

POLITICS AND CONTINGENCY:

LOUIS ALTHUSSER

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## DECLARATION OF ORIGINALITY

I, Rezzan İlke Mordeniz, certify that

- I am the sole author of this thesis and that I have fully acknowledged and documented in my thesis all sources of ideas and words, including digital resources, which have been produced or published by another person or institution;
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## ABSTRACT

### Politics and Contingency: Louis Althusser

This dissertation undertakes a close reading of Louis Althusser's early and mature works as a problematization of a particular way of thinking that, with inspiration from Althusser, I have called "the logic of genesis." Logic of genesis corresponds to a teleological thinking with reference to a model of generation. As in the case of the development of a seed into a plant, this model treats every succession as a continuous process, which one can trace back to its initial, embryonic form.

Althusser finds this way of idealist thinking to be dominant not only in idealisms, but also in materialisms, Marxism included. The reconceptualization of Althusser's work from this perspective, which puts him in a broader context than that of structuralism or post-Marxism, allows for a new axis to reevaluate his relationship with Hegel and Marx and his specific type of materialism. I begin my inquiry with Althusser's early writings, which are positioned in post-war return to Hegel in France, in a battlefield, which is defined by two fronts: the philosophies of the concept and the philosophies of intuition. Then, I proceed with Althusser's mature works, which I read as a critique of a conceptual society that logic of genesis operates in and as attempts to develop an alternative conceptual society through his well-known concepts such as overdetermination, structure in dominance or invisible time. This context is a preparation for a discussion of why Althusser thinks there cannot be a Hegelian politics and the importance of contingency for conceiving political practice.

## ÖZET

### Siyaset ve Olumsuzluk: Louis Althusser

Bu tez, Louis Althusser'in erken ve olgun dönem eserlerini, yine Althusser'den ilhamla, "genesis\* mantığı" adını verdiğim bir düşünce biçimi etrafında okuma çabasıdır. Genesis mantığı teleolojik bir düşünceye karşılık gelir. Bir tohumun bir bitkiye dönüşmesi durumunda olduğu gibi, bu model her ardıllığı, ilk embriyonik formuna kadar izlenebilecek kesintisiz bir süreç olarak ele alır. Althusser, bu idealist düşünce biçiminin sadece idealizmlerde değil, Marksizm de dahil olmak üzere materyalizmlerde de yaygın olduğunu düşünür. Althusser'in eserlerini yapısalcılık veya post-Marksizm bağlamından daha geniş bir bağlama yerleştiren bu kavramsallaştırma, Althusser'in Hegel ve Marx'la ilişkisini ve kendine özgü materyalizmini yeniden değerlendirebilmek için yeni bir eksen oluşturmaktadır. Araştırmama Althusser'in, savaş sonrası Fransa'da Hegel'e dönüş olarak adlandırılan ve "kavram felsefeleri" ve "sezgi felsefeleri" gibi iki cephe tarafından tanımlanan bir savaş alanında konumlanan erken dönem yazılarıyla başlıyorum. Ardından, Althusser'in, genesis mantığının işlerlik kazandığı kavramsal çerçeveyi eleştirdiği ve üstbelirlenim, görünmez zaman, hakim yapı gibi kavramları aracılığıyla alternatif bir kavramsal çerçeve geliştirmeye çalıştığı olgun dönem eserleriyle devam ediyorum. Tüm bu bağlam, Althusser'in Hegelci bir siyaset olamayacağı iddiasına ve siyasi pratiği kavramak için olumsuzluğun önemine dair bir tartışmaya hazırlık olarak düşünülmüştür.

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\* Genesis kavramı Türkçe'de tekvin kelimesiyle karşılanırsa da Althusser'in kullandığı haliyle genesis yoktan var etmenin yanında köken, öz, başlangıç gibi anlamlar da içerdiğinden bu kavramı İngilizce haliyle tutmanın daha doğru olduğunu düşündüm.

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I would like to acknowledge the very fortunate series of chance encounters that have resulted in this project. I was fascinated by Louis Althusser's *Ideology and the State Apparatus* in my undergraduate years. I was eventually initiated into the very adventurous world of Michel Foucault through Ferda Keskin's lectures and with inspiration from these lectures I wrote my MA thesis on sophists, whom Foucault had highly appreciated. Then, one day I bumped into Althusser's latest book entitled *Philosophy of the Encounter* at the library, which entirely altered my previous understanding of his work. However, I could not convince myself to do a thesis on Althusser, whose philosophical value was rarely appreciated and whose political project had supposedly come to a dead-end. Hence, the initial project I proposed to Johannes Fritsche and Ferda Keskin, was a thesis on the notion of political contingency as it appeared in the works of Hannah Arendt, Alain Badiou and Louis Althusser. They both recommended that I focus only on one of these philosophers, Louis Althusser, in order that it be a realizable project. I did not listen. But, as I began to pave my way through the vast number of books and essays by and about these philosophers, I came to understand their concern. This was also the time that I coincidentally met Ceren Özselçuk in a Badiou conference. I read her thesis on post-Althusserian post-Marxism with excitement and asked to her to be my co-advisor, which she fortunately accepted. For many years she has been a keen reader of my chaotic drafts. Without the joy and courage that our long and enthusiastic conversations gave me, I would not be resilient enough to run this far.

