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BOOK REVIEW

Title ‘Is it Simple to Be a Marxist in Pedagogy?’.

Book details **The Gold and the Dross: Althusser for Educators**, by David Backer, Leiden and Boston, Brill, 2019, 82 pp., €45.00 (paperback), ISBN 978-90-04-39468-1

> This theoretical work is not an abstraction in the sense of empiricist ideology. To know is not to extract from the impurities and diversity of the real the pure essence contained in the real, as gold is extracted from the dross of sand and dirt in which it is contained. To know is to *produce* the adequate concept of the object by putting to work means of theoretical production (theory and method), applied to a given raw material. This *production* of knowledge in a given science is a *specific practice* which should be called *theoretical practice - a specific practice, distinct, that is, from other existing practices* (economic, political, ideological practices) a*nd absolutely irreplaceable at its level and function* (Althusser 1990, 15).

Publishing a book subtitled *Althusser for Educators* in 2019 is both timely and problematic. Timely, as there is a current resurgence of interest in the work of Louis Althusser. Problematic, for reasons personal, political, and pedagogic. Unavoidably, all these themes converge scandalously within the mythology of Althusser, *maître à penser* of the elite Parisian university *L'École normale supérieure* (ENS), *Theorist* ‘with a capital T’ (1979 [1965, 162), self-appointed defender of Marxist ‘science’ from its deviations within the French (PCF) and Soviet [PCSU] Communist Parties, and the murderer of his wife, the Communist activist Hélène Rytman on 16th November 1980**.**

As has been said elsewhere, it is difficult to know where to begin with the Althusserian legacy. Gregory Elliott’s *The Detour of Theory* (Elliott 2015 [1987]), which remains the definitive account of Althusser’s work to date, self-identifies as ‘anti-anti-Althusserian’ (2015 [1987], x). Yet, as Peter Osborne recognises in his review of that book, it is not ‘so easy as Elliott supposes to be an 'anti-anti-Althusserian' without being for Althusser’ (Osborne 1989, 44). Backer’s book is intended as a short-form introduction to Althusser for those who have never encountered his thought before (Backer 2019, xii). It also is written in a style which deliberately tries to engage these unfamiliar readers, using anecdotal recollections to explain key Althusserian concepts. For example, the author’s childhood classroom admonishments and barroom romances in adulthood are invoked to explain ‘interpellation’. As the readers of this journal will recognise, relating complicated concepts to students’ socio-cultural spheres is a tried and tested method of pedagogy. Outside of the classroom, the orality of this style will engage and alienate in equal measure. However, a strength of Backer’s book is that each of these anecdotes is juxtaposed with unedited excerpts from Althusser’s texts, allowing the reader to test Backer’s subjectivist interpretations against the evidence of the text.

It should be highlighted that Backer promises a ‘longer, more technical manuscript on Althusser’s influence on educational thinking’ (Ibid.) in 2020, which should complement the present volume well. Given this, perhaps it is beyond the remit of this book to engage with the Althusserian legacy in depth, and unfair to criticise the author for this absence. As Elliott rightly points out, ‘the testimony of [Althusser’s] students and others to his liberating intellectual influence – and generosity – is there for those who want to read it’ (Elliott 2015 [1987], 313). At the same time, Backer concedes that Althusser’s ‘personal and political history’ is ‘crucial for understanding his philosophy’ (xiii), but only briefly discusses this problematic inheritance in the introduction (xiii-xvi). The result is that the author’s enthusiastic metaphorical explanations could be interpreted as uncritically pro-Althusserian. In his ‘Elements of Self-Criticism’ essay of 1974 (Althusser 1976, 132-4), Althusser recounts the difficulties of remaining a ‘Marxist in Philosophy’ (133), and how it became necessary to take a Spinozist detour

through Theory to mitigate against Party dogmatism and Marxist-humanist revisionism. To accurately assess the legacy of 'Althusser for Educators' it is necessary to also take a detour, through the history of Althusserianism and its political effects, which is also to confront the difficulties, faced by both Althusser and Backer, of being a Marxist in pedagogy.

