept of *empietement* between the two tendencies that are constitutive of philosophy⁴⁴⁸; and that it is the

447 L. Althusser, 'The transformation of philosophy' [hereafter TPH], in Althusser, *Philosophy and the Spontaneous Philosophy of the Scientists*, pp. 242-265, here p. 246. The lecture was pronounced in 1976.

448 Cf. L. Althusser, *Essays in Self-Criticism*, trans. G. Lock (London: NLB, 1976), p. 144: 'If it is true that philosophy, "class struggle in theory", is, in the last instance, this interposed conflict between tendencies (idealism and materialism) which Engels, Lenin and Mao spoke about, then since this struggle does not take place in the sky but on the theoretical ground, and since

problem of the relation between philosophy and practice that plays a major role in this move to aleatory materialism. What I will try to argue is that there exists, between aleatory materialism and philosophy, the same relationship that exists, for Althusser, between practices and philosophy as *logos* – a parallel that leads Althusser to think of aleatory materialism as a veritable thought of practice, i.e., a mode of thinking that is capable of grasping practices from the point of view of practices themselves⁴⁴⁹.

To tackle this problem, I will refer mainly to two texts, both belonging to the so-called self-critical or post-theoreticist phase of Althusser's thought. The first is a series of notes on philosophy, exchanged in '67 in the context of an aborted attempt to lay out a general theory of discourses with many collaborators; the other is, by contrast, a public text, a conference held in Granada in '76 and significantly titled 'The Transformation of Philosophy'. Between these two texts, a tension internal to the definition of philosophy appears, a tension that marks (and allows for the explanation of) the shift from the search of a new practice of philosophy to a 'philosophy for Marxism'. This shift is played out around the possibility of the definition of a materialism of practice that stands in opposition both to traditional materialism and to idealistic philosophy.

this ground changes its features in the course of history, and since at the same time the question of what is at stake also takes on new forms, you can therefore say that the idealist and materialist tendencies which confront one another in all philosophical struggles, on the field of battle, are never realized in a pure form in any "philosophy". In every "philosophy", even when it represents as explicitly and 'coherently' as possible one of the two great antagonistic tendencies, there exist manifest or latent elements of the other tendency. And how could it be otherwise, if the role of every philosophy is to try to besiege the enemy's positions, therefore to interiorize the conflict in order to master it?.

449 Which can be expressed through the following proportion, which will become clearer in the following pages: $PH : pr = PH : al$. To the left of the equals, we find the practical operation of traditional philosophy (PH) on social practices (pr); to the right, we find the practical operation of philosophy on the discursive field of philosophy itself. Key to Althusser's late materialism is the assumption that what is repressed in the history of philosophy (al) is the concept that can account for what is repressed through the arrangement of practices performed by philosophy via ideology.

3.2 The Philosophy-Effect

It is in the '67 notes on philosophy, now published in the second volume of the *Écrits*⁴⁵⁰, that Althusser attempts for the first time to elaborate a conception of philosophy as a specific instance of *discourse*, making heavy use of the theory of psychoanalysis. Marking the move to his post-theoreticist phase, in these notes Althusser moves beyond the idea of a Marxist philosophy as a 'theory of theoretical practice', proposed in *For Marx* and *Reading Capital*⁴⁵¹. Althusser here attempts to link philosophy to politics, and - not surprisingly - the middle term is found in ideology. Althusser identifies what he calls the 'philosophy-effect' as the specific operation, or performance, of an agency called the 'philosophical unconscious', and proposes a triple thesis that anticipates the set of theses that he would shortly after propose for ideology: 1) philosophy does not have any history; 2) philosophy

450 L. Althusser, *Écrits philosophiques et politiques*, Vol. 2, ed. F. Matheron (Paris: STOCK/IMEC, 1995). Hereafter EPP II.

451 This definition does not concern us here, but it is of course of great importance in itself. Introducing this definition, Althusser intended to stress that Marxist philosophy (the theory of theoretical practice that corresponded to Dialectical Materialism) was not a general ontology, but an epistemological reflection on the concepts produced by science (Historical Materialism). Knowledge itself is not a mere contemplative activity, but a 'practice' like all the other social practices (ideological practice, political practice, productive practice). The specificity of scientific practice was for Althusser the 'break' with ideology, and such a break guarantees in principle the autonomy of scientific practice with respect to immediate practical task. This thesis had two polemic objectives: empiricism and idealism on the one hand, and pragmatism on the other. Against the first, Althusser maintained that knowledge is a transformation of the theoretical object, and not the extraction of the 'essence' of any object. Against the second, Althusser argued that science produces 'true' knowledge, independent of any practical goal, of which the criteria are internal to the scientific practice itself. This second thesis was directed against the pragmatism that infected Stalinism, wherein Marxist science had become the justification of Stalinist politics. After 1965, Althusser corrects his idea regards philosophy (Dialectical Materialism). The main problem of the definition of philosophy as 'theory of theoretical practice' was the absence of *any* link to politics. It is this point that is systematically addressed by Althusser after 1965, starting with these notes. The new definition of philosophy as 'class struggle in theory' was rendered public in the lecture 'Lenin and Philosophy' in 1967. I privilege these notes as they allow me to flesh out the link of this second definition of philosophy with the late idea of a 'philosophy for Marxism' in a way that 'Lenin and Philosophy' does not, given the systematic and more explicit reference to psychoanalysis to be found in them.

is eternal; 3) nothing happens in philosophy⁴⁵². This triple thesis coexists with the apparently contradictory idea that philosophy, as a specific discursive device⁴⁵³, irreducible to other discourses, was born with Plato, being dependent upon the appearance of mathematics as one of its determining conditions. In fact, how are we to understand the thesis that philosophy is eternal, if it was actually born at a certain point in history? In reality, what is eternal is, at least here in these notes, a certain 'effect' that is induced or produced by philosophy, which is due, it appears, to a 'neurotic' kernel that is inherited by philosophy and around which philosophy constitutes itself. Althusser, then, is proposing a two-fold thesis on two levels. On the one hand, the neurotic kernel is prior to philosophy itself, but is nonetheless what makes it eternal; on the other, this 'neurotic' kernel is inherited and functionalised by a particular discursive device, which we might for the sake of brevity call the 'philosophy-device', which is historically constituted for the first time in Greece with Plato. Althusser proposes, then, the thesis of the double determination of philosophy by science and politics:

philosophy cannot be comprehended as a historical fact and as a new specific domain, with its own history, but on the basis of this double determination, of this double condition: 1) facts belonging to the history of sciences [*coupures*]; 2) facts belonging to the politico-ideological history of class struggle (the socio-political 'revolutions' and their effects: the ideological revolutions)⁴⁵⁴.

The determinations of philosophy by politics and ideology, on the one hand, and by sciences on the other are not, however, equivalent. Althusser is eager here to sidestep what might appear to be a scientist determination of philosophy, stating that the determination of philosophy is, in the first instance, due to ideology, the determination by science being only secondary. In order to describe the specific effect produced by philosophy, Althusser introduces the notion of *rupture*, to be distinguished from that of *coupure*, which concerns the sciences. Therefore,

452 EPP II, p. 347.

453 To be distinguished from other types of discourse: ideological, scientific, aesthetic and psychoanalytical. Cf. *supra*, ch. 3.

454 EPP II, p. 320.

Althusser has three concepts at his disposal: revolutions, which concern politico-ideological history; *coupures*, which concern the domain of sciences; and *rupture*, which concerns philosophy. The point that interests us is how Althusser actually accounts for philosophy as rupture. In fact, 'rupture' can make us think of philosophy as something that 'breaks' with a certain form of rationality in the wake of socio-political and scientific revolutions, pushing towards the end, as it were, of a revolution in the broken and fractured texture of the socio-political rationality. But Althusser immediately points out that, if philosophy is the 'rupture' insofar as it 'registers the *coupures* to invest them in revolutions', this always happens in such a way as to re-establish, to reconnect and amend the interrupted texture of the social and political rationality⁴⁵⁵. Hence, we are presented with a double model. On the one hand, philosophy is a 'political device', because it depends on the socio-politico-ideological revolutions as one of its determining conditions; on the other, it is political also with respect to its effects. The 'rupture' is not after all (or always) a rupture, or at least is a very peculiar one:

this rupture always performed by philosophy, is, in the pre-Marxist philosophy, generally [...] 'recuperated' in a theory of rupture that subjects this rupture to the subversion of a superior reconciliation (God, morality, etc.)⁴⁵⁶.

The abstract character of this model is mitigated by Althusser's reference to Plato. Plato, as we saw, represents the moment of the birth of philosophy in its specific configuration: he marks the birth of philosophy by intervening, with a specific theory, in a historical conjuncture marked by the appearance of Euclidean mathematics and by a democratic revolution, in order to re-establish an aristocratic-like rationality by means of an anti-egalitarian usage of the theory of pro-

⁴⁵⁵ We might note here that Althusser is taking up the Hegelian model of the owl, at the same time twisting it: philosophy comes after, but it does not only register or comprehend fact, but intervenes in them as well. Comprehension-intervention are one and the same thing, and the limit of Hegelianism – and of historicism more generally – is not to have missed this point, but to have denied it.

⁴⁵⁶ EPP II, p. 323. Few lines below, Althusser adds that a possible exception to this model is constituted by Spinoza and 'perhaps by Epicurus'. This is a point that we must remember further along this chapter.

portions⁴⁵⁷.

It is clear from the quotation above that Althusser is concerned here with the double task of producing a general theory of philosophy and of clarifying the specific difference between Marxist philosophy and the pre-Marxist one (and the 'pre' is not to be understood, obviously, in a chronological but in a logical sense). What is essential in this model that Althusser sets out here is the effect produced by philosophy, understood as an operation, upon its own conditions of existence; an effect that we can define, in light of the psychoanalytical vocabulary used by Althusser, as an effect of the 'repression' of its own content – in much the same sense that, according to Freud, repression always involves a transformation of the repressed content. What philosophy does not recognise is, in fact, the very operation through which it reinvests the given conditions of the theoretical field in political positions, because, according to Althusser, its own relationship to these conditions remains foreign to it. Such a 'repressive' activity, which corresponds to the 'philosophy-effect', 'governs and organises' all and every philosophical discourse; the consequence, argues Althusser, is that in order to read a philosophical text, one must separate the 'philosophy-effects' from the content that is irreducible to them⁴⁵⁸. Any philosophy, or better, any historically given philosophical formation, constitutes itself as a 'closed system' that naturally arranges itself as a '*topique*', which allows us to identify three fundamental effects which, taken together, constitute the 'philosophy-effect' or the 'components' of the philosophical unconscious:

- 1) Operation of distinction-discrimination-differentiation
- 2) Operation of hierarchisation
- 3) Operation of philosophy's self-positioning in the space of the topic⁴⁵⁹

What is important to notice is that this structure characterises not just one

457 Evidently, Althusser is referring to Plato's *The Republic*.

458 EPP II, p. 347.

459 EPP II, p. 349.

philosophy in particular, but philosophy as such: 'what are called philosophies are intelligible on the basis of the structure of these formations of the philosophical unconscious'⁴⁶⁰. Now, if we take into consideration the idea – proposed by Althusser in the same period – of the two tendencies in philosophy, the materialistic and the idealistic, the question that logically follows is: if only one 'philosophico-political device' exists, if, in other words, philosophy is such a device *per se*, on what basis can we establish the difference between materialism and idealism, or else between Marxist and pre-Marxist (in a logical sense) philosophy? At this point, Althusser's answer is that there is no such basis: the distinction is not possible. As a consequence, the idea of a Marxist philosophy is dropped in favour of another conception. Here, in fact, Althusser proposes a crucial distinction, one that fully takes stock of philosophy as an operation. Althusser proposes to distinguish two practices of philosophy, the first called 'philosophical practice I' and the second 'philosophical practice II'. 'Philosophical practice I' is nothing other than the 'manipulation' of certain socio-historical content according to the system of agencies described above, which is put to work without being modified by its use ('this practice - rumination - leaves the neurotical structure under which the philosophy-effect is compulsively repeated intact'⁴⁶¹); by contrast, 'philosophical practice II' is to be understood as a philosophical 'cure' which is made possible by Marx's discovery of the science of history (crucially, of ideology), and which is thought of, by Althusser, according to the model of a psychoanalytical cure. It acts upon the philosophical formations (hence, we might suppose, even though this is not made explicit in the text, not *directly* upon the socio-historical content) in order to

faire bouger the relationship between the levels [instances] that exist in the relations of organisation [*agencement*] of the *fantasmes* constituting the formations of the philosophical unconscious [...] [in order to] liberate the objective content that philosophical discourses held under the domination and organisation of the philosophy-effect⁴⁶².