I cannot express enough gratitude for Ferda Keskin -so I abstain from trying that- who has been an inspiration not only for all my philosophical journey, but also

for life as a friend. Unfortunately, Johannes Fritsche, my original advisor, who had been for me and for many other students a wonderful “surprise” when he joined our department will not be able to read this dissertation. I pay tribute to his memory. I would like to thank with all my heart Chryssi Sidiropoulou, who accepted to be my advisor after the sad loss of Johannes Fritsche. I am grateful for being a student not only of them, but also of Gürol Irzık, who has trusted me and supported me in my path to pursue a philosophy degree and of Pınar Canevi and Marc Nichanian, who have generously shared their knowledge of philosophy in their lectures. I also would like to thank Volkan Çıdam and Ömer Behiç Albayrak for joining my dissertation committee and for their precious comments.

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*To my father, who gave me my first book...*

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## ABBREVIATIONS

All publication details are listed in the section entitled References.

Works by Louis Althusser

ESC - *Essays in Self-Criticism*

FM - *For Marx*

*Future - The Future Lasts Forever: A Memoir*

HC - *The Humanist Controversy and Other Writings, 1966-67*

OMT - The Only Materialist Tradition. Part 1: Spinoza

PE - *Philosophy of the Encounter: Later Writings, 1978-87*

PFNP - *Philosophy for Non-Philosophers*

PH - *Politics and History: Montesquieu, Rousseau, Hegel, Marx*

PSPS - *Philosophy and the Spontaneous Philosophy of Scientists and Other Essays*

RC - *Reading Capital*

SH - *The Spectre of Hegel: Early Writings*

WOP - *Writings on Psychoanalysis: Freud and Lacan*

Works by Immanuel Kant

CPR - *Critique of Pure Reason*

Works by G. W. F. Hegel

*Phenomenology - The Phenomenology of Spirit*

*Outlines - Outlines of the Philosophy of Right*

EL - *The Encyclopaedia Logic*

Works by Karl Marx

*Grundrisse - Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy*

## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

It is raining. Let this book therefore be, before all else, a book about ordinary rain. (*Philosophy of the Encounter: Later Writings, 1978-87* (PE), p. 167)

These are the lines that the editors chose as the opening sentences of Louis Althusser's projected, yet unfinished book that he began writing in 1982, during a time when he was on and off in mental institutions. The editors, who had to reconstruct the work out of a set of photocopies full of hand-written emendations all of which originated in different periods, titled this "overdetermined" text after a phrase used in it: "The Underground Current of the Materialism of the Encounter." The effect of the text is enormous on anyone who is already familiar with Althusser's previous work. The triggering instance that led to the emergence of this study is the surprise-effect that Althusser's posthumously published works, especially his latest writings dedicated to the "philosophy of the encounter," produced in such a recovering Althusserian as myself. Having come to know Althusser as a Marxist philosopher, who flirts with "structuralism" and leans towards "economic determinism," it was very surprising to find out that he had been theorizing on "encounter," on something he called "aleatory" materialism. As I delved into the Althusserian corpus, I have discovered a completely different philosopher than the initial image I had of him, a philosopher, who resisted all my efforts to approach him as an anti-Hegelian, a Hegelian, a structuralist or even as a Marxist or to neatly divide him into different periods, which in turn repeatedly undermined my motivation to construct a narrative that would track Althusser's transformation from a structuralist Marxist to a post-structuralist, or from a philosopher of necessity, of

structure to a philosopher of contingency, of event. A close reading of his texts, indeed of his well-known, much-studied texts revealed some currents, which I would perhaps never to have noticed with a lens that the post-humously published texts radically challenged.

Even before the appearance of his late works, which, in order to stress their radicality with respect to his previous works, some scholars interpreted as a *Kehre*, it has already been stated many times by his readers, either in a positive or a negative way, that it is difficult to provide a “comprehensive assessment” of Althusser’s work, since it is marked by multiple turns and returns either due to its utter “inconsistency,” or because of its interventionist character, that is, its being a response to differing political and theoretical conjunctures Althusser has encountered, or because, as Matheron (2008) puts it, “Althusser constructed his whole *oeuvre* in the dimension of catastrophe” (p. 527), of a self-criticism constantly opening to discussion what it has affirmed before.<sup>2</sup> After all, it is Althusser himself that defines his works as “particular structural effect[s] of [particular] conjuncture[s]” (*The Humanist Controversy and Other Writings, 1966–1967* (HC), p. 17, n. 2). Given this difficulty, what I try to do is to treat this very characteristic aspect of Althusser’s work as an inevitable and important component of his theoretical and political stance rather than as an inconsistency that undermines any effort to describe what we may call an Althusserian philosophy. Therefore, rather than trying to construct a complete picture, in which we can cleanly follow the transitions between the different periods of a philosopher, through a close reading of his texts, I reflect on Althusser’s