A Detour, or, A Brief Critical History of Althusserian Theoreticism

The recent fiftieth anniversary of *Reading Capital* (2015 [1965]) and *For Marx* (1979 [1965]) partly explains the current 'return' to Althusser. These massively influential texts laid down the foundations of the high-Althusserian schema, and its signature concepts of the 'epistemological break' from early to mature Marx, contradiction, overdetermination, structural causality, relative autonomy, and the 'Theory of theoretical practice' (Althusser 1990, 42, 208-9). The latter was weaponised against reductive humanisms, historicisms, and empiricisms (Osborne 1989, 42). Emerging currents of new materialist and posthumanist thinking (Diefenbach et al 2013) have turned to the late Althusserian 'aleatory materialism', or 'materialism of the encounter' (Althusser 2006), to construct a radically decentred anti-humanist ontology. However, the current conjuncture has also foregrounded political reasons to revisit these classic Althusserian texts. As Bargu and Marasco (2019, 239) recognise, in a recent special edition of *Rethinking Marxism* devoted to Althusser, 'while the alt-right is galvanized by the specter of 'cultural Marxism', a term that could also be applied to Althusser's thought and his celebrated concept of ideology, and while "democratic socialism" comes back into political vogue, the moment seems ripe for a reassessment of his works'. Such a reassessment would represent an unlikely salvation for a philosopher whose presence dominated theoretical debates within early 1970s Leftist circles, especially in the UK, but whose theoretical star had fallen to such a degree that by the 80s even his biographer Elliot conceded that the philosopher was a 'dead dog' (2015 [1987], xiii).

The tragic death of Hélène Rytman has meant that Althusserianism has been 'subjected to irrational extremes of abuse and adulation' (McCarney 1989, 115). Much of the most abusive commentary has been *ad hominem*. A prime example is Boyer's (2014) 'Kill the Philosopher in Your Head', which misrepresents Althusser's theory of ideology as 'the imaginary representation of imaginary relations to real conditions' (Boyer 2014; cf Althusser 1971, 162) to rhetorically equate his anti-humanist system to the psychotic detachment Althusser experienced as he strangled Hélène (Cf. Althusser 1993, 15-17). Boyer's attack reiterates the earlier, more sophisticated, polemic by Geraldine Finn (1981) 'Why Althusser Killed His Wife'. Within, Finn rightly objects to the transformation of Hélène's murder, by a sycophantic and patriarchal academy, into the tragic struggle of Althusser against debilitating delirium and torment. In an age where the #MeToo internet campaign has exposed structures of institutional protection for male sexual predators, and the growing gender pay gap between male and female academics increasingly highlighted (UCU 2020; Kintsler 2017), a return to Althusser could be marked as a return to the status quo. Yet, at the risk of reproducing a patriarchal apologia, some of the burials of Althusser's system, via charges against Althusser the man, seem vengeful rather than rational.

The most powerful critique of Althusser remains E. P. Thompson's (1995 [1978]) *The Poverty of Theory*. Therein, Althusserianism is not only dismissed as an idealism but also as a theology (1995 [1978], 5). The charge of 'theology' certainly chimes with the cult-like celebrity of Althusser within the ENS, and the elite *Cercle d'Ulm*, and his centralisation of *Capital* as the 'Holy Text' of Marxist science. Its idealism, for Thompson, stems from the proposition that 'theoretical procedures *in themselves* can refine ideological impurities out of their given materials', resulting in the apparent proposal of 'some ever-pre-given Marxist Idea outside the material and social world' (Thompson 1995 [1978], 15). Similarly, its 'defence of 'science' (against ideology) and of some kind of authentic Leninism (against contemporary Soviet political orthodoxy)' (Osborne 1980, 42). However, the terrain which Thompson really wants to defend is historical research and the historian's empirical method, which he argues