460 EPP II, p. 353.

461 EPP II, p. 353.

462 EPP II, pp. 353-355.

If in these notes the specific mechanism of philosophy is clearly identified as a mechanism of repression of content, the specific nature of this content is only partially investigated, to the extent that it appears under-theorised. Furthermore, the idea of a 'neurotical kernel' at the heart of philosophy might seem rather unsatisfactory, as it posits a structural homology between philosophy and the unconscious that is not further examined. However, Althusser himself is aware of the tentative and provisional status of these theses. The fact that shortly after, when he publicly proposes the definition of philosophy as 'class struggle in theory' in the conference 'Lenin and Philosophy', he does not make any mention either of this 'neurotical kernel' or of the 'philosophy-effect', proves it. In fact, what is the relationship between the idea of philosophy as class struggle, in theory, and the philosophy-effect? In what way is philosophy the bearer, or even the vector, of class struggle, if it merely 'inherits' its functioning from a 'neurotic kernel' that appears to be of psychoanalytical provenance? Is the theory of the 'philosophy-effect', premised upon the psychoanalytical conception of a philosophical unconscious, fully compatible with a theory of philosophy that wants to account for the *social* role of philosophical discourse, as the idea of philosophy as class struggle, in theory, suggests?

These questions remain, at this stage, unanswered. For now, the theory Althusser is after leads him to drop the idea that a Marxist philosophy might be possible, in favour of a deconstructive conception of philosophy, understood as a 'cure' (philosophical practice II). If we can define it as 'deconstructive' it is because, quite clearly, this new practice brings the work of 'un-bounding' to the fore: it is a matter of unbounding the elements hierarchically organised as elements of the philosophical system given each time in the history of philosophy, and which are part of a historical conjuncture. Also, such a practice might appear as deconstructive because it is closely related to a textual analysis. In fact, it can be interpreted as an extrapolation and generalisation of the model of symptomatic reading. The analogy is evident, even though Althusser seems, in these notes, more eager to pursue the investigation of 'philosophical practice I', which is the condi-

tion of the necessity of different philosophical practices capable of '*faire bouger le chos*es'. Notwithstanding the proximity to deconstruction and to Derrida⁴⁶³, a difference already emerges here, namely the fact that Althusser is interested in elaborating a more political explanation as to why and how philosophy is configured the way it is. In other words, Althusser intends to understand why philosophy was not only constituted in a specific way, but why it continues to present itself in the same way. The difference then is that Althusser is interested in a *materialisation* of a theory of philosophy that one can find in Derrida (and for that matter, in Heidegger), which means that he is attempting a materialisation of the problem of the 'philosophy-effect', from which he expects to draw the consequences for a new practice of philosophy that is not confined to a textual analysis. It is, in fact, the Gramscian concept of hegemony that will assist Althusser in this attempt. But the concept of hegemony will lead him to understand the possibility of another kind of philosophy, and not simply another *practice* of philosophy.

3.3 Philosophy and Practices: Materialism Divides in Two

In the lecture 'The Transformation of Philosophy' (1976)⁴⁶⁴, Althusser returns, ten years later, to the idea of philosophy as a discourse. Here, he links it to the Gramscian conception of hegemony, using this concept to elaborate on his own idea that philosophy is, in the last instance, 'class struggle in theory'. The specific interest of this conference lies in the fact that Althusser insists, for the first time, on the deep connection existing between the traditional philosophical discourse and the political function of 'hegemony'⁴⁶⁵. Now bringing the relationship

⁴⁶³ A systematic study of the relationship between Althusser and Derrida remains to be done. It is nonetheless clear that their relationship and their exchange were more frequent and perhaps significant than it has been recognized so far. Among the few articles dealing with Althusser and Derrida, see É. Balibar, 'Eschatology versus teleology: the suspended dialogue between Althusser and Derrida', in *Derrida and the Time of the Political*, ed. P. Cheah and S. Guerlac (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009), and J. Smith, 'Derrida and Althusser: an almost secret alliance', in *Rileggere il Capitale. La lezione di Louis Althusser*, ed. M. Turchetto (Milano: Mimesis, 2009), pp. 113-128.

⁴⁶⁴ L. Althusser, 'The transformation of philosophy' [hereafter TPH], in Althusser, *Philosophy and the Spontaneous Philosophy of the Scientists*, pp. 242-265, here p. 246.

⁴⁶⁵ Althusser has not changed his mind as to the historicist character of this Gramscian category. Only, it appreciates it as a valuable tool for the *description* of what philosophy is and how it

between the philosophical discourse and its hegemonic function to the fore, not at the level of *coupures* and ruptures, but at the more general level of social practices (and here the growing engagement with Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks* has certainly played a role), in this text Althusser lays the foundation for an *asymmetrical* rupture between idealism and materialism. What is at stake here, in a still not fully explicit manner, is a redefinition of philosophy that moves towards the direction of aleatory materialism, which, from our point of view, will attempt a re-elaboration in terms of philosophical discourse of the problem of how to think, in philosophy, about the primacy of practices.

The transformation of philosophy to which the title alludes can be understood in two ways, according to an objective and subjective reading of the genitive. According to the first way of reading, Althusser construes here a definition of philosophy as a discourse that, from a historical point of view, constitutes itself on what we might call a 'gap of repression-deformation' of social practices. By studying the history of philosophy, argues Althusser, one can see that philosophy is a device that systematically 'transforms its own condition of existence' in order to produce a discourse by means of which it takes power over practices. Philosophy (as in the '67 notes, for this aspect), is an operation that produces Truth as the specific modality of the taking of power over practices⁴⁶⁶. The crucial point, however, is the specific relationship between practices and philosophy:

What matters is that philosophy does not incorporate social practices under the unity of its thought in gratuitous fashion, but by removing the social practices from their own space, by subjecting this hierarchy to an internal order that constitutes its true unification. The world thought by philosophy is a unified world in so far as it is disarticulated and rearticulated - i.e., reordered - by philosophy. It is a world in which the different social practices, decom-

actually functions.

466 'If we examine the question closely, we shall come to realize that philosophy is satisfied neither with dominating the sciences nor with 'speaking' the truth of the sciences. Philosophy equally imposes its dominion over religion and morality, politics and aesthetics, and even economics (beginning with Plato, in whom we find a surprising theory of wages, and Aristotle, with his appraisals of 'value' and the 'slave system') [...] In a few words: the production of philosophy as 'philosophy' concerns all human ideas and all human practices, but always subordinating them to 'philosophy' - that is to say, subjecting them to a radical 'philosophical form'. And it is this process of the 'subordination' of human practices and ideas to 'philosophical form' which we see realized in philosophical dialogues, treatises and systems'. TPH, p. 245.

posed and recomposed, are distributed in a certain order of distinction and hierarchy, which is significant⁴⁶⁷.

On the one hand, then, philosophy; on the other, practices. In this text, Althusser defines practices as the set constituting the 'stuff' of the category he had previously used to define history, i.e., the 'process without subject'. He insists upon the transformative essence of practice: practice is to be understood, above all, as a 'process of transformation' that 'if it has agents, it nevertheless does not have a subject as the transcendental or ontological origin of its objective, nor does it have a goal as the truth of its process'⁴⁶⁸. By contrast, from the standpoint of philosophy, practice is the 'commitment to exist over and above exploitation and transformation: *it is resistance to philosophical violence*'⁴⁶⁹. Thus, philosophy is defined as a specific practice of the unification-deformation-transformation of social practices, which are in themselves processes of transformation: we might then say that for Althusser it is always a transformation of a transformation.

But for Althusser, philosophy must be comprehended in close connection with the real class struggle in the social space, and it is now the concept of hegemony that serves the function of medium between the Althusserian theory of philosophy that we found in the notes ('philosophy-effect') and the definition of philosophy as class struggle in theory. Hegemony, argues Althusser in the wake of Gramsci, is the construction of a 'unity' of the dominant ideology, a unity that must be won against the many dominated ideologies of which a social formation is composed. It is in connection with this task of producing a *specific* hegemony that philosophy works as an ideological device:

What we have seen occurring in philosophy - that reorganisation and ordered positioning of social practices and ideas within a systematic unity under its Truth [...] we can of course see being produced in a comparable, almost superimposed (but not simultaneous), form in the ideological class struggle [...] If the correspondence is exact, we may infer that philosophy, which continues the class struggle in theory, responds to a fundamental political neces-

467 TPH, p. 252.

468 TPH, p. 249.

469 TPH, p. 250, my emphasis.

The philosophical organisation of practices, with the 'gap' or the inflection that it produces over the transformative capacity of the practices, takes on the function of organising the 'grammar' of the normalisation of the practico-linguistic games, establishing a 'set of categories' that is not first and foremost a theory by which to understand, or comprehend, the world, but is instead a 'manner of posing, and hence resolving, all the problems that may arise', thanks to 'theoretical schemas' and 'theoretical figures' that 'serve as mediators for surmounting contradictions and as links for reconnecting the different elements of ideology in a definite order'⁴⁷¹. Philosophical strategy, if related to the task of constructing a social hegemony, can then be aptly described in Wittgensteinian terms as a linguistic game of uniformation of languages and construction of a 'super-order' capable of acting upon the social practices via the ideology that permeates them, in order to lead and organise them. Above all, the aim is to anticipate and prevent all of the points of emergence (and potentially the points of disruption of a given social order) that might arise from the development of the social practices.

At this point, philosophy is considered as *structurally, and by definition, incapable of grasping practices without transforming and repressing them*. But the problem for Althusser is one of finding a *new* kind of relationship between philosophy and practices, so that their relationship may not be one of repression and transformation, whence the second sense of the title of the lecture we have been discussing: the transformation of philosophy is that which is required to circumvent the philosophy-effect. Now, the interesting aspect of this lecture is that in it Althusser presents us with two different answers. The first answer is the classic one that we already found in the '67 notes: Marxism needs (and entails) not another philosophy, but a new practice of philosophy. This answer is the answer provided by the lecture at an explicit level. But there is another answer, one that stands in tension with the explicit level of the text. It is this answer that interests us the most.

470 TPH, p. 259.

471 TPH, p. 259, trans. mod.

In order to see this second answer, we need to make a little detour. Here, in fact, Althusser's interpretation of the first thesis on Feuerbach becomes crucial. According to Althusser, this thesis, which argues that materialism is not concerned, or should not be concerned, with objects, but with practice⁴⁷² can certainly be read as the foundation of a transcendental philosophy of praxis, but Althusser argues that it must be understood in a much more radical way, i.e., *not* as a proposal for another philosophy, but as the crucial move of Marx beyond philosophy as a specific discourse, as a specific form of *logos*. It must be read, for Althusser, as the fundamental affirmation that there is something outside philosophy. It is not, therefore, a call for another philosophy, one that would posit praxis as a principle, because philosophy is, as we just said, essentially and structurally incapable of grasping practices without transforming and repressing them according to the ideological need to impose a certain order on societies, a constraint that limits their capacity to be processes of transformation. What is not to be missed, however, is that here Althusser introduces a distinction between two kinds of materialism, and it is this distinction that allows us to understand the shift towards the search for a 'philosophy' for Marxism, and in fact the very possibility of a philosophy that would not produce a 'philosophy-effect'. According to Althusser, much of the materialism that presented itself as materialism throughout the history of philosophy was not 'a materialism of practice'. As an example, he cites two cases: first, the materialism of Enlightenment, which constituted its own system with its own Truth, organising the ideology of the bourgeoisie, the rising class of the time; second, he cites the materialism of Diamat, the official philosophy of the Soviet Union, and of the Communist movement in general. This materialism grounds its own Truth in matter and in the laws of matter, but as a *system* of laws and principles it functioned as a system of truths, therefore replicating the very structure of philosophy. Contrary to the unifying role of materialism, the defining characteristic of a Marxist practice of philosophy would be to not impose any

472 'The chief defect of all hitherto existing materialism – that of Feuerbach included – is that the thing, reality, sensuousness, is conceived only in the form of the *object or of contemplation*, but not as *sensuous human activity, practice*, not subjectively. Hence, in contradistinction to materialism, the *active* side was developed abstractly by idealism – which, of course, does not know real, sensuous activity as such.' <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1845/theses/theses.htm>.

unity on social practices - and in fact, according to Althusser, Marx refused to propose a philosophy because he knew that to do so would have meant to betray, so to speak, the primacy of practices.