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<sup>2</sup> Matheron (2008) points out to the absence of a “detailed study of Althusser’s position in the history of Marxism, in philosophy, in the history of philosophy or epistemology, even in the history of French philosophy” and argues that:

For this kind of approach generally assumes a comprehensive assessment, at least an implicit one, which Althusser’s *oeuvre* precisely seems designed to discourage. How can one assess an *oeuvre* that was forever destroying itself? (p. 503-4)

materialist philosophy that finds its articulation in his consistent attempt to distance himself from an idealist tendency that he claims to dominate politics, science and philosophy. Although this study would not be possible without the paradigmatic shift that Althusser's late texts effected in my view of Althusser, I focus particularly on his early and canonical texts in order to draw attention to how he, from the beginning of his career, consistently attempts to articulate a materialist position against an idealist one. I try to substantiate the thesis that the key to Althusser's materialism lies in his problematization of a particular way of thinking that he calls the ideology of genesis, which he claims Hegel to have given its ultimate theoretical form, and, accordingly, in his attempt to formulate a logic of contingency, the most effective form of which he claims to be given in the new practice of philosophy that Marx introduces. So, a discussion of this particular way of thinking also aims to reconstruct Althusser's specific understanding of materialism and his relation to Hegel and Marx.

One important point that I would like to develop is that Althusser's materialism, which finds its articulation through a web of concepts he invents or borrows from other disciplines is, at the same time, a political position, which derives from his project of refounding Marxism on scientific grounds, rather than on subjectivism. I believe that it is only in a retrospective manner, after the reframing of his oeuvre by the publication of his early and late texts and the notes and articles that are contemporaneous with his canonical texts, yet publicly unknown or in limited circulation, that one can grasp the significance of Althusser's lifetime philosophical and political struggle with idealism and the relation of this struggle with scientific practice, the absence of which, he defends, puts at risk both philosophy and politics. Although there may be differences between the early and the late Althusser with

respect to concepts, problems and the points of emphasis, he is loyal to the idea that the absence of a philosophy in the materialist sense means the absence of politics in the revolutionary sense, which is a restatement of the Leninist dictum that Althusser likes to repeat “without revolutionary theory, no revolutionary practice.”

Before I begin this inquiry, however, I would like to look at the reasons that closed and then re-opened the Althusser case. This kind of detour, which aims to justify why I find Althusser to be an important philosophical figure, is perhaps not awaited from studies on philosophers that are Althusser’s contemporaries such as Michel Foucault, Jacques Lacan, Jacques Derrida, or Gilles Deleuze. After all, Althusser was announced a “dead dog” with the downfall of Althusserianism of the ‘60s and his “philosophical” value was very much debated. The following section aims to present the many ways in which Althusser’s work has been perceived, and to clarify why there is a return to him beginning with the close of the twentieth century. Through such a detour I aim to position my study as a response to the recent resurgence of Althusser in the overall Althusser scholarship.

### 1.1 Why re-turn to Althusser?

The person who is addressing you is, like all the rest of us, merely a particular structural effect of this conjuncture, an effect that, like each and every one of us, has a proper name. The theoretical conjuncture that dominates us has produced an Althusser-effect. (HC, p. 17, n. 2)

In a collection of essays edited by Terrell Carver and James Martin (2006) on continental political thought, Althusser is listed among the key political thinkers in continental tradition. Despite the efforts of the editors, however, Althusser’s name seems incongruous with the rest of the thinkers that are chosen for the book. That

Althusser is “out of place” cannot be evinced more clearly than the opening words of the essay on him:

More than a quarter of a century after Louis Althusser’s heyday, one wonders how this rather troubled French professor managed to create such a buzz with the publication of only two books – *Reading Capital* and *For Marx*. (Arditi, 2006, p.193)

Arditi’s wonder is symptomatic; one would not wonder why Althusser was so influential if he were not out of date now. This wonder ostracizes Althusser from the company of “key continental thinkers,” who obviously deserved their rightful place owing to a genuine thought, not to some ephemeral ideas lacking philosophical depth and rigor. Hence, the essay testifies to Warren Montag’s (2013a) observation that even those who “are willing at least to grant Althusser a place in the history of thought, chronicled the rise and fall of an ‘Althusserianism’ confined to a moment that has come and gone and outside of which it can have no significance or effect” (p. 1).

In the same vein as Montag’s remark, efforts such as Althusser’s disciple and colleague Étienne Balibar’s (2009), to keep Althusser case an “open problem” paradoxically underscore that he is a “sealed story” (p. 59). Again, it is significant that so many essays written after him, the present dissertation included, cannot but help the question “why read Althusser today?” It is as if writing on Althusser initially demands that this question be answered. Hence, it is important that we first clarify the reasons that lead many to pose this question. My aim is not to give a comprehensive and detailed account of the reasons that led to the demise -and the subsequent rise- of Althusser and Althusserianism and discuss whether and on what points his critiques were right, but to present the general atmosphere of the milieu that these Althusser-effects were produced. My reading, which brings to the fore the

decay and destruction of a once influential political philosopher, can be rightly be said to be negligent of the survivals of Althusserian project, of its continuation out of France -especially in Latin America and England- and also in different fields such as social, postcolonial, feminist studies. This omission, which does injustice to those, who remained loyal to and advanced the Althusserian project, however, serves to introduce as a “case” worthy of investigation the abrupt change in attitude towards the “dead” Althusser after the posthumous publication of his texts. The question why he resurrected requires that we go back to why he was announced dead in the first place.