collapse into the generalities 'historicism' and 'empiricism' in Althusser's work (1-5). For Thompson, Althusser's disregard for the methods and evidence of the historian results in an epistemology completely incapable of dealing with the complexity of social experience, focusing on represented or imagined social experience rather than lived (5-6). As a corrective, Thompson supplements the Althusserian procedural schema of 'theoretical practice' ('Generalities I' [G1]: pre-existing ideological concepts; reworked by 'Generalities II' [G2]: modes of production / theoretical practice; producing 'Generalities III' [G3]: new scientific knowledge) (Althusser 1979 [1965], 182-93). Thompson complicates and bifurcates G1 into 'Experience I' [E1]: 'lived experience' and 'Experience II' [E2]: 'perceived experience' (Thompson 1995 [1978], 300-1). Worse than any epistemological shortcomings, Althusserianism was for Thompson a form of 'Stalinism without Stalin', which 'reimposed the disciplinary controls of State and Party and re-established ideological orthodoxy' (332-3). Yet, even Thompson admitted his polemic descended into 'caricature or mere abuse' (130) at times.

Prior to Thompson, Althusser's former protégé Jacques Rancière had already identified 'an unofficial version of Stalinism' (2011 [1974], 72) operating within his work. His radical disavowal, *Althusser's Lesson,* devotes a whole chapter (1-21) to the disciplinary lesson in Party orthodoxy issued against aberrant Marxist-Humanism within Althusser's 'Reply to John Lewis' (Althusser 2008, 61-140; 1976, 34-72). It also recognises 'the phenomena that characterize Stalinism (the strengthening of hierarchical structures and of workers' discipline; the constitution of new, privileged layers [...])' (103) as the same as those underpinning the theoreticist problematic. For Rancière, within the space of the university, particularly the Sorbonne of May '68, this discourse intervened as a set of primarily repressive pedagogico-political effects (23). The clearest of these was the labelling of student revolutionaries as '*gauchistes* [Leftists]' implying, following Lenin's (1920) *"Left-Wing" Communism - An Infantile Disorder,* an immature fringe politics disconnected from the workers' struggle. Inversely, as part of the elite Althusserian circle, Rancière recollects being treated as 'heirs to the throne by our professors' and consequently pouring scorn on the politics of the student movement ('the reveries of illiterate minds') (2011 [1974], 21-2). This condescension was echoed in the PCF's mouthpiece *L'Humanité*, which published an article headlined 'The Fake Revolutionaries Unmasked', after Daniel Cohn-Bendit's March 22nd movement occupied the rector's office at Nanterre. Within the broader culture of the ENS, Althusser's celebrity, and demeanour as both 'kindly grandfather' and 'mother hen to [...] generations of students' (Fox 1992, 22) actually 'strengthened the PCF apparatus by recruiting students to the Party' (Rancière 2011 [1974], 23). Furthermore, Althusser's PCF played a key role in selling out the student revolution to the State. In the fallout of May '68, 'university students who were card carrying members of the PCF were brandishing 'theoreticist' texts as they called for the reestablishment of order at the university' (Rancière 2011 [1974], 23). Though these political effects must be distinguished from Althusser's personal politics, following Rancière (23-4) it is hard to ignore this counter-politics of Althusserian pedagogy; a pedagogy which argues that 'the class struggle in theory' (Althusser 1971, 18) is equal, if not superior, to the class struggle in the street.

Callinicos argued that Althusserianism should be rejected precisely because of its inability to synthesise revolutionary theory and revolutionary practice (1976, 102-6). For Callinicos, this disconnection emerges for Althusser specifically because positing revolutionary practice necessitated a critique of the bureaucratic and reformist character of the Western and Soviet Communist parties with which he was complicit (Callinicos 1976, 103-4). Consequently, a defence of the authority of the vanguard Party over the masses is repackaged via the privileging of theory (science) over spontaneous political practice (ideology). Finally, though Althusserianism presented as 'the class struggle in theory' within the ENS, in the last instance he was incapable of critiquing the actual class basis of the *grandes écoles,* and his privileged status as professor within one. Therefore, if the politics of Althusserianism can be located in its repression of the spontaneous revolt outside the university, then within the university walls its pedagogy can similarly be recognised as 'the line that separates the politics of

delirium from its enlightened counterpart' (Rancière 2011 [1974], 32). This dividing line, which Rancière (2004) would later identify as the 'distribution of the sensible' [*le partage du sensible*], separates professor from student, student from worker, university from factory, Communist from *gauchiste*, and so forth.