The point is that Althusser suggests here, in a context in which what is at stake is, apparently, the very impossibility of constituting a philosophy which would be materialist in the sense of being capable of affirming, in a 'non-philosophical' way, the primacy of what is external to philosophy, that to understand the 'silence' of Marx on philosophy we should look at Machiavelli and Epicurus:

Some, such as the eighteenth-century materialists, went so far as to oppose their own system of truth to the representatives of the dominant class. But rather than the eighteenth-century materialists [...], perhaps those who ought to interest us, are the ones who only half succeeded (or hardly succeeded) in imparting to their opposition the form of a philosophy produced as 'philosophy'. For my part I would closely investigate the cases of Epicurus and Machiavelli, to cite only them⁴⁷³.

The insertion of a materialism of practice produces an asymmetrical rupture in the pair idealism/materialism. The materialism of the philosophical tradition appears as a materialism that, although in the name of 'matter', falls entirely under the philosophy-effect. As such, it posits a fundamental Truth (a Truth that functions as ground)⁴⁷⁴ that in the ideological field takes the role of regulating and organising practices in a hegemonic system. The hegemonic system cannot but function as a constraint imposed upon the process(es) of transformation enacted by the practices; hence, philosophy is a subjection-repression of practices, a repression of their transformational capacity. Certainly, Marx has showed in the *Theses* that something outside philosophy exists. But to conceive of practice as a *philosophical* principle is, for Althusser, an outright contradiction, a betrayal of Marx's discovery; it means, no matter if intentionally or not, to fall back into the hegemonic and ideological game, building an entire philosophical system on the concept of practice. Althusser's position becomes, then, the following: what is re-

473 TPH, p. 261.

474 In English this play on words gets lost: a 'fundamental' truth is a truth that functions, by definition, as a *fundamentum* (ground).

quired is a true materialism of practice, i.e., a materialism that does not construe practice as another fundamental Truth, but that allows us to apprehend practice in its truth, as a process of transformation. This is, argues Althusser, what Marx did not manage to do. It is a matter, in fact, of breaking (again) Marx's silence on philosophy, but to break it in the right way. In order to break it properly, what is required is a break with the 'philosophy-effect', and now Althusser finds this possibility in the asymmetrical rupture represented by the materialism of practice.

Now, the crucial point for us is that aleatory materialism in 1982 is presented by Althusser, not only in terms that echo the 'theory of contingency' mentioned in the interview with Hyland that we quoted at the beginning of this chapter (and which said that the theory of contingency 'is the problem of Marx's relation to Epicurus, via Machiavelli'), but also that it is presented precisely as an *asymmetrical* rupture with idealism and materialism, and that contingency is said to have been repressed:

I would like to bring out: the existence of an almost completely unknown materialist tradition in the history of philosophy: the 'materialism' (we shall have to have some word to distinguish it as a tendency) of the rain, the swerve, the encounter, the take [*prise*] [...] a materialism of the encounter, and therefore of the aleatory and of contingency. 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. The fact that this materialism of the encounter has been repressed by the philosophical tradition does not mean that it has been neglected by it: it was too dangerous for that. Thus, it was very early on interpreted, *repressed and perverted* into an idealism of freedom⁴⁷⁵.

Leaving aside for now the concepts here set forth (we will discuss them later on), what is important is the equivalence that appears between the 'space' delineated by this aleatory materialism and the 'space' of practice. First of all, we can say that the equivalence between practices and contingency is formal: as philosophy

475 PHE, pp. 167-168, my emphasis.

represses and transforms practices to grasp them in the unity of a system, in the same way contingency (the aleatory), as a concept, is basically repressed and 'perverted' within the history of philosophy, both in materialism and in idealism, which symmetrically mirror one another. But this parallelism is not only formal, as it opens up the possibility to express, in a philosophy that is actually a non-philosophy, a materialism of practice, and therefore to consider history under the primacy of practice itself. When Althusser says that he wants to propose a philosophy for Marxism, then we need to see in this the attempt to express, through a philosophy that is in fact outside philosophy, the primacy of practices, or, as Althusser says in a sentence that seems to me to express the real meaning of aleatory materialism, 'to think practice via a thought'⁴⁷⁶. This perhaps enigmatic phrase expresses, in a sense, all the torsion that Althusser is trying to impart on materialism. In what sense, indeed, can we consider practice without submitting it to the *imperium*, the philosophy-effect? It is not, obviously, a matter of stating the primacy of practice over thought: this would mean reverting back to a dichotomy that Althusser is trying to supersede, or at least to abandon. The problem is another: how can we endow ourselves with categories capable of translating, in thought, the complexity of the network of practices? Not unlike the Kantian problem of the deduction of the transcendental categories, the problem is deducing categories which are apt to think of the 'free play' of practices, without submitting them to a unifying point of view, to a philosophy that is a system.

3.4 Marxism and *Surmaterialisme*: Lecourt's Contribution

In the texts dating before 1982 that we have discussed in the previous sec-

⁴⁷⁶ PHE, p. 188. It is possible to establish, at this point, a relationship between the need of a materialism of practice and the 'aleatory tendencies' the writing of the crisis talk about: what is at stake is the recognition of the autonomy of practices, of their unforeseeable development which is not controllable in advance. The 'inexhaustible imagination of history' is an index of the necessity, for politics and theory alike, to reconnect with an 'outside' – the mentioning of Machiavelli and Epicurus signals that in order to comprehend practices one needs to place himself within the horizon, or from the point of view, of contingency and of aleatory tendencies.

tion, Althusser does not include Lenin and Engels, or Marx, in the materialism of the ground, or of truth; a few years later they are instead listed as representative of a 'rationalist' materialism. Such a change of position is due to the deepening of the problematic of the materialism of practice via Machiavelli and Epicurus. It is only when Althusser glimpses the opportunity to answer the question that we saw emerging in the previous section (how a philosophy that can escape the philosophy-effect is possible), that a passage from a 'practice of philosophy' to a 'philosophy for Marxism' takes place. Nonetheless, as we saw in the Granada conference, the two perspectives still coexist; using an Althusserian expression, we can say that this shift exists there in a practical state, but not at a theoretical level, which means that Althusser still has not resolved the tension between the two perspectives, or that he has not conceptualised it yet.

An essential contribution to the clarification of these problems, and in particular the relationship between materialism and idealism, is provided to Althusser by a work published in 1980 by Dominique Lecourt, *Les ordres et les jeux*⁴⁷⁷. Apart from the obvious fact that Lecourt had always been very close to Althusser, and was in fact an Althusserian, two other, more specific factors suggest this thesis. The first is that Lecourt says, in the preface to the book, that he had discussed it at length with Althusser himself. Given the biographical circumstances of Althusser's life, we might suppose that these discussions took place before 1980. The second is that Althusser positively cites this book in 'The Underground Current of the Materialism of the Encounter' (1982)⁴⁷⁸, referring in particular to the concept of *surmaterialisme*, a concept that Lecourt proposes to define a materialism of practice, and which he considered indispensable to overcoming the conception of philosophy encapsulated in the idea of the opposition between idealism and materialism⁴⁷⁹.

In the wake of Althusser's work, Lecourt proposes, in the final part of the book (most of which is taken up by an analysis of the epistemology of the Vienna circle and Popper, to which he opposes the 'second' Wittgenstein), to incorporate

477 D. Lecourt, *Les ordres et les jeux: le positivisme logique en question* (Paris: Grasset, 1980).

478 PHE, pp. 163-207.

479 PHE, p. 189.

Wittgenstein's therapeutic conception of philosophy into the Marxist practice of philosophy, on the basis of a strict homology between the way in which Althusser understands ideology and the Wittgensteinian notions of 'linguistic game' and 'form of life'. From the *Philosophical Investigations* onwards, Wittgenstein, Lecourt rightly points out, based all of his philosophical work on the attempt to discern the presence, within the everyday linguistic games, of philosophical categories and to understand their role in such games: finding that it was, above all, a 'function of fixation [of the linguistic games] in the limits of a theoretical and ideological constraints'. Philosophy, then, was not, for Wittgenstein, a matter of elaborating a doctrine, but rather it was tantamount to the 'therapeutic practice' aimed at removing the 'interruptions' induced and caused by these same categories. The proximity of this theory of philosophy to Althusser's idea that philosophy is the discursive device in charge (not alone of course) of the 'sewing' of the hegemonic texture is, notwithstanding many differences (Wittgenstein never refers to politics directly), evident⁴⁸⁰. It is indeed explicitly advanced by Lecourt: if Wittgenstein had considered the multiple and contradictory processes of ideological practice as constitutive of a 'form of life', he argues,

the traditional philosophical practice would have appeared to him as a practice of unification of different ideological regions that at the same time performs, in its linguistic machinery, the denial of the contradictory process which is effectuated in each of these regions in a specific modality⁴⁸¹.

Lecourt explicitly applies the consequences of his interpretation of Wittgenstein to dialectical materialism, but *also* to the Althusserian definition of philosophy as a struggle of opposite tendencies and as class struggle in theory⁴⁸². For him, the Wittgensteinian critique of traditional philosophy also entails a transformation of 'our [i.e. 'Althusserian'] conception of materialism'. According to Lecourt, even the re-

480 It is very close to the 'philosophical practice II' we discussed earlier in this chapter. I do not know whether Lecourt was acquainted with the '67 notes, but it is certainly possible that he had read them.

481 Lecourt, *L'ordre et les jeux*, p. 213.

482 This is also a self-criticism, as well as a criticism of Althusser.

definition of the opposition idealism/materialism proposed by Althusser in the sixties based on the idea of an *empietement*, notwithstanding its positive effects on a too mechanistic opposition between two 'pure' tendencies running throughout the history of philosophy (that is, Engels and Lenin's thesis), remains caught up in the definition of (traditional) philosophy given by Wittgenstein. The grave mistake of this conception, argues Lecourt, is that for all the attempts that were made to complicate the classic schema, the terms and concepts 'idealism' and 'materialism' continued to be accepted without being questioned, and hence they were assumed in the classic version provided by Engels and Lenin (and, we add, drawn from Hegel):

notwithstanding the amendment that we attempted of the schema of the struggle in philosophy, we continued to accept as such [...] the very notions of materialism and idealism. [...] [H]ow not to remark that the conception of materialism as 'primacy of matter over thought' presents itself as a unifying doctrine of the diverse ideological regions. [...] such a definition encapsulates the image of a materialist philosophy that would be, after all, the symmetrical answer to idealism under its different forms⁴⁸³.

The conclusion drawn by Lecourt is radical: it must be admitted that materialism, as it is conceived of in the Marxist tradition, lends itself to functioning as an 'agency of synthesis that expresses a unified class standpoint'⁴⁸⁴. It is here that Althusser's distinction between philosophy and science is not sufficient for Lecourt: there is always the risk that philosophy (as class struggle in theory), in order to serve the proletariat, becomes the 'servant of politics' and therefore commits itself to the construction of a hegemony⁴⁸⁵. By contrast, for Lecourt, it is a matter of *only* thinking of philosophy as a practice of *intervention* that 'neutralises' the power of 'resorption' of the different social practices by philosophy – *only*, because 'every philosophy of unification or "cement", no matter what its declared or

⁴⁸³ Lecourt, *L'ordre et les jeux*, p. 213.