#### 1.1.1 Althusser’s decay

In November 1980, Althusser murdered Hélène Rytman-Legotien, his wife. With this single act, Althusser not only put an end to a life, but also to himself, to his reputation and accomplishments as a philosopher.<sup>3</sup> The case was never brought to the court as he was declared unfit to plead. Althusser was not considered a “legal subject,” he was not held responsible for his actions, he was “never again called upon to speak” and by that fact, he ceased to be “a speaking subject” (Montag, 1994, p. 54). Consequently, since he was unable to hold a position, he ceased to be a philosopher as well (p. 54). As Martin Jay (1984) writes, shortly after Althusser’s “demented act of violence,” “although aspects of Althusser’s work continue to be influential in certain quarters, his system as a whole no longer commands widespread respect” (p. 398). Again, as Montag (1994) puts it:

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<sup>3</sup> “Is it possible to be an Althusserian?” This question is posed in *London Review of Books* in April 1981, five months after Althusser murdered his wife. The author, Douglas Johnson (1981), Althusser’s former student asks: “Althusserian Marxism has always been under threat, but since the tragic events of last November we are obliged to wonder whether the ruin of Althusser’s own life and career, as he faces a future necessarily bounded by the mental hospital, will also encompass the definitive destruction of his philosophical work.” (para. 1)

The good Althusser of the 1960s and 1970s was simply replaced by the madman of 1980s. Bad objects are devalued cast out, excommunicated. Of course, the Althusser of the 1960s and 1970s was continued to be spoken of, but most commonly in the past tense. (p. 52-3)

The tragic events of November 1980 obscured every aspect of Althusser's work.

Moreover, Althusser's autobiographical memoir, which was published after his death, contributed to this oblivion by bringing his unbalanced psychological state to the fore to the detriment of his theoretical production. The "speaking" Althusser portrayed himself as a fraudulent professor, who tries to hide his ignorance from his students (*The Future Lasts Forever: A Memoir (Future)*, p. 133). In a number of scandalous passages, he confessed that he had a "rather limited" philosophical knowledge of the texts that he lectured and wrote about:

I was very familiar with Descartes and Malebranche, knew a little Spinoza, nothing about Aristotle, the Sophists and the Stoics, quite a lot about Plato and Pascal, nothing about Kant, a bit about Hegel, and finally a few passages of Marx which I had studied closely . . . I learnt from Jacques Martin who was cleverer than me, by gleaning certain phrases in passing from my friends, and lastly from the seminar papers and essays of my own students. (*Future*, p. 165-6)

After the publication of these confessions, autobiographical and psychological elements began to dominate the interpretation of Althusserian corpus.<sup>4</sup> Whether there

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<sup>4</sup> Among those scholars, who point to how Althusser's theoretical work was overshadowed not only by the murder, but also by his autobiographical work (Balibar, 1993; Johnson, 1995; Morfino, 2005), Vittorio Morfino (2005) says:

Treating Althusser - the "murderer" who begins to speak after his trial is thrown out - as a case has had the effect of obscuring every other aspect of Althusser's production prior to or contemporary with the autobiography. In the most generous interpretations, this has led to this later work being quite simply absorbed into the autobiographical problematic. When Fabrice Alcantre and Christophe Brochard, for example, are able to write that "the contingent and irrational fact spoken of by [Althusser's] aleatory materialism is, par excellence, the fact of madness," the discoveries of Althusser's late work are reduced to a theorization of his autobiographical writing. (p. 1)

In the same vein, Gabriel Albiac (1998) remarks:

Louis Althusser's autobiographical texts . . . served as a comfortable alibi for the eclipse of all his theoretical work. As if the autobiography had shown a "truth" of which the supposedly philosophical texts were nothing more than masks, if not impostors. (p. 81)

was a link between Althusser's violent act and his philosophy, particularly his anti-humanism, was another issue that was brought to attention and, for some, evidenced by the tragic incident. In his introduction to the memoir, for example, Johnson (1995) raises a question that is perhaps already in the minds of many and he interestingly hesitates to answer: "can we consider the fate of the Althusser without reflecting on the type of philosophy that made Louis Althusser famous?" (xi). Again, as Dennis Porter (1995) plainly puts it in his study on French literary culture:

The scandal of the murder clearly concerned Louis Althusser the man but it also concerned the Parisian intellectual milieu to which he belonged and the critical philosophy of a generation. It was as if the "theoretical anti-humanism" Althusser had championed had come home to roost and revealed itself as dangerous and not simply theoretic. His personal scandal was also that of contemporary theory, since a continuity could be observed between that (dehumanizing) theory and the criminal act. (p. 252-3)