This hierarchised pedagogical problematic is explicit in Althusser's essay 'Student Problems' (2011 [1964]), written just before the event of '68, and uncannily anticipating the forms of its eventual recuperation. Ostensibly, the text addresses the demands of radical students to democratise the university; demands which included the removal of exams, the collectivization and co-authoring of syllabi, and the fair remuneration of knowledge labour via a student wage (Montag 2011, 9). Althusser responded as follows:

> the pedagogic situation is based on the absolute condition of *an inequality between a knowledge and a lack of knowledge*. [...] The famous pupil–teacher, lecturer–student, relationship is the technical expression of this fundamental pedagogic relationship. [...] No pedagogic questions, which all presuppose unequal knowledge between teachers and students, can be settled on the basis of pedagogic equality between teachers and students (Althusser 2011 [1964], 14).

This 'absolute condition' of inequality at the heart of the teaching scene is one which a majority of mainstream educators would still accept without contestation. Indeed, pedagogy, from the Greek *paidos* [child] and *agogos* [leader] has hierarchisation written into it, etymologically, conceptually, and institutionally. Similarly, in the current technocratic, neoliberal, instrumentalised educational conjuncture, Althusser's rejection of demands to democratise the university as an 'anarcho-democratic conception of pedagogy' (2011 [1964], 15) would presumably remain uncontroversial. Yet, as Althusser found, the uncritical acceptance of inequality as the absolute condition of pedagogy is deeply problematic for educators on the revolutionary Left. How can one 'teach to transgress' (hooks 1994) if the pedagogical scene itself is structured to reproduce, not overcome, inequality and social hierarchy?

The now-famous gambit of Rancière's (1991, 46) *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* is to proceed from an assumption of universal pedagogic equality 'to see what can be done under that supposition'. This fundamentally anti-Althusserian pedagogy, forged within the French university protests of '68 and '86, opposes the teacher as 'master explicator' (16-18), whose presence is figured as barrier, not conduit, to equality and educational emancipation. The central autodidact hypothesis of Rancière's book, which is also the 'anarcho-democratic' hypothesis of the May revolt against Party and university, celebrates the capacity of everyone to learn independently of teachers, experts, and authorities. In the final analysis, 'it is the explicator who needs the incapable and not the other way around' (6); Althusser's 'absolute condition of an inequality' is perhaps merely the teacher's anxious self-validation. This interpretation of Rancière is scandalous for the educational sector, tantamount to a 'suicidal pedagogical how-to' (Ross 1991, 59). Biesta (2017) rejects this as radical constructivist pedagogy, arguing instead for the necessity of the centralised educator in emancipatory teaching, if not emancipatory learning. Whether the pedagogue retains a role within the teaching scene or not, even Biesta concedes that the removal of 'explicative' method seems necessary for any counter-hegemonic 'pedagogy of the oppressed' (Freire 1996). In 1968, France lagged behind other nations in terms of progressive pedagogy, with the *explication de texte* still dominating the academy. May '68 saw the 'master-explicators' cast out of the Sorbonne, along with their methods, replaced by nascent forms of radically non-hierarchical, democratic, and collectivised pedagogy (Ross 2002, 15-17). Indeed, the transformation of the Sorbonne's aristocratic *Beaux-Arts* academy into *L'Atelier populaire* embodied what Italian workerist (*operaismo*) militants from the movement called *conricerca* (militant co-research) (Roggero 2012). *Conricerca* insists on the absolute indivisibility of the subject and object of the learning process as the absolute precondition of radical and emancipatory education (Bookchin et al 2013, 6-7). Militant co-research is Rancièrean rather than Althusserian pedagogy.