⁴⁸⁴ Lecourt, *L'ordre et les jeux*, p. 215.

⁴⁸⁵ If it is a 'risk', it is because for Lecourt (as well as for many others, Althusser in primis) a philosophy *ancilla politicae* is the codename for Stalinism, with all the effects on sciences that go under the name of Lisenkoism. See D. Lecourt, *Lissenko: histoire réelle d'une science prolétarienne* (Paris: F. Maspero, 1976).

implicit tendency is, is a linguistic game that has the effect of levelling out and absorbing the differences effectuated between the social practices and contributing to fixing their process within the limits of the status quo⁴⁸⁶. As Lecourt says, this materialism is a materialism of practice, or *surmaterialisme*, as it has the goal of setting practices free from any ideological domination, and is premised upon the affirmation, by which it is constituted, of the primacy of practice over theory inside philosophy itself.

The interest of Lecourt to Althusser is evident. We can sum up Althusser's debt in two main points: 1) Lecourt's critique of the pair idealism/materialism, and the idea that materialism has been, more often than not and certainly in the Marxist tradition, an *inverted* answer to idealism, and put in service of a specific class; 2) a decisive impulse to further pursue an elaboration of a materialism of practice, which must escape the closed circle of the specular couple, to think of the 'play' of practices in their free development. Differences, however, subsist. Lecourt remains at the level of a practice of philosophy, whereas Althusser will attempt to think not of a practice of philosophy, but of a (non-)philosophy of practices⁴⁸⁷.

486 Lecourt, *L'ordre et les jeux*, p. 214.

487 In fact, Lecourt takes the idea of the primacy of practices as a presupposition external to the practice of philosophy, that becomes internal only insofar as it transforms the practice of philosophy. By contrast, Althusser wants also to find categories that correspond to the primacy of practices, that can describe the development of history from the point of view of practices themselves. He wants philosophy to internalize the primacy of practices in the categories that it puts forth.

4. Principles of a New Materialism

4.1 Materialism beyond the Principle of Reason

It is in *Sur la philosophie*⁴⁸⁸ that Althusser presents aleatory materialism as a 'philosophy for Marxism' in a way that can be seen as a direct consequence of Lecourt's criticism of idealism and materialism. Returning to the pair idealism/materialism a few years after the Granada lecture we dealt with in the previous section, Althusser now rewrites his own theorisation of the philosophy-effect, leaning on Heidegger's examination of the role performed in the history of philosophy by the 'principle of reason'. Such a principle becomes the 'point of synthesis' of idealism and materialism alike, as they have been thought of for over more than twenty-five centuries⁴⁸⁹:

It should nevertheless be pointed out that, in the pair of opposites idealism/materialism, idealism – inasmuch as it is the dominant tendency in all of Western philosophy – has become the basis on which the pair itself is founded and constructed. When we set out from what Heidegger says about the domination of logocentrism over all of Western philosophy, this is not hard to explain: one can readily see that, every time it is a question of self announced materialism in the history of our philosophy, the term 'materialism' reproduces as, so to speak, its negation and mirror opposite, the term 'idealism'. Heidegger would say that idealism, just like materialism, obeys the "principle of reason", that is, the principle according to which everything that exists, whether ideal or material, is subject to the question of the reason of its existence⁴⁹⁰.

488 L. Althusser, *Sur la philosophie* (Paris: Gallimard, 1994). The book was originally published in Spanish in 1988, following the initiative of Fernanda Navarro, who spent some time with Althusser after 1982 in Paris. She could see and study various manuscripts concerning aleatory materialism, as well as previous texts such as a textbook on philosophy (which correspond, arguably, to the *Initiation à la philosophie pour les non-philosophes* published in 2014, or to the one released in 2015 under the title *Être marxistes en philosophie*), on which she drew to assemble the texts and the interviews of *Sur la philosophie*. For the history of the redaction of this book, see Navarro's 'Presentation', pp. 19-26.

489 Not only, as for Lecourt, in the Marxist tradition.

490 PHE, p. 272.

Such a position perfectly corresponds to Althusser's need to prepare the ground for the research of philosophical categories allowing him to think of practices not as a philosophical principle, but as a process of non-teleological and non-predetermined transformation⁴⁹¹. Idealism itself is now redefined more precisely without reference to an epistemological question (primacy of matter or primacy of thought)⁴⁹², but *only* in regard to the deployment of three principal concepts, or figures: Origin-Subject-End, which in turn are the three fundamental aspects of the principle of reason itself. Of course, this definition of idealism in reference to this triad is no novelty for Althusser: one can say that this triad was present from the very beginning of his philosophical career; we have already encountered it, in its diverse aspects, in the course of this thesis. However, it is only now that Althusser spells out more vigorously that materialism, too, can fall prey to this triad, and that it becomes the *definiens* of idealism in a straightforward manner; and it is only now that Althusser meets Heidegger in his criticism of Western metaphysics. In more philosophical terms, then, the quest for another materialism is defined as a move beyond the principle of reason conceived as the *assiette*, the basis of the grammar of Western thought. The displacement of the materialism of practice with respect to the pair idealism/materialism becomes, therefore, a conscious renunciation of the quest for a ground⁴⁹³.

If our reading of Althusser's development of aleatory materialism as a philosophy of practices is plausible, and if, also, the hypothesis of Lecourt's influence is too, then Althusser should drop any reference to any class. In fact, it is the *ensemble* of practices that now takes centre stage, to the extent that we can say that history itself is now re-written as an intertwining of practices. But 'practice' – let us stress this point – is not something used to describe the activity of an agent, be it singular or collective, in the sense of the subjective genitive; it is instead the objective side of the genitive that remains dominant in Althusser's understanding of practice, as it is defined always as a 'process of transformation' that includes in

491 Cf. IPH, esp. ch. 7, 'Qu'est-ce que la pratique?', pp. 161-175.

492 As it still was in previous works.

493 Which grounds, indeed, the development of practices, as we said, framing them in a sort of hegemonic narrative in service of the dominant class.

it its agents, which are not the 'origin' of practices themselves⁴⁹⁴. It is indeed this ongoing insistence on the anti-humanist conception of practice that renders it impossible to interpret the aleatory materialism unilaterally as a materialism of 'freedom', as for example suggested by Toni Negri. As a consequence, aleatory materialism is defined, in the broadest possible sense, without *any* reference to any historically given entity, a circumstance that suggests, as we will see further along, that this materialism cannot have, or refer to, any privileged political 'agent' or social class (which would be turned into a subject because of this privilege). Althusser states this anti-humanist stance of aleatory materialism forcefully: 'this materialism is the materialism, not of a subject (whether God or the proletariat), but of a process – without a subject – which dominates the order of its development, with no assignable end.'⁴⁹⁵

Before proceeding to an analysis of the more constructive part of aleatory materialism, it might be useful to address here the question of the status of this philosophy. We have already noted that its link to philosophy and to the philosophical tradition is problematic, and that this link is itself tied to the conception of philosophy that is peculiar to Althusser. As far as the status of 'aleatory materialism' as *philosophy* is concerned, the reference to Heidegger represents a further problematisation. To say that this materialism is a materialism beyond the principle of reason points unequivocally to Heidegger's attempt to overcome the metaphysical tradition, a tradition marked by the power of the principle of reason which correspond, in Heidegger, to the forgetfulness of being. Now, one can wonder whether Althusser is attempting a 'leap beyond' the metaphysical tradition of Heidegger's type. The answer is not easy, and cannot be a simple yes or no. In a sense, we should not concede too much to the presence of Heidegger. In that regard, it is noteworthy that Althusser continues to refer to this new task as a philosophy, whereas Heidegger's account of the history of Western thought was inten-

494 There is a strong continuity on this point with the 'Reply to John Lewis' (1972), in L. Althusser, *On Ideology* (London and New York: Verso, 2008), p. 135. However, there is also a difference. In the 'Reply', Althusser links the idea of history as a 'process without subject' to the idea that class struggle is the motor of history, whereas now history is a process without subject because history is an intertwining of practices, and practices do not have a 'subject' in the sense of a constituent subject.

495 PHE, p. 260.

ded to pave the way for a new way of thinking that could not be thought of as philosophical, and that was indeed called 'poetic thinking' by Heidegger himself. By contrast, Althusser does not declare that such a thing is possible, and or even desirable; his *philosophical* commitment is, in this respect, still evident.

In effect, Althusser seems eager to tie this new materialism to his previous definitions of philosophy. On the one hand, one cannot but register the fact that, while elaborating 'aleatory materialism' as a materialism of practices, Althusser is also moving backwards to the idea of a philosophy that can account for (and possibly make function) a specific science, namely the science of history. This was precisely the function of Dialectical Materialism in regard to Historical Materialism in the early sixties. It is remarkable that, in introducing the notion of a 'philosophy for Marxism' in the interview with Fernanda Navarro, Althusser opposes it, not to the notion of a 'practice of philosophy', but to his previous attempt to construct a Marxist *philosophy*, suggesting that what he expected from the former was exactly the fulfilment of the role assigned to the latter 20 years earlier. The idea of an extraction of Marx's philosophy from Marx's works (*Capital* in particular) is abandoned, but the underlying pattern remains the same⁴⁹⁶. The idea of a philosophy that makes a science function properly is reaffirmed later, in 1986, when Althusser seems to be trying to sum up the main function of aleatory materialism⁴⁹⁷. In the *Thèses de Juin*, we read that, in fact,

there is the idea in Marx, and above all in Engels, Lenin and Mao, that scientific concepts are only valid on the background of a 'right philosophy' [*philosophie juste*], and that [...] they may only be

496 Cf. PHE, p. 259: 'Thus, in writing a scientific, critical and political work, he practised in *Capital*, the philosophy he never wrote. By way of summary of what we have said so far, let us repeat that the task before us today is to work out, not a Marxist philosophy, but a philosophy for Marxism. My most recent thinking moves in this direction. I am looking, in the history of philosophy, for the elements that will enable us to account for what Marx thought and the form in which he thought it'. The other point that the first definition of philosophy and aleatory materialism share is that they are not linked to any class.

497 I quite agree with Balibar's idea that Althusser is closer to Koyré than to Bachelard, at least when the problem of the relationship between philosophy and science is at stake. Nowhere Althusser explains in detail his relation to Koyré, unfortunately. In the eighties Althusser seems to have abandoned the idea that Marx's works stemmed from a double rupture (philosophical and epistemological), embracing the idea that Marx never managed to subtract himself from Hegel's influence. Yet he still endorses the idea that Marxism is a science that needs the correct philosophy. Cf. É. Balibar, 'Althusser's object', *Social Text* 39 (1994), p. 185, fn. 30.

used on the basis of the correct orientation provided by such a right philosophy⁴⁹⁸.