Yet, even without the blurring effects of Althusser's criminal act and his autobiography, Althusserianism was already in a state of deterioration by the mid-70s.<sup>5</sup> For some commentators, the demise of the most influential French philosopher of the 60s can be understood with reference to the changes in the political and academic conjuncture. Of the elements that make up the conjuncture, the French publication of Alexander Solzhenitsyn's *Gulag Archipelago* in 1974 was decisive (Breckman, 2013, p. 142; Dosse, 1998, p. 269-275; Elliott, 2006, p. 258). The "Gulag effect," as François Dosse (1998) dubs it, was such that "it was no longer possible to consider Marxism without acknowledging the somber procession of its concrete effects on the history of humanity" (p. 270).<sup>6</sup> Marxism came under attack by

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<sup>5</sup> As Dosse (1998) tells in his detailed study on the history of structuralism, Althusser's absence from the May '68 events had shaken his philosophical influence. In his interview with Dosse, Pierre Macherey says "May '68 was the moment when texts against Althusser began to proliferate. I remember bookstore windows completely full of hostile books and journals. This was a very difficult time, exactly the reverse of the preceding period." (p. 119-20)

<sup>6</sup> Gregory Elliott (2006) points out that in the second half of the '70s historical materialism was politically and theoretically in decline and the only "senior . . . French Marxist philosopher," who

two currents: the *nouveaux philosophes* and poststructuralists (Elliott, 2006, p. 261; Callinicos, 1993, p. 41). The *nouveaux philosophes*, the leading figures of which were Althusser's former students Bernard-Henri Lévy and André Glucksmann, held Marxism and in general revolutionary politics to be responsible for such horrors as Gulag. The sole alternative to Marxism and totalitarianism, which some held to be co-existent with Marxism was, they argued, was a defense of human rights. The post-structuralist critique, on the other hand, mostly focused on the totalizing tendencies of science and Marxism's claim to be a science.<sup>7</sup> In this context, Althusser's project of refounding Marxism on scientific grounds, his ambition to grant social sciences a new methodology in light of Marx's discoveries and his anti-humanist, leftist critique of Stalinism were all problematic.

In 1985, Luc Ferry and Alain Renaut (1990) published their influential and also very controversial book *French Philosophy of the Sixties: An Essay on Anti-humanism*, in which they claimed that "the crisis of Marxism . . . made Althusser a museum piece" (p. 152). According to Ferry and Renaut, "Althusser always remained fundamentally an interpreter of Marx," hence the demise of Marxism brought about the demise of Althusser, while those who were already "doing original work" remained. This originality is what makes, for example, Pierre Bourdieu the representative thinker of the French Marxism of '68, while rendering Althusser's

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could fight back this loss in reputation was Althusser, yet, he adds, "he revealed himself incapable of it" (p. 262).

<sup>7</sup> I am aware of the fact that this is a very superficial judgment concerning the relation between Althusser and the philosophers, who are broadly categorized under the rubric of "post-structuralism." Here, I only would like to point to the tension between Althusser's Marxism and the critique of Marxism especially by Foucault. See M. G. E. Kelly (2014) for further elaboration of the issue. Also see M. S. Christofferson (2016) for a detailed discussion of the relation between nouveaux philosophes and Foucault.

work “very dated, irresistibly recalling a recent but evolved past, like the Beatles’ music or the early films of Godard” (p. 153).<sup>8</sup>

Other commentators, who do not efface the role of Althusser in this period as Ferry and Renaut once did, grant that Althusser has introduced a series of themes such as anti-humanism or anti-historicism, which were then employed by post-structuralists. In his book *Modernist Radicalism and its Aftermath*, for example, Stephen Crook (1991) portrays Althusser as the “Trojan Horse of postmodernism” (p. 135). However, even such an appreciation of Althusser’s work underlies his status as “a transitional figure.” According to Crook, Althusser’s work has a “liminal character” and his attempt “to hold a line between modernist radicalism and its ‘post-structuralist’ critique” “explains both the phenomenal success of Althusserianism and its rapid demise” (p. 148).

This brings us to the theoretical conflicts internal to Althusser’s thought. According to some commentators, Althusser was already in a theoretical deadlock even when he was at the peak of his philosophical production. In 1967, right after the original release of the French edition of *Lire Le Capital*, Glucksmann (1972) published an article in *Les Temps Modernes*<sup>9</sup> criticizing Althusser’s “metaphysical passion for a system,” which obscures Marx’s real achievement, that is, the critique of political economy (p. 92). Glucksmann argued Althusser’s philosophy to be a

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<sup>8</sup> Alex Callinicos (1993) points out to the devastating effect of Ferry and Renaut’s book as “the ultimate put-down” of Althusser (p. 40). Yet, for Balibar (1993) -who does not mention Ferry and Renaut- “[w]iping out the role of Althusser in this period is a typical aspect of a more general censorship,” which denies the originality of the post-war French interpretation of Marxism and its social and political effects:

It seems important now to deny that there was intellectual activity— therefore productivity— within Marxism, not only illusions. Marxist intellectuals, and especially communist intellectuals, must be portrayed as either passive victims or impostors, the mere instruments of a gigantic conspiracy. (p. 2)

<sup>9</sup> *Les Temps Modernes* which was founded in 1946, by Jean Paul Sartre, Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Simone de Beauvoir acted as “the primary medium through which the existentialists put forward their philosophical and political views” (Schrift, 2009, p. 32).

variant of Kantian transcendentalism, in which production took the place of being. Again, the same year Alain Badiou's review article on *For Marx* (FM) and *Reading Capital* (RC) appeared. Badiou (2012) pointed to an unresolved tension in Althusser's work between "the Kantianism of the multiple" and "the Spinozism of causality."