The reason that *soixante-huitards* scrawled '*a quoi sert Althusser*? [what use is Althusser?]' all over the streets outside the Sorbonne (Backer 2019, xiv; Barker 2016) was not simply because they were the blind subjects of ideology in the yoke of resurgent Rightist humanisms. It was also because, to them, politically and pedagogically, 'Althusserianism is Stalinism reduced to the paradigm of Theory' (Thompson 1995 [1978]: 245-6). The famous quote from Lenin, cited regularly by Althusser, insists that 'without revolutionary theory there can be no revolutionary movement' (1971, 52). Against this, Cohn-Bendit's *Obsolete Communism: A Left-Wing Alternative* (1968) argued that 'far from having to teach the masses, the revolutionary's job is to try and understand and express their common aspirations' (Cohn-Bendit 1968, 250). In the final analysis, the disastrous effects of theoreticism for emancipatory politics and emancipatory education are spelled out clearly by Rancière, in the appendix to *Althusser's Lesson*: 'cut off from revolutionary practice, there is no revolutionary theory that is not transformed into its opposite' (Rancière 2011, 154). Within English Althusserianism, this anti-political transformation was acted out as tragicomedy. Two short-lived journals, *Theoretical Practice* (1971-3) and *Economy and Society* (1972-4), briefly purveyed a form of hyper-Althusserianism, epitomised by sociologists Barry Hindess and Paul Hirst (1977; 1975). Perry Anderson dismissed their work as 'a *reductio ad absurdum* of some of Althusser's ideas' (Anderson 1980: 125). Tellingly, the front cover of *Theoretical Practice*, Vol. 2, (Brewster et al 1971) proudly boasts the Leninist-Althusserian dictum above. Positioning themselves as 'more Althusserian than Althusser' (Elliott 2015 [1987], xvi), this group eventually imploded, rejecting Althusser as 'too empiricist, then their own earlier notions as too rationalist, [and] Marx as too revolutionary' (Thompson 1980, 125). Some members ended up working within reformist Eurocommunism, others for the centrist New Labour Party in the UK, and some pessimistically concluding that 'Marxism [was] vulgar *per se* and revolutionary socialism utopian' (Elliott 2015 [1987], xvi).

The Gold and the Dross

Hopefully, this brief 'detour' through Althusser's critical biography has evidenced how this personal, political, and pedagogic legacy overdetermine any easy 'return' to Althusser. It has been necessary because Backer's *The Gold and the Dross: Althusser for Educators* is largely silent on this problematic inheritance. Given this baggage, any book declaring for Althusser in the name of education must, as a minimum condition, acknowledge what Rancière (2011 [1974]) has characterised as the 'lesson' of Althusserian theoreticism if it wishes to avoid presenting as unequivocally *for* the political effects of that 'lesson'. Even though Backer's book is intended merely as an introductory commentary, its silence on this matter is massively problematic. Emphasising the necessity of conjunctural analysis, Althusser used to famously argue:

> a philosophy does not make its appearance in the world as Minerva appeared to the society of Gods and men. It only exists in so far as it occupies a position, and it occupies this position only in so far as it has conquered it in the thick of an already occupied world (1990: 205).

The same rule applies to pedagogy. Even introductory books on Althusser need to contextualise the appearance, territories, and parapolitical and metapolitical effects (Rancière 1999: 65-93) of Althusserianism, within both the Sorbonne and the Marxist movement, more seriously than the three pages offered by Backer (2019, xiii-xv). Althusser also used to say that it is not so easy to be a Marxist in philosophy. Evidently, it is not so easy to be a Marxist in pedagogy either, not least because to be a revolutionary educator necessitates questioning the validity of the educational ISAs professional educators depend upon for the reproduction of their knowledge-labour (Althusser 2014; Althusser 1971, 130-1). For Althusser, 'a Marxist cannot fight, in what he writes or in what he does, without thinking out the struggle, without thinking out the conditions, the mechanisms and the stakes of the battle in which