This passage unmistakably brings to the fore the fact that Althusser had by no means given up on the idea of Marxism as a philosophy and a science. This, however, is only one tendency detectable in Althusser's late writings. He also establishes a close relationship between this philosophy and the idea of philosophy as a *Kampfplatz*⁴⁹⁹, the idea of taking up a position, pointing to the struggle that occurs in philosophy, in keeping with the second definition of philosophy as 'class struggle in theory' (but dropping the reference to class). The real problem here is that it seems difficult to reconcile the idea that philosophy is a *Kampfplatz*, where two tendencies are in perennial struggle and continuously encroaching on each other so that neither of them ever appears in a pure state on the stage, with the idea that it is possible to construct a philosophy for Marxism that could be this 'true' materialism that was never fully elaborated. The point is that the theory of the two tendencies, as re-elaborated by Althusser, implies, not solely, that it was never the case that such a philosophy was ever achieved; but, if taken seriously, that such a philosophy is by definition impossible. However, the whole point amounts to the question of whether or not Althusser intended this materialism to be the 'pure' or the 'true' materialism, a question that can hardly be settled given the fragmentary state of the materials, and the tentative character of this materialism, which was, this should be clear, an ongoing and unfinished project. What is clear, after all, is that Althusser himself did not attempt to put forth a series of categories 'out of nothing', but, instead, he attempted to make them emerge out of the struggle with the text of the history of philosophy; i.e., through an agonistic practice of philosophy that was in search of 'elements' susceptible to accounting for the materialism of practice. If we refer to the main text of the period, 'The Underground Current', we can see that easily: it is an attempt to excavate some parts of

498 ALT2. A29-06.04, 'Thèses de Juin'.

499 Cf. PHE p. 256: 'Let me make it clear that this materialism is not a philosophy which must be elaborated in the form of a system in order to deserve the name 'philosophy'. There is no need to make it over into a system, even if that is not impossible. *What is truly decisive about Marxism is that it represents a position in philosophy*' (my emphasis).

the history of philosophy to bring out only those 'elements' that seem to be promising for the task Althusser set himself. In fact, a careful consideration of the above mentioned text, together with a reading of Althusser's notes belonging to earlier periods (which we already encountered in Chapter 4), should make us aware that Althusser often opposes those philosophers to themselves: it is the case with Montesquieu, with Hobbes, with Rousseau, even with Spinoza; and Epicurus, the true novelty of the text, is used only for his physics, which is a small part of his production. Only Machiavelli seems to have avoided the traps of the philosophy-effect, and it is for this reason, arguably, that he is judged the 'greatest of all'. Still, it must be admitted that the implicit *telos* of Althusser's operation seems to be in the end, the construction of a 'pure' materialism. In other words, if it is true that the writing itself (or, to put it differently, the deduction of the categories of aleatory materialism) is a *practice* of philosophy that cannot but happen in the *Kampfplatz*, the goal seems to be to jump, as it were, out of the *Kampfplatz*, in order to find a 'pure' place: the place – or the viewpoint – of practice. Such a place, however, does not stand beyond philosophy, as in the case of Heidegger's poetic thought. It is still philosophy: it is a practice of philosophy that produces philosophical categories, i.e., theses that depend on the decision to take up a determinate position. If this is correct, then we might say that Althusser implicitly recognises the impossibility of a 'pure' materialism at the same time as he sets out to construct it, which, after all, amounts to saying that the quest for materialism has no end.

4.2 The Epicurean 'assiette'. *Clinamen* as the Materialist Abstraction

The construction of aleatory materialism is performed, as we said, through a reading of the text of the history of philosophy by which Althusser implicitly makes the repressed *of* philosophy and the repressed *within* philosophy coincide⁵⁰⁰. In this section, I will examine Althusser's usage of the Epicurean model,

⁵⁰⁰ Such a move is grounded, as we saw, on the theory of philosophy and on the search of a *asymmetrical* rupture with it.

which is in fact the basis of the re-arrangement of notions already used by Althusser and which represents the main novelty of this late phase. I will argue that Althusser, by interpreting the *clinamen* in a non-idealistic way, sees the equivalent of practice in this Epicurean notion as that which cannot be subsumed under any concept. Stressing the importance of the *clinamen*, I will argue that Althusser's late materialism should be read, more than as a 'philosophy of the encounter', as a 'philosophy of deviation [*clinamen*]'.⁵⁰¹

It has been noted by many interpreters that his use of Epicurus brings him dangerously close to an atomistic ontology that would be substantially non-compatible with a Marxist framework. Even when this reproach has not been made, a general scepticism has emerged towards Althusser's attention to ancient atomism, and to non-Marxist thinkers such as Heidegger and Wittgenstein⁵⁰¹. From our perspective, it is more a matter of understanding the specific meaning of Althusser's use of the Epicurean model than of assessing its contradiction with a supposedly 'original' Marxism. Such an understanding is essential, as in fact all the references to philosophers already present in Althusser's works and all the new references are made through the peculiar perspective opened up by Epicurus and his notion of *clinamen*. It is on this figure that it is possible to test aleatory materialism as a materialism of practice, and hence as a 'non-philosophy', by which we do not intend to refer to other 'non-philosophies' such as those heralded by Laruelle or condemned by Badiou, but only to the specific sense attached to it in the Althusserian context as a philosophy that does not fall back into the 'philosophy-effect'⁵⁰².

It seems appropriate to start with the simplest question: why Epicurus? It is difficult – and perhaps impossible – to provide a simple answer to this question; it is possible, however, to advance some hypothesis as to what might have led Althusser in this direction. In the first place, as is well-known, Epicurus had been, along with Democritus, the subject of Marx's doctoral dissertation, a dissertation

501 For a brief account of the reception of the late Althusser in France see J-C. Bourdin, 'Ce que fait l'aléatoire au matérialisme (et à la philosophie)', in particular p. 55 ff. A recent critique is P.F. Liria, 'Regreso al "campo de batalla"', in Louis Althusser, *Para un materialismo aleatorio* (Madrid: Arena Libros, 2006).

502 I.e. a philosophy that cannot be recuperated or twisted by an ideological apparatus of categories in service of the construction of an hegemonic grammar, which always implies a subject.

that Althusser had studied carefully, as his working notes show. Marx's thesis comes to represent, in Althusser's eyes in the eighties, a sort of 'primal scene' of the repression, by Marx, of a materialism of contingency and the aleatory. The fact that Marx's and Althusser's preferences tend to lean towards Epicurus over Democritus is not the sign of a similar reading, because the reasons for their preferences could not be further from one another. In the 1982 interview with R. Hyland we have already referred to, Althusser stresses that his reading of Epicurus is intended to oppose Marx's reading, which was responsible for covering up the 'traumatic' notion of contingency present in Epicurus by re-coding it as an 'idealism of freedom':

you know that Marx wrote his thesis on Epicurus and Democritus. It is a complete misreading [*contresens complet*]. He took up the misreading according to which Epicurus is the champion of the *clinanem*, of freedom [...] Marx took up the misreading of the *clinamen* as the figure of freedom, whereas it was the figure of necessity⁵⁰³.

We will see in detail what the last phrase means; for now, suffice it to say that Althusser's inclusion of Epicurus, as the main point of reference for the construction of a new materialism, can be seen, in light of this quote, as a 'last recommendation' of Marxism, one that attempts to set straight Marx's contradictions or mistakes at their point of origin⁵⁰⁴. It must be remarked, also, that Althusser's archives demonstrate a good familiarity with ancient materialism, as proved by the many working notes Althusser took while working on the atomism of Epicurus and on the version of it provided by Lucretius. In these notes, Althusser devoted a great deal of attention to notions such as 'void', 'atom' and 'causa sui', comparing Marx's thesis with Hegel's reading of Democritus, Leucippus and Epicurus in the

503 Hyland, 'Conversation with Althusser', ALT2. A46-05.04.

504 We need to remember that Marx's reading of Epicurus and Democritus was influenced by Hegel, even if it stood against Hegel's downplaying of the post-Aristotelian philosophy. On this, a good introduction is A. Sabetti, *Sulla fondazione del materialismo storico* (Firenze: La Nuova Italia, 1962). Althusser also read the book written by F. Markovits, *Marx dans le jardin d'Épicure* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1972). A note in his archives shows that he appreciated the book and that it 'confirmed' to him the importance of the ancient materialism to Marx.

Logic and in the *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, his two main references. If in many cases the Hegelian texts remain the only primary ones, there are several notes in which Althusser directly confronts the primary texts, as in the case of Lucretius. In these notes Althusser concentrates on the *clinamen* and tries to work out its philosophical meaning, resorting to the weapons of philology. Here Althusser points out that Hegel's reading – and by extension Marx's – of the *clinamen* as *causa sui* (i.e., as a figure of freedom) was premised upon the wrong philological assumption that Lucretius's text reads '*voluntas*' instead of '*voluptas*'. Without entering into the philological debate surrounding Lucretius's *De Rerum Natura*, what matters here is the fact that Althusser is evidently eager to sidestep any interpretation of the *clinamen* according to a Christian grammar of the will (*voluntas*), in favour of an interpretation irreducible to the subjectivist dimension of the volition⁵⁰⁵.

In the second place, we can add to this confrontation with Marx the confrontation with Marxism, since a 'Democritus-line' as a materialistic tendency is mentioned by Engels and Lenin, and given the fact that Althusser sometimes refers – inconsistently – to this line as the guiding thread of his late effort⁵⁰⁶, although in other passages he explicitly criticises him (and Engels and Lenin) for his determinism. This inconsistency is difficult to explain; a possible hypothesis is the one suggested by J-C. Bourdine, according to whom in *Sur la philosophie*, the only text on aleatory materialism ever published in his lifetime, Althusser had felt the necessity to preserve a link to the Marxist tradition that in his private writings was more easily broken⁵⁰⁷.

However, this is not sufficient enough to explain why Althusser did turn to Epicurus in the eighties. More crucially, what is left unexplained is why Althusser – who knew all this even before 1982 – in fact returned to Epicurus. Again, the crucial link, both from the point of view of chronology and of theory, is represen-

505 'The whole interpretation revolves around the interpretation of the *clinamen* as freedom, *voluntas* or *potestas* (which, as if by chance, makes Lucretius fit into Christianity). Now, in this point of the fragment on dreams Lucretius' text is erased: the crucial word, is it *voluntas* or *voluptas*? 'Notes on Lucretius', ALT2. A58-02.16.

506 PHE, p. 254.

507 Cf. Bourdin, 'Matérialisme aléatoire et pensée de la conjuncture', p. 193.

ted by Machiavelli (with whom, as we saw in the previous sections, Epicurus was often associated). On the one hand, Machiavelli was himself strongly influenced by the reading of Lucretius, whose then recently discovered poem he copied as a young man⁵⁰⁸, and it is then perfectly understandable that in studying Machiavelli, Althusser had found elements of Lucretius. On the other hand, Althusser proves to be aware of the influence of ancient materialism, and in particular of the importance of Lucretius and Epicurus, as the philosophical core of Machiavelli's thought in a brief note related to the composition of *Machiavelli and Us*, and possibly intended as a preparatory note for another chapter of the book. What he had done 'in the previous chapters' (clearly of *Machiavelli and Us*) was to study the 'philosophical *dispositif*' enacted by the Florentine, but - he adds - it was also necessary to study his philosophy⁵⁰⁹. Many of the notes Althusser took on Machiavelli from the seventies onwards abound with references to Epicurus, and many of them suggest that Althusser contemplated, at least for a period, continuing the book that we know today as *Machiavelli and Us* in order to 'extract' Machiavelli's philosophy. On this basis it is possible to formulate the hypothesis that Althusser came progressively to see this philosophy implicit in Machiavelli, and nurtured by Epicurus, as the philosophy for Marxism. The same operation of construction of a 'philosophy for Marxism' would appear, if considered in this light, similar to the operation attempted in the sixties of the extraction of Marxist philosophy from *Capital*. Here, however, we would be presented, not with a detour, but with a double detour: from Machiavelli, to Epicurus, to return to Marx.

After answering the question 'why', we need now to tackle another question, namely 'how'. In order to address this question, it is necessary to refer to the

508 On this see the interesting and well documented book by A. Brown, *The Return of Lucretius to Renaissance Florence* (London: Harvard University Press, 2010).