Althusser was also critiqued of the absence of a theory of agency in his philosophy.<sup>10</sup> According to some commentators, among which we can also see some of the devoted Althusserians, one of the consequences of this lack was that Althusser was unable to account for the Paris Spring. Perhaps, the fiercest attack came from Jacques Rancière (2011), Althusser's student and one of the contributors of *Reading Capital*: "Althusserianism had died on the barricades of May 68, along with many other ideas from the past" (p. xx). In *Althusser's Lesson*, Rancière claimed that Althusser's reactionary position was intimately linked with his anti-humanist, theoreticist and scienticist theoretical position. Althusserian philosophy, he argued, is "a philosophy of order," hence an obstacle for emancipatory politics (p. xix). Rancière sees Althusser as only another representative of the popular thinking of the French academy: the death of man and the annihilation of the subject. For Badiou (2012), as well, May '68 demonstrated that Althusser and his company were "scholastic owls." "Althusser's positivist Marx" that he tried to isolate from "the subjectivist tradition," Badiou argues, was more threatening than "Sartre's idealist Marx" when put to test "in the times of urgency" (p. 12, 22-3). Thinking subjectivity

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<sup>10</sup> According to some scholars, the demise of Althusser lies in his attempt to reconcile dialectical materialism and psychoanalysis through his theory of ideology and in the theoretical centrality the concept of ideology gains in his general philosophical framework. As Bosteels (2006) notes, "because the efficacy of overdetermination in producing situations for a subject is now perceived to be profoundly ideological, Althusser's philosophy can no longer register any true historical event - not even in principle, let alone in actual fact - as will become painfully evident during and after the events of May '68 in France" (p. 125). Also see J. Martel (2017, pp. 42-57) for a summary of the criticisms against Althusser's theory of interpellation.

only through the concept of ideology, he says, Althusser failed to understand the import of the event. After all, if history is, as Althusser claims, a process without a subject, how are we to talk about politics, which obviously requires a subject?

Althusser was also the target of a critique by the British Left, which generally focused on Althusser's structuralism and his anti-humanism. In 1971, an essay by Norman Geras on Althusser's two important works, *Reading Capital* and *For Marx*, appeared in *New Left Review*. Geras's article was followed by a translation of Glucksmann's article, "A Ventriloquist Structuralism" (1972) which Geras (1972) had earlier argued to be "the most effective and damaging critique of Althusser's work to date" (p. 83, n. 25).<sup>11</sup> In 1977, Valentino Gerratana (1977) published two articles that were part of his larger investigation on the relationship between Stalinism and Leninism, which he argues to have been ignored by Marxists including Althusser. In the first of these articles, which focuses on Althusser's critique of Stalin, he claimed that what Althusser later called his "theoreticist deviation" in *Reading Capital* and *For Marx* was a result of Althusser's "avoidance of the confrontation with Stalinism" (p. 112) and that even after his self-criticism, it is still doubtful whether Althusser has overcome "the old theoreticist vice" (p. 114). In 1978, E.P. Thompson published his *The Poverty of Theory* attacking Althusser on the grounds that his structuralism resulted in a neglect of history, in ahistoricism, while his political opposition to humanist Marxism in Stalinism.<sup>12</sup> The noted Marxist

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<sup>11</sup> Later in his *Marx and Human Nature: Refutation of a Legend*, Geras (1983) criticizes Althusser's periodization of Marx's works and his thesis that a notion of human nature was absent from Marx.

<sup>12</sup> Montag (2013a) points to the interesting closeness of Thompson's and Rancière's critiques of Althusser: "For both Rancière and Thompson, Althusser's power is fundamentally a power of seduction and deception; their task as they see it is to break the spell with which he has held so many in thrall." (p. 2)

historian's reading of Althusser has been effective in the repudiation of Althusser and Althusserianism.<sup>13</sup>

### 1.1.2 The return to Althusser

Looking at the prolificacy of the critiques, perhaps, it should be acknowledged that Althusser, who for a time inspired a group of intellectuals and students, never really was an original thinker. Balibar (1993) expresses, albeit with a rhetorical attitude, this doubt that is shared by many by asking: "Is there a work of Althusser, in the strong sense, a treasury of inheritable thought?"<sup>14</sup> (p. 3). Perhaps, Althusser was at most a cunning expositor, a fraud with his exceptional claims concerning Marxist theory and practice, "renowned, even at the height of his fame, for ignoring the difference between asserting something and establishing it" (Hitchens, 2005). The philosophical value of Althusser's work seems ambiguous under the circumstances that I have tried to present so far: his personal crises, coupled with the general crisis of Marxism and the theoretical conflicts of his work that were not paid much attention during the heyday of Marxism.