he is engaged and which engages him' (1990, 167). Unfortunately, Backer's book sidesteps such challenges, or any rigorous conjunctural analysis of the forces and relations of contemporary educational production, necessary for the development of a revolutionary, anti-capitalist pedagogy. This is a shame, as its first section on Althusser's ISA essay states explicitly that it is intended for activists as well as educators (19). Despite the claims of the book's afterword that Backer 'offers a new style of writing, one that has unique educational potentials' (Backer 2019, 78) and therein outlines a 'uniquely Althusserian pedagogy: an attempt to teach philosophy as a practice of cuts and swerves' (79), it needs to be emphasised that this book is not Althusserian, in the sense outlined above.. It forgoes historical and dialectical materialist analysis altogether in favour of an idiosyncratic attempt to introduce a selection of Althusser's key concepts by way of metaphor or analogy. Many of these explanations unhelpfully obfuscate rather than clarify the sophistication of Althusser's thought (the section on the 'interpellation machine' (Backer 2019, 13-14) is particularly confusing). This is certainly not 'theoretical practice', nor theoreticist pedagogy, but then again, this is not the author's stated ambition. Many would consider Backer's idiosyncratic approach infinitely preferable to heavy theoreticist 'explication'. iven the book's history as a'pamphlet for student teachers and activists studying interpellation (and sometimes philosophy) for the first time' (19), alongside Backer's declaration for the Democratic Socialists of America [DSA] (40-1), it is perhaps better conceived of as political as well as pedagogic practice , or (generously) the class struggle in pedagogy.

However, it is worth restating Rancière's argument that 'Althusserianism is a theory of education, and every theory of education is committed to preserving the power it seeks to bring to light' (52). An unfortunate consequence of Backer's strategy of reading, which in the final analysis is actually a strategy of experimental writing (79), is that it recenters the pedagogue's explication in precisely the same manner as Althusserianism. However, the afterword's claims do beg the question - "What would a truly Althusserian 'pedagogy of the encounter' look like"? How can one teach the 'swerve' or more importantly the 'void' where, 'before the [ideological] world, there is only the [...] non-world which is merely the existence of atoms' (Althusser 2006, 170)? Such questions cannot be addressed here, and perhaps not adequately in any introductory book. To answer these questions, one needs to analyse in detail the ideological raw materials (G1) which an Althusserian pedagogy (G2) would rework. At times, Backer's analogies reproduce ideological humanist concepts (G1) (see the section on 'love' in particular, 2019, 8-9) rather than reworking them as theoretical practice (G2). Nevertheless, an Althusserian pedagogy would probably have much to teach us about the humanist problematic which stubbornly underpins the majority of pedagogies, whilst suggesting an anti-humanist or radical alternative (Bojesen 2020). Perhaps it could also reintroduce Thompson's 'lived experience' (E1), or 'agency as a category of historical understanding' (Osborne 1980, 42) and pedagogic understanding. As a minimum, this analysis would have to attend to debates concerning the 'intersectionality' (Crenshaw 1989) of social experience in more detail than eight lines (Backer 2019, 15).

The most surprising omission from Backer's book is a sustained commentary on Althusser's damnation of the school as the leading ISA in developed capitalist societies (1971, 155). Given the subtitle of the book, one could have presumed that this issue would have been central. Especially so, given the tantalisingly underdeveloped suggestion in the same ISA essay that, despite the school's disciplinary and interpellative function, committed educators that 'teach against the ideology, the system and the practices in which they are trapped [...] are 'a kind of hero' (1971, 157). Surely, an account of Althusser's relevance for educationalists must begin from here, developing his conception of the heroism of the class struggle in pedagogy by outlining concrete pedagogic and political strategies to transform the neoliberal educational ISA? Despite the sociological pessimism of some Marxist accounts of education, the best critical writing on education always attempts to offer prognoses for the salvation of education, despite the apparatus of education. For example, Bill Readings' account of *The University in Ruins* (1996, 180-93) concludes with the possibility of a 'community of dissensus' emerging from its

ashes. Similarly, though Harney and Moten (2013, 26) conclude that 'the only possible relationship to the university today is a criminal one' they at least begin to sketch what that criminality might look like, in the form of a subterranean and resistant 'undercommons'. At a time when university struggles in Johannesburg (2016), Berkeley (2017), New Delhi (2020), and across seventy-two universities in the UK (2020), are repeatedly raising the question of the educational ISA and the 'commodification', 'marketisation', and 'financialisation' (McGettigan 2013) of neoliberal education, the work of the 'dead dog' Althusser seems as relevant as ever. But it must always be revisited critically, and its theoretical and political weaknesses reckoned with, if it is to be retained as a weapon in the arsenal of progressive educators fighting the educational ISA.

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