509 See ALT2. A31-05.03, where Althusser writes: 'following an old idea of my youth, which I actually took from Marx, and which I found later again in Gramsci, I told myself that a unique author as Machiavelli could not but imply a philosophy. That in order to be able to say what he said about history and about his times, about politics and its means, he had to have taken a great distance from all the philosophies of his time [...]' He continues by saying that this philosophy must be recuperated 'by means of a simple (but arguably difficult and dangerous) work of reflection and demarcation on the letter of the texts and its background, haunting this philosophy in order to grasp it'. Shortly after, he adds: 'these two chapters [undoubtedly Althusser is referring to the two central chapters of *Machiavelli and Us*] remain at the level of the theoretical dispositive. There is, there, some philosophy, but it exists though his "theoretical practice". A first layer, that one needs to pierce in order to see further?'.

text titled 'The Underground Current of the Materialism of the Encounter'⁵¹⁰. Althusser introduces Epicurus at the beginning of this text, assigning him to a strategic position. But in fact, he introduces Epicurus as a sort of specification of another model, namely Heidegger's '*es gibt*', onto which the former is 'grafted'. Heidegger's presence – as we already mentioned – might appear odd, but is fully consistent with Althusser's idea of a materialism beyond the principle of reason. By insisting on the *es gibt*, Althusser credits Heidegger, to a certain extent, with an important discovery in the field of materialism, namely the discovery of the idea that the first tenet of materialism is an unconditioned apprehension of reality⁵¹¹. Althusser goes as far as to say that the entirety of aleatory materialism 'turns on a certain interpretation of the single proposition "there is" (*es gibt*, Heidegger) and its developments or implications'⁵¹². By such a move, Althusser aims first and foremost to place thinking in the absolute facticity, in the being-there without any Reason or Ground, i.e., without any origin. In this sense, aleatory materialism is undoubtedly consonant with Heidegger's rejection of 'metaphysics' (provided that we bear in mind that, for Althusser, 'ontoteology', the other name of metaphysics, has to do with philosophy as the hegemonic 'laboratory' of ideology, and with the mastery and domination of the practices rather than with a generic 'forgetfulness'). So, Althusser shares with Heidegger the conviction that it is necessary to start with the unconditioned facticity, and, of course, the ensuing refusal of any dialectical theory of becoming: being does not depend on any prior logical structure existing before the world – God before the creation – and the 'giving' is not governed by any rule that transcends it. However, the proximity with Heidegger is limited, as the proviso 'a certain interpretation' already stated. Althusser is well aware of the risk that one runs in following Heidegger too closely; in particular, there are two risks. The first is to again embrace a certain form of historicism, to which Heidegger himself falls prey when, while attempting to subvert Hegel's philosophy of history, he ends up inverting the optimistic faith, in the progress of the Spirit, into a pessimistic one that is nonetheless a preparatory phase of an 'over-

510 The title was given by the editor. See Matheron's editorial note in EPP I, p. 547 ff.

511 I think that one can see here another development of the idea of the 'listening' of which we talked earlier.

512 PHE, p. 189.

coming' of a period of the history of being. The second, which stems from the first, is connected with the theological element of the late Heidegger. In other writings, Althusser appears to be aware of both (which does not necessarily mean that he completely avoids them). In a text entitled 'La philosophie c'est enfantine', for example, Althusser forcefully criticises Heidegger about exactly these two related points. On the one hand, Heidegger's theory of philosophy is rejected as surreptitiously religious⁵¹³; secondly, the religious inspiration has an important consequence as to the way in which history – of which the history of philosophy is the quintessence – can be conceived of. Here, Althusser follows Derrida's criticism of the German philosopher, pointing out the determinism implicit in the idea of an originary forgetfulness of which the subsequent history is nothing but the linear and ineluctable unfolding⁵¹⁴.

It is apparent, then, that the usage of Heidegger is limited and strategic. Soon after his comments on the *es gibt*, Althusser in fact introduces Epicurus. The *es gibt* is submitted to the primacy of the *clinamen*, to which Althusser assigns the role of non-originary origin, of a beginning non-deducible from any Reason. 'Void' and '*clinamen*' come to represent the two central notions of aleatory materialism:

Epicurus tells us that, before the formation of the world, an infinity of atoms were falling parallel to each other in the void. They still are. This implies both that, before the formation of the world, there was nothing, and also that all the elements of the world existed from all eternity, before any world ever was. It also implies that, before the formation of the world, there was no Meaning, neither

513 ALT2. A29-04.08: 'I must state that I do not agree with Heidegger's 'epochal' periodizations at all. First of all because he borrows them, without saying it, from the scholastic 'economic epochs' (the first Duns Scotto: the economic management of the God's house) [...] Heidegger also recalls without admitting it the epochal division established by Feuerbach, who overtly says that the different epochs of the human history correspond to as many historical epochal divisions.'

514 Cf. *ivi*: 'Derrida, against Heidegger, in fact thinks that there can be in history manifold 'sendings' of Being, and that the covering up of Being by the different forms of being [étant] is not reducible to the inaugural form of *alétheia*. [...] Heidegger is interested only in Parmenides, "thought and being are one and the same", fine, but where does this lead us if not to the fundamental distinction between being and thought, on the one hand, and to their identity conceived and expressed by Parmenides on the other – and all this to the covering up, by the Platonic theory of *a-létheia*, of such an intuition of genius, an oblivion that seals the destiny of Western metaphysics without any possibility of breaking this historical destiny'.

Cause nor End, nor Reason nor Unreason. The non-anteriority of Meaning is one of Epicurus' basic theses, by virtue of which he stands opposed to both Plato and Aristotle. Then the *clinamen* supervenes [...] the *clinamen* is an infinitesimal swerve, 'as small as possible'; 'no one knows where, or when, or how' it occurs, or what causes an atom to 'swerve' from its vertical fall in the void, and, breaking the parallelism in an almost negligible way at one point, induce an encounter with the atom next to it, and, from encounter to encounter, a pile-up and the birth of a world – that is to say, of the agglomeration of atoms induced, in a chain reaction, by the initial swerve and encounter⁵¹⁵.

It is important to note that the retrieval of Epicurus is immediately inserted in an oppositional context: he is opposed to Plato and Aristotle. Now, such an opposition would seem to stand in contradiction to the idea that aleatory materialism is to be constituted outside the oppositional circle idealism/materialism. The point is: if Epicurus opposes Plato and Aristotle, does this not mean that he remains caught, after all, in the 'problematic' set up by them? In reality, Althusser seeks to give to this opposition the value of an asymmetrical one. Not in this text, but in some other places, Althusser clarifies that the basic structure – the primal scene – of the idealistic problematic, in which idealistic materialism also remains caught, is the one laid out by Plato in the *Sophist*, where the 'friends of the forms' are opposed to the 'friends of the earth'⁵¹⁶. But in the above quoted passage, Althusser does not frame Epicurus on the basis of this pair; rather, Epicurus stands against Plato because of the rejection of the very problematic on which that opposition is built, namely the problem of the Meaning, or of the Cause. It is the refusal to think about the basis of this problem that allows Epicurus to set up a structure of becoming, alternative to that which, quite evidently, imposed itself as dominant in the Western tradition (via the mediation of Christianity). In particular, the opposition to Plato is the opposition to the formal cause, to the essence as something that transcends the materiality of that which exists in the terrestrial world; but more fundamentally, we might argue, Epicurus's physics stands against the philosophy of Aristotle, whose *kosmos* is structured by the four causes, around the primacy of

515 PHE, p. 168-9.

516 Plato, *The Sophist*, 246a-249d.

substance and of the final cause⁵¹⁷. Thanks to Epicurus's physics, then, Althusser can, at the same time and by the same move, reject the categories of Origin, End and Subject, and substitute for them a model in which the basic categories are *clinamen*, void and encounter. The resulting 'materialism' is, then, opposed to idealism, not in terms of materiality against spirit, or body against mind *et similia*, but in terms of a move away from the fundamental categories that structure those oppositions.

By rejecting the basic triad of the Western philosophy, aleatory materialism attempts to grasp the 'real' according to another triad. In 'The Underground Current', Althusser presents us with different versions of this aleatory materialism, which remains fundamentally non-systematised. However, it is possible to sum it up in the main principles that follow from the centrality assigned to the *clinamen* and the void.

- 1) '*Principle of "taking hold" [prise]*'. Every stable reality exists by virtue of an encounter that, following a *clinamen*, 'has taken hold' and 'lasts'; ('in the nothing of the swerve, there occurs an encounter between one atom and another, and this event becomes an advent on condition of the parallelism of the atoms'). This model of the 'hold' proposes an 'externalist' model of 'causality' as a conjunction of heterogeneous elements which are not destined to encounter each other⁵¹⁸. With this conception, Althusser can think of the moment of the coming-to-being of a determinate 'world', or stable reality, without resorting to any origin, but as a contingent beginning.
- 2) '*Principle of non-totalisation*'. The encounter that lasts, and the ensuing formation of a stable reality, do not eliminate contingency, because according to Althusser 'the encounter is aleatory both in its origins and in its effects'⁵¹⁹. This second principle is a fundamental one, as it prevents us from thinking of the contingency of the world only as its first moment. In fact, it

517 Heidegger argued that Aristotle's *Physics* is the most influential source of Western metaphysics, a statement to which Althusser might have subscribed. Cf. L. Ruggiu, 'La fisica come ontologia del divenire', in Aristotele, *Fisica*, ed. L. Ruggiu (Milano: Mimesis, 2007), pp. XIII-LXV.

518 PHE, p. 192.

519 PHE, p. 193.

means that contingency (in Epicurean terms, the contingency of the *clinamen* in the fall of the atoms) is never eliminated by the 'taking hold', and that there is no 'taking hold' capable of annulling the aleatory consequences of its coming to being: every encounter renews, as it were, the aleatory, and gives rise to new possible *clinamen*, and hence new encounters. Althusser writes, following Derrida, that there is no such thing as a sole 'sending' of being, but 'multiple sendings'. The principle of non-totalisation functions against the principle of reason and its totalitarian pretences, as well as against the historicist idea of an impenetrable unity of a determinate epoch.

- 3) '*Principle of weak necessity*'. There are no 'laws' of the encounter, because the encounter follows a *clinamen* and the *clinamen* that does not respond to any 'law'. But when Althusser says that there are no laws of the encounter, the genitive is to be read both in a subjective and an objective way. The encounter has no laws prior to it, and no laws that stem from it. Here, 'law' is used by Althusser in its strong sense, as a physical correlate of a metaphysical causality, of a *ratio* that plays the role of an *arché*. Althusser seems to mix two different types of causality, the metaphysical and the physical, which should be kept separated, and which in any case are not considered today in the same way as they were at the time of Leibniz. The point is that the lack of a *logos* does not entail, *per se*, the absence, or the impossibility, of a regime of physical necessity. However, the principle of 'weak necessity' appears to be consistent with the principle of non-totalisation, and can be seen as a corollary of it. Althusser does not deny that a certain necessity can govern a certain world, but argues that such a necessity must be considered as the duration of a singular thing that came to being, and that such a duration is always undermined by contingency, i.e., by the aleatory effects that itself has produced and produces. Aleatory materialism, then, claims the primacy of contingency over necessity, and that an 'interruption' of the laws governing a certain world can always occur⁵²⁰.

520 PHE, p. 195. As we can see, these principles retrieve what Althusser had said in '66 about the

Now, the fundamental problem raised by Althusser's use of this Epicurean ontology is the real function that it performs in his attempt to construct the categories of this new materialism. Does this mean that Althusser has turned to an atomistic ontology? Such an ontological and literal interpretation of Althusser's recourse to atomism would stand in contradiction to our hypothesis that aleatory materialism is to be seen as a materialism of practices. But the question imposes itself, all the more if we take into account the fact that Althusser also refers to the philosophy of the early Wittgenstein, a philosophy that involves a referential conception of language premised upon an individualistic ontology, where the 'state of affairs', the 'fact', is essentially a complex relation of (logical) atoms. Despite appearances, however, what interests Althusser in Wittgenstein is the proposition, stated in the *Tractatus*, in which the Austrian philosopher asserts the primacy of the *Fall*, understood by Althusser as an equivalent of chance. In Wittgenstein, then, Althusser sees a vigorous negation of the concept of the origin, replaced by the *Fall*, as well as a break with an overarching conception of causality. In Wittgenstein, a single state of affairs cannot be deduced or inferred from another state of affairs. Furthermore, another aspect that is unrelated to Wittgenstein's atomism seems to be relevant here, namely the fact that, from the assumption of the principle of the *Fall*, Wittgenstein is led to a silence (although a mystical one) as to the origin: *das Mystische* is, for Wittgenstein, that the world is. Without any other question – from an Althusserian perspective, this means without the activation of the principle of Reason and its quest for a grounding origin.

As in the case of Wittgenstein, we might argue that Althusser's turn to Epicurus has nothing to do, in the first place, with atomism in itself. In other notes dating from the same period, there are some elements that support the idea that it is necessary to interpret his 'detour' through ancient atomism in its metaphorical valence as a work upon categories through which to think, within thought itself, about the primacy of practices; practices in terms of a non-dialectical transformation. In a crucial passage, Althusser claims that, to him, the value of the ancient materialists is precisely that they were *not* philosophers, and he unequivocally

encounter, giving to those intuitions a more systematic coherence. At the same time, however, the aleatory occupies the centre of the stage.

stresses the metaphorical value of their categories:

their philosophy is not a philosophy at all, but an allegory that, far from thinking in a direct manner, permits us to think on the basis of this fundamental and inaugural void (and I do not say, original or originary, let us be clear on this)⁵²¹.