Why return to Althusser, then? Just as it was considered necessary to ask whether it was still "possible to be an Althusserian" after '68, after the crisis of Marxism, after the tragic event of November 1980, or after the madman's memoir, it is now necessary to ask this question in the face of the growing interest in Althusser's work beginning with the close of the twentieth century. It would not be

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<sup>13</sup> See Perry Anderson (1980) for a well-debated response to Thompson's misrepresentation of Althusser and its causes.

<sup>14</sup> The conference which was held at the State University of New York in September 1988 was titled "The Althusserian Legacy." Balibar (1993) problematizes this title, which he finds odd as the term legacy evokes a dead person - the conference was held two years before Althusser's death. Hence, Balibar underlines that this formulation assumes either that Althusser is now unable "to add something to his work. Or if he does . . . it would in fact constitute a completely different work, in a sense coming from a completely different person" (p. 2).

an overstatement to say that a return to Althusser has been an undeniable feature of the contemporary intellectual landscape. One of the reasons -obviously an indirect one- that motivates a re-examination of Althusser's work is perhaps his influence upon some very prominent figures of contemporary political philosophy such as, to name a few, Alain Badiou, Étienne Balibar, Judith Butler, Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Frederic Jameson, Ernesto Laclau, Chantal Mouffe and Jacques Rancière. Their relation to Althusser, what they have retained from and abandoned in him, is highly relevant to any study on the current (whichever name we prefer to give to them: post-structuralist, post-Marxist, neo-left, post-foundational, post-Althusserian) politico-philosophical discourse.<sup>15</sup> Althusser occupies, for example, a central place in one of the most important works of post-Marxism, that is, Laclau and Mouffe's *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (1985). Also, a particular Lacanianism that has come to dominate today's politico-philosophical scene is highly influenced by Althusser. In his *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, Slavoj Žižek (1989), who is one of the founding members of Ljubljana School of Psychoanalysis and perhaps one of the most controversial figures of contemporary political thought, proposes to displace the Foucault/Habermas debate with the Lacan/Althusser debate as the axis which defines the problem of ideology. Again, some other influence of Althusser that needs to be mentioned is in the field of social sciences. Julie Graham and Katherine Gibson<sup>16</sup> (2006), for example, argue that although Althusser's interpretation of Marx shaped "the content and directions of social research" in the mid-80s, he was seldom

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<sup>15</sup> See Ceren Özselçuk (2009) for a detailed analysis of Althusser's influence in shaping the post-Marxian theoretical field.

<sup>16</sup> J. K. Gibson-Graham have been inspired by Stephen Resnick and Richard Wolff's work at the University of Massachusetts-Amherst. The Amherst School of non-determinist Marxist political economy is one of the important survivals of the Althusserian project with a focus on the critique of economic determinism. See T. Burczak, R. Garnett, and R. McIntyre (2018) for a detailed analysis on the historiography, the influence and the scope of the Amherst School.

acknowledged (p. 26). Robert Young's *White Mythologies* (2004), on the other hand, testifies to Althusser's significance for postcolonial studies (p. 15-23).

Nevertheless, the most important reason for the remarkable surge of interest in Althusser is the new Althusser that we had the opportunity to meet through numerous essays, lectures and notes ranging from 1946 to the 1980s that are posthumously edited, translated and published. These works can be compiled into four categories, each of which brings forward different aspects of Althusser's thought:

i. Early works

ii. Lectures, notes, letters and essays from '60s and '70s that were not published or translated before

iii. Late texts

With the early works, we find the opportunity to bear witness to a quite different Althusser, an "observant Catholic" (Montag, 2013a, p. 191) writing articles addressed to Christians, a member of *Jeunesse de l'Église* (Youth of the Church), an acute and a very sympathetic reader of Hegel. These texts allow us to situate Althusser's thought in post-war French intellectual scene and his relation to Hegel gains a remarkable depth. Although they have not attracted as much attention as his late texts, of the limited scholarly work on early Althusser, we can name Roland Boer's (2004, 2007a, 2007b, 2015) attempt to read Althusser from the point of view of his early Catholicism. Again, the last chapter of Montag's (2013a) *Althusser and His Contemporaries* is devoted to a remarkable exegesis of "The International of Decent Feelings," Althusser's 1946 text that critiques post-war apocalyptic discourses. The most recent and the most comprehensive study that refers heavily to early works, is a collection of essays, *Althusser and Theology*, which has been edited

by Agon Hamza (2016) with the premise that “*it is impossible to completely understand Althusser’s philosophy, without having thoroughly studied and understood his Early Catholic Writings*” (p. 6).

The comprehensive edition by G. M. Goshgarian -with the title, *The Humanist Controversy* (2003)- of Althusser’s essays and lecture notes that Althusser gave in *École Normale Supérieure* during 1966-7, at the peak of his fame, made them available to a wider audience than his students at the time. Together with these texts, his lectures on Machiavelli, edited into a book titled *Machiavelli and Us* (1999)<sup>17</sup> by François Matheron, testify to Althusser’s vivid interest in philosophers other than Marx and Hegel -perhaps even rivalling them in the case of Machiavelli. The compilation by Olivier Corpet and Matheron of Althusser’s published and unpublished texts that relate to psychoanalysis under the title *Writings on psychoanalysis: Freud and Lacan* (WOP) (1996) adds to this picture the Althusser as an acute reader of Freud and Lacan. All these texts enable the reader to see the scope and the depth of Althusser’s project presented in his canonical works and bring a certain comprehensibility to the opacities, enigmas and multiple “turn”s of his thought.