On this basis, it becomes necessary to reject a literal and ontological interpretation of this materialism: it is not a matter of constructing a pure ontology of contingency, but of finding categories apt to think of the primacy of practices. Above all, it is clear that the void is not, as has been maintained, an origin or an end; it is not an ontological, or worse, a quasi-cosmological principle of hope, a guarantee of the destruction of things and the guarantee that this world is not perennial. If we take this note seriously, the void is, above all, what allows us to think of the *clinamen* as that which resists any conceptual subsumption, or as that which remains always in excess over any 'mastery'. The *clinamen* is for Althusser the conceptual equivalent of practice: like practice, it *resists* the transformation, aimed at 'controlling' and 'mastering', imposed upon it by the philosophical reason (*logos*); it is the notion in which Althusser crystallises the essence of practice as a process of (non-dialectical) transformation. We could even say that the *clinamen* is the materialist abstraction, which, like practice, cannot be subsumed under any concept; it is the immanent critique of the philosophical reason – its internal outside –, in the same way that practice is the non-retrievable 'outside' of philosophy.

5. Elements for an Aleatory Marxism

In its metaphorical valence, the '*assiette*' provided by Epicurus enables Althusser to reread Marx, and Engels, of whom he effects a somewhat surprising retrieval. The core question in this rereading is whether or not an 'aleatory' Marx-

521 ALT2. A29-04.08.

ism exists, a question on which the possibility of thinking about history and politics by means of a logic other than the one still affected by the principle of reason ultimately depends. Althusser's rereading of Marx and Engels is by no means comparable to the one performed in the sixties. Firstly, there is no single text in which the project of a new interpretation of Marx is carried out; secondly, the scattered passages in which Althusser provides elements for what we may well call an 'aleatory Marxism' are more in the state of notes, or unfinished texts, and they are often part of broader texts. A major difference is that Althusser opposes Marx to Marx, as well as Engels to Engels (and Marx), excavating their texts in search of the nodal points where Marx has been able to think by means of a different logic. It is a matter of showing that Marx is not at all 'dead'⁵²², and if Althusser concedes that Marx and Engels surrendered to the logic of the principle of reason (i.e., to 'metaphysics'), somehow endorsing the allegations that the *nouveaux philosophes* addressed to Marx, nonetheless his main preoccupation is to show that, within Marx, two different tendencies exist; an 'aleatory materialist' one and an 'idealist' one. If the latter ultimately gained victory, the first would be, for Althusser, the point of departure for a new Marxism.

Overall, although dispersed, it is possible to extract from the last writings two main points concerning Althusser's new reading. The first concerns, quite unsurprisingly, the aleatory reformulation of the concept of 'mode of production', which Althusser still considers to be the basic concept of historicity, and hence of the science of history. The second concerns, instead, the historico-aleatory formation of historical actors. These two points, which remain quite unrelated in Althusser's last writings, are the two inner tendencies of Althusser's last aleatory Marxism.

1) On the Mode of Production

In 'The Underground Current', Althusser argues that, in Marx, two concep-

⁵²² Althusser never refers to Benoist's book on Marx (J.M. Benoist, *Marx est mort* (Paris: PUF, 1994 [1970])), but his last writings show that he was aware of the anti-Marxist turn in French philosophy, and sometimes refers to Glucksmann in negative terms. See PHE, p. 10 and the editor's note 11 on p. 151.

tions of the category of mode of production can be found. The first is a conception that Althusser defines as 'totalitarian', where the mode of production is conceived as a final cause that predetermines, in advance, the encounter between the owners of the means of production and the free hands: this is the dominant model that one can find in *Capital*. Such a conception, evidently a Hegelian one, substitutes the logic of reproduction for the logic of production, and leads one to think of the proletariat as an essence that is being produced by capitalism, and which also represents the possibility of its overcoming. From here, argues Althusser, stem all the philosophical and political consequences that affected the communist movement. It is to be noted that here Althusser does not, in principle, deny that the mode of production can be considered as a final cause, but only that thinking according to the schema of the final cause means that one is locating oneself from the point of view of reproduction, and not of production. The change in perspective is evident if we consider that, in his analysis of ideology, Althusser said that it was necessary to think from the point of view of reproduction.

Alongside this conception, Althusser nonetheless finds an aleatory conception of the mode of production introduced in *Capital I*, XXIV, where Marx describes the process of originary accumulation. In this chapter, Marx was able, argues Althusser, to grasp the aleatory specificity of historical processes by reading the encounter between the owners of the means of production and the free hands as the result of a swerve, which is 'the mark of the non-teleology of the process':

In untold passages, Marx – this is certainly no accident – explains that the capitalist mode of production arose from the 'encounter' between 'the owners of money' and the proletariat stripped of everything but his labour-power. 'It so happens' that this encounter took place, and 'took hold', which means that it did not come undone as soon as it came about, but lasted, and became an accomplished fact, the accomplished fact of this encounter, inducing stable relationships and a necessity the study of which yields 'laws' – tendential laws, of course [...]. What matters about this conception is less the elaboration of laws, hence of an essence, than the aleatory character of the 'taking-hold' of this encounter, which gives rise to an accomplished fact whose laws it is possible to state⁵²³.

523 PHE, p. 197.

Thus, Althusser attempts to produce a concept of the mode of production that respects its production as a contingent historical form. The underlying principle governing this concept is the principle of aleatory materialism, according to which the 'form' is always secondary with respect to the aleatory encounter, and is conceived, not as an essence, but only as duration. However, Althusser is explicit in this passage as to the importance of keeping a certain conception of 'law'. What is at stake, then, is not the pure contingency of the process – that, as such, would be impenetrable to knowledge. A certain idea of lawfulness is, therefore, still compatible, for Althusser, with an aleatory position, even though he adds immediately that it has to be understood as 'tendential law'. We will come back to this concept of tendential law, but for now, let us spell out the way in which the atomistic model is applied to Marx. After listing the 'elements' that compose a mode of production, elements that Althusser considers aggregates of atoms, or elements of elements, Althusser points out the importance of considering these elements as *independent from one another*:

every mode of production comprises elements that are independent of each other, each resulting from its own specific history, in the absence of any organic, teleological relation between these diverse histories. The fact is that this process took place culminating in a result that was promptly diverted from its possible, presumed end by 'owners of money' looking for impoverished manpower. This diversion is the mark of the non-teleology of the process and of the incorporation of its result into a process that both made it possible and was wholly foreign to it⁵²⁴.

History, here, is presented as a history of independent histories, in a way that is perhaps close to the idea of the mode of production as a structure of structures. Althusser recognises, in fact, that the problem of different series and of their 'encounter' or *Verbindung* was already at the centre of their preoccupation at the time of *Reading Capital*, especially in Balibar's paper, where what was at stake was the

524 PHE, p. 199.

definition of the mode of production in general⁵²⁵. But Althusser stresses, in addition to the *radical externality* of the processes, the 'diversion', i.e., the swerve. Against the model of the final cause and the Hegelian notion of contradiction⁵²⁶, externality and swerve are, therefore, the two tenets of an aleatory conception of the mode of production. For Althusser, however, it is not only the beginning of the mode of production that must be thought of according to the aleatory logic. As we saw earlier, Epicurus's model led Althusser to argue that to think according to this logic means, above all, to recognise that no encounter can ever totalise the process, because every encounter produces aleatory effects (principle n°2). Reproduction, too, then, needs to be thought of from the perspective of the aleatory: 'it would be a mistake – he adds – to think that this process of the aleatory encounter was confined to the English fourteenth century [...] [It is] a permanent process that puts the aleatory at the heart of the survival and reinforcement of the capitalist "mode of production"'⁵²⁷.

This last note seems to link 'aleatory materialism' to politics; but Althusser does not spell out this aspect here. But in another text, titled *Sur la pensée marxiste*, he gives an account of Engels that suggests that what is at stake in this idea is that it is necessary to think of history, and, above all, the reproduction of the mode of production, under the primacy of the aleatory, is also the problem of the (aleatory) production and (aleatory) reproduction of the political actor.

2) Engels's Contribution to Aleatory Marxism

Assuming an aleatory perspective in the consideration of history has the decisive effect of bringing to the fore the antagonistic and contingent character of the formation of the historical entity called the 'proletariat'. From the new perspective, it is no longer possible to think of the proletariat as being the result of the contradiction of capitalism, or, to put it another way, it is only possible to think

525 L. Althusser and É. Balibar, *Reading Capital*, trans. B. Brewster (London and New York: Verso, 2009), pp. 226-345.

526 Which is for Althusser the specific version of the principle of reason embraced by Marx and Engels.

527 PHE, p. 199.

of it as being a contingent result of the dynamic of capitalism, itself deprived of any *telos*. The crucial consequence of such a perspective, of course, is a sidestepping of all the problems that have historically been associated with the proletariat as the class charged with emancipating the entirety of humankind. In the 1982 text 'Sur la pensée marxiste', Althusser indirectly tackles this problem by rereading the development of Marx and Engels's relationship in a way that seems to be a continuation of aleatory materialism at another level, precisely the level of the formation of the proletariat from an aleatory point of view⁵²⁸.

In this text, in addition to a new chronology of the development of Marx's and Engels's thought, what is crucial for us is the importance that Althusser attributes to Engels's *The Condition of the Working Class in England*. In this book, written before *The Communist Manifesto*, Althusser finds an apprehension of history based on an aleatory materialist philosophy; Engels was able, argues Althusser, to free himself from the swaying power of the Hegelian contradiction, and to base his analyses on the simple *Faktum* (or, *es gibt*)⁵²⁹. This premise is paramount to Althusser, as it sets thinking free to listen to the reality of the pure facticity of the conjuncture⁵³⁰, understood as an intertwining of effects that do not hint towards any Cause and do not prefigure any way out of the impasses, or injustices, of history. Althusser attempts in this text to render Engels's aleatory methodology narratively, referring to Engels's listening to Mary, one of the workers at the factory in Manchester:

What she said did not have much to do with the explanations provided by the management. She said: there are (*es gibt*) some men and women that have been thrown onto the street, who had their houses burnt, the fences of lands destroyed (*Faktum*), and who left by walking [...] they came here, they found the entrance

528 L. Althusser, 'Sur la pensée marxiste', *Futur Antérieur*, 'Sur Althusser' (1993). It represents a continuation of the attempt to rewrite Marxism from an aleatory point of view because we are presented with another aspect of this re-reading. However, the two texts were written at about the same period, a circumstance that might well lead us to conclude that they form two strands of the same project. It was impossible to precisely date these texts from the evidence that I could gather at the IMEC.

529 PHE, p. 24.

530 Again, it seems to me that the metaphor of 'listening' plays an important role to define aleatory materialism.

of the factory open and they have been welcomed as beggars, giving them in exchange a piece of bread⁵³¹.

The insistence on the 'fact', on the 'finding' of something that has happened, has the clear goal of destroying the Hegelian logic that would later – Althusser here points his finger toward the *Manifesto* as the text in which Hegel wins against Engels's aleatory intuitions – preside over Marx and Engels's reflections. In fact, more than *Capital* I, XXIV, this text represents the most radical negation of the teleology of the concept:

it is not a matter of concept, of contradiction, of negation and negativity, of primacy of classes over struggle, of primacy of negativity over positivity. But a state of affairs, the result of an entire historical process, unforeseen yet necessary, that had produced this state of affairs: exploited in the hands of exploiters. As for the struggle, it was a result of a factual story too⁵³².