The effect of these texts, however, cannot be thought in isolation from Althusser’s later writings from 1978-87, edited by Matheron and Corpet and published in French in 1993 and then translated into English by Goshgarian in 2006 under the title *Philosophy of the Encounter*, in which he introduces a new conception of materialism, he calls “aleatory materialism,” as a viable alternative to dialectical

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<sup>17</sup> Althusser’s first lecture on Machiavelli dates back to 1962. Yet, this edition is based on the more complete notes from the lecture in 1972. Elliott (1999) summarizes the complex history of the text: “Derived from a lecture course given in 1972, revised on and off up to the mid 1980s, and prepared for publication after his death in 1990, ‘Machiavel et nous’ eventually appeared in a 1995 collection of Althusser’s philosophical and political writings.” (p. xi)

materialism. The publication of the late works has instigated a lively discussion on whether Althusser totally abandons his former philosophical position and installs himself in an entirely new project or not. Antonio Negri (1996) interprets the late texts as a *Kehre* in Althusser's thought adding that "as in every philosophical *Kehre*, elements of continuity and innovation intertwine, but the latter ones acquire hegemony" (p. 58). Negri argues that "the structural framework of Althusser's previous theoretical analysis is completely reversed: theory does not show the convergences and consequences, in a structural and systemic manner; on the contrary, it shows ruptures, paradoxes, voids and points of crisis" (p. 54). For him, this *Kehre* can be situated in Althusser's rereading of Machiavelli (in 1978). This makes sense, for Althusser openly states in these lectures that Machiavelli has revolutionized philosophy by introducing a category that was excluded from philosophical discourse: political practice. Althusser's positive portrayal of Machiavelli has even led some commentators to argue that Althusser has overcome the "absolute limits" of Marxism through Machiavelli (Vatter, 2004). Again, Miguel Vatter's claim seems justified if we consider Althusser's characterization of dialectical materialism in a late interview (1984) as a "philosophical monstrosity," which constitutes the theoretical basis of Stalinist regime (PE, p. 254). Montag (2005), on the other hand, rejects Vatter's reading by highlighting the elements of continuity. For after all in the same interview, Althusser also makes a distinction between two different approaches to dialectic:

When the 'laws' of the dialectic are stated, it is conservative (Engels) or apologetic (Stalin). But when it is critical and revolutionary the dialectic is extremely valuable. (PE, p. 254)

Supporting the continuity thesis, G. M. Goshgarian points to the presence of the elements of a theory of the encounter before the late texts and even in his 1959 text

on Montesquieu. Again, Gregory Elliott (1998) argues that the late works are part of Althusser's lifetime project of founding "an alternative logic of the constitution of modes of production" and that the theme of "necessity of contingency" traverses his works as a whole (p. 28).

This new episode in Althusser scholarship brings about a new understanding of Althusser, which, in some respects, is diametrically opposed to the one portrayed in the previous readings, that is, as a theorist of the death of man, as a historical determinist, who lacks a genuine theory of history, as a structuralist, who became out-moded due to the rise of post-structuralism. Under the light of these new publications, Althusser's canonical texts such as *For Marx* and *Reading Capital* are now situated in a new network of references that brings to the center some elements and themes that were hitherto unnoticed or unexplored. In direct opposition to the view that Althusser was simply an interpreter of Marx, the new commentaries acknowledge that "Althusser is much more than a Marxist and a communist" (McGee, 2012, p. 142) or that "Althusser is not the theorist 'we' (by which I mean English-language political theorists, especially in the USA and the Commonwealth) have taken him for" (Chambers, 2014, p. 160). Althusser is now appreciated as a reader of Machiavelli (Lahtinen, 2009; Luchesse, 2010), of Spinoza (Montag, 1993, 2013a; Peden, 2014; Williams, 2001), of Rousseau and Hobbes (Critchley, 2009), of Montesquieu (Goshgarian, 2013), as a theorist of radical temporality (Chambers, 2011, 2014; Morfino, 2014), of law (DeSutter, 2013; McGee, 2012), and even of theology (Boer, 2004, 2007a, 2007b; Hamza, 2016). Montag's *Althusser and His Contemporaries* (2013a) draws a completely novel genealogy of Althusser's structuralism, which highlights figures such as Wilhelm Dilthey and Edmund Husserl, while Knox Peden situates Althusser in the context of a debate between

French epistemological and phenomenological tradition underlying his importance for French Spinozism in his *Spinoza contra Phenomenology*<sup>18</sup> (2014).

## 1.2 The logic of genesis

The list of new contributions to Althusser scholarship has extended tremendously from the time I began to write this dissertation (2008). Once strongly influenced