The conclusion that Althusser draws from this certainly brief and cursory analysis of Engels's work is in line with the asymmetrical displacement that aleatory materialism affects on philosophy: here, writes Althusser, there is the recognition that in history, 'there is certainly a philosophy, but *a philosophy without philosophy*'⁵³³. What we find here is the idea that this philosophy should be able to consider the factual emergence of the proletariat. By extension, what Althusser is suggesting, therefore, is the idea that any political agent is the result of a factual history, the result of an encounter: that the beginning of the political agent is always tied to an encounter, ultimately to a *clinamen*. Above all, this analysis points, it seems to me, to the fact that aleatory materialism is a philosophy of conflict: thinking from the point of view of practices, aleatory materialism should be able to think of the formation of political actors starting from the aleatory processes of constitution and the reproduction of a determinate social formation. If we relate this analysis to

531 Althusser, 'Sur la pensée marxiste', p. 17, my trans.

532 *Ivi*, p. 18. my trans.

533 *Ibidem*, my emphasis.

the political context in which the aleatory emerges, of which we spoke at the beginning of this chapter, we can see that the crucial implication of this philosophy is certainly to prohibit the assumption of a subject of history, *but also to think of the emergence of a political agent out of the conflict and out of the changing and aleatory field of the 'current phase'*⁵³⁴, dropping once and for all what the Italian philosopher C. Preve, and with him A. Tosel, called the 'metaphysical principle of Marxism', which is nothing but the exact reformulation of Althusser's definition of idealism as Origin-Subject-End⁵³⁵. Here, Althusser gets the closest to suggesting that Marxism has to consider the aleatory processes of formation of political processes; which is to say, it has to consider the formation of political agents that are never subjects of history, but always of specific, and singular, contingent and ever-changing historical sequences⁵³⁶.

5.1 An Unfinished project. Concluding Remarks on Aleatory Materialism

It is apparent from what we have said in this chapter, in which a significant number of texts and notes have been investigated, that aleatory materialism resembles a philosophical laboratory, a project to which Althusser did not, and perhaps could not, give the rigour that marked his previous productions. Notwithstanding the fragmentary state in which this 'philosophy for Marxism' exists, we tried to unearth the profound motivations that underlie it, and to discern the stages that mark its development. Although any conclusive judgement risks overlooking the fact that it was a work-in-progress, two considerations may be advanced as to Althusser's last philosophy.

534 This thesis is a rewriting of the thesis, already advanced by Althusser in the *Reply to John Lewis*, of the primacy of the contradiction over the contraries. Here, however, there is no contradiction, but only swerve and encounter and creation of processes that might generate a political subjectivity.

535 A. Tosel, *Le marxisme au 20^e siècle* (Paris: Édition Syllepse, 2009), pp. 38-39.

536 However, the fact remains that Althusser does not refer to the 'subject' in the way in which he had in *Machiavelli and Us* (cf. supra, ch. 4). This line, present in the text we have just referred to, remains underdeveloped, even if the idea of an aleatory reading of Engels seems to be quite interesting.

The first concerns the political viability of this new materialism. Although Althusser, quite clearly, thinks of it as a materialism of practices and of conflict, one can ask whether or not, in this new materialism, there remains, implicitly, a certain messianism – one that is suggested by the idea that the *clinamen* occurs *incerto loco et incerto tempore*. Althusser himself expresses, perhaps, this messianic tension when he says that aleatory materialism 'is required to think the openness of the world towards the event'⁵³⁷. The charge of messianism, or at least the remark that such an element is predominant in his late reflection, has been raised against Althusser by many. In particular, among the most penetrating readers, Montag and Tosel have argued that, with aleatory materialism, Althusser endowed himself with a 'principle of hope' reminiscent of the Benjaminian eschatological tension⁵³⁸, and that the core of aleatory materialism would be constituted by a Pascalian conception of the miraculous event⁵³⁹. The tension of the late Althusser towards the 'event' is impossible to deny, and when we remain at a superficial level – to the letter – this conclusion seems to impose itself. These readings seem to overlook the fact that Althusser did not want to turn the event into a new 'principle', but to establish a new philosophical grammar capable of thinking from the point of view of the practices. It is not by chance that these readings stress, in the late Althusser, the notions of the encounter and event. Although this late philosophy is today known under the name of the philosophy of encounter, we have insisted on the fact that its core is constituted by the *clinamen*. I think that another reading of aleatory materialism is possible, a reading that does not see the surrender to the contingency of the world in it – even if such a reading is allowed by some expressions to be found in it. What is clear is that, for Althusser, it is not a matter of *awaiting* an event. It is not purely a matter of remaining open to the event, as, for example, in the late Derrida, or in Deleuze. For Althusser, it is more a matter of placing oneself at the level of the swerve, of thinking and acting (and organising), starting from the *clinamen* and from its reconfigurative power, i.e., starting from that place from which it is possible to produce a new beginning.

There is no surrender to contingency, but instead the idea that, in order to resolve

537 PHE, p. 264.

538 Montag, *Althusser and His Contemporaries*, p. 185.

539 Tosel, 'Matérialisme de la rencontre et pensée de l'événement-miracle', p. 35 ff.

the impasse of the communist movement, it was (and perhaps is) necessary to 'think of history under the primacy of class struggle and its *aleatory* effects', placing oneself precisely where those aleatory effects take place. The main ambition of aleatory materialism was to re-orient Marxism, conceived as a political and theoretical practice, towards the 'nothing' of the swerve in order to *produce an event* – much in the sense in which Machiavelli sought to think of the beginning of a new principality in the absence of (sufficient) conditions⁵⁴⁰.

The second point concerns the question of science. Aleatory materialism is, for Althusser, the philosophy on which the science of history, Marxism as science, can be based: the point of view of practices, with its capacity for re-orienting thought, must be taken up by science⁵⁴¹. However, what Althusser says about the way in which the science of history can function on the basis of such a new philosophy is far from satisfactory and remains largely underdeveloped. Certainly there are the indications in the mode of production and in the remarks on Engels's analysis, but the construction of new *concepts* apt to consider history from the point of view of practice remains to be done. There are a few passages that affirm, in my opinion, that Althusser was aware of this problem. In a passage of *Sur la philosophie*, he reflects on the concept of 'law', attempting to relate this crucial concept in any modern scientific discipline to history, thought of from the point of view of aleatory materialism. Here, Althusser proceeds to a double distinction: first between the physical world and the historical world, and then between history as *res gestae* and history as *Geschichte*. Such distinctions prepare a modification of the concept of law:

there are two types of history, two histories [...] the History of the traditional historians, ethnologists, sociologists and anthropologists who can talk about 'laws' of History because they consider only the accomplished fact of past history [...]. There exists another word in German, *Geschichte*, which designates not accomplished history, but history in the present [*au present*]; a history which is present, which is living, is also open to a future that is uncertain, unforeseeable, not yet accomplished, and therefore aleatory. [Marx used] an expression of genius: 'tendential law', capable of inflect-

540 The reference is to the principle of reason, also known as the principle of sufficient reason.

541 See *supra*, ch. 4.

ing (but not contradicting) the primary tendential law, which means that a tendency does not possess the form or figure of a linear law, but that it can bifurcate under the impact of an encounter with another tendency, and so on *ad infinitum*⁵⁴².

To be sure, we are quite close to the nineteenth-century controversy over the distinction between *Naturwissenschaften* and *Geisteswissenschaften*. It seems clear that Althusser is relying on a distinction that remains largely unproblematised and untested in his writings. However, one can say that the recourse to *Geschichte* is made 'in a materialist way', as Althusser, shortly after this passage, argues that the only one to have thought of history as *Geschichte* is – again – Machiavelli, as he placed himself from the 'point of view of practice'. From the point of view of science, however, Althusser suggests here that it is the concept of tendency that is the one that is apt to apprehend history *qua* *Geschichte*. Now here the problem is, above all, that Althusser does not further develop this problem, and that, as a consequence, the appeal to the concept of *Geschichte* risks raising more problems than it is capable of solving. But the reference to the concept of tendency also appears to be problematic and, in the end, incomplete. Indeed, Althusser seems to be aware of the fact that the idea of a tendential law, already used by Marx and one of his crucial concepts, is by no means at a distance from a mechanistic and deterministic understanding of history: however tendential, a tendential law is always a law. To meet the challenges of an aleatory conception of history, the tendency itself, Althusser suggests, ought to be subjected to the primacy of the *clina-men*, i.e., in the passage quoted above, to the idea of an always-possible bifurcation. Hence, the problem of the elaboration of a specific aleatory concept of tendency is, it seems, passed onto the problem of bifurcation – here, unfortunately, Althusser does not go any further. Even if it may appear unfair to ask of Althusser more than he intended to give, i.e., more than a first and necessary incomplete suggestion for possible research, we need to recognise that, on these themes, Althusser's reflections remain insufficient.

542 PHE, p. 264.

Conclusion

The question of contingency, according to the thesis that I tried to argue for throughout this work, represents a *fil rouge* that traverses the whole of Althusser's philosophy, undergoing a progressive elaboration throughout the years, at the same time that Althusser confronts different problems in his attempt to produce a breakthrough in the Marxist tradition.

As all the 'interpretations' that consciously assume a partial point of view in the study of a philosopher, a reading that focuses on one concept in the work of a philosopher always runs the risk of being unilateral. My reading of Althusser is no exception to this rule. However, it has not been a matter of searching, in the 'labyrinth' of his philosophy, the 'true' Althusser, one that would stand beyond (or behind) the received interpretations of Althusser as a 'strong' structuralist, or as a scientist, or as a firm opponent of the 'subject', etc. Rather, I tried to assume a point of view from which to try to set Althusser's philosophy in motion; from which to try to open up new paths that his pages seemed to contain. Paths that have not been entirely explored yet, but that are objectively (or at least this is what I tried to show) inscribed in his writings, even in their contradictions or in their interruptions – or perhaps thanks to their contradictions and interruptions.

The practice (a very academic one) of 'concluding' brings with it something that Althusser would probably have considered (I am pretty sure of it) as 'idealist'. It is not by chance that most of his writings are not finished 'books', but 'notes towards an investigation', lectures, articles, seminars, unfinished and explorative texts. This corresponded, in Althusser's intentions, to a practice of philosophy that he never ceased to practise, even beyond the definitions of philosophy that he proposed at different stages of his philosophical career. By this I mean a practice of philosophy that did not want to seek to impose a definitive meaning, but rather one that consisted in constantly seeking to open new perspectives in an attempt to indicate, for himself and others, new possible beginnings. In a text dating from the early sixties Althusser argues that 'philosophy' is entirely, every time, in its begin-

ning⁵⁴³. More precisely, it is entirely in the 'gesture' in which the 'beginning' comes to light. In this 'gesture' - I would say also in this 'risk' of the beginning - lies the essence of philosophy. The attempt to read Althusser through the lenses of contingency represents the possible new beginning that I was looking for; the beginning of a possible new reading.

I do not believe that it is possible, and that neither it is desirable, to arrive at a synthesis of Althusser's thinking on contingency. As we have seen, the tension between necessity and contingency is established very early in Althusser's work; it sustains, as it were, the development of his reflections on different themes and problems which, in turn, change and displace it, thus engendering its reformulations. Even when the reflection on contingency becomes explicit (as we have seen in chapter 5), there is also the opening of a different perspective, and not a simple return to the old themes to impose on them a sort of systematicity that they lacked.

I indicated in the chapters the points that I consider problematic in Althusser's philosophy, or the 'nodal points' that come to light when the question of necessity and contingency is taken into account. At the same time, I willingly confess that I do not consider my work on Althusser to be finished. It would hardly be, also in light of the status of the publications (some of which seem to be particularly promising for studying the relationship between Machiavelli, Epicurus and the notion of the 'subject' in the seventies, for example, as I noted in chapter 4⁵⁴⁴), but also in light of the amount of the unpublished materials that might well change not only the 'old', but also the most recent interpretations, or at least modify them on important points. However, what I hope to have been able to show, sometimes even 'risking' and going beyond the *littera* of the texts, is not only that Althusser confronted, for long time, the question of contingency; but also that along this path, which he opened, there is still much to be thought and done.

543 L. Althusser, *Écrits Philosophiques et politiques II*, ed. F. Matheron (Paris: STOCK/IMEC, 1995), pp. 7-8.

544 Althusser's textbook titled *Être marxistes en philosophie* (Paris: PUF, 2015) is particularly relevant on this point; it was published when my thesis was already at an advanced stage and I could only partially integrate it in the present work.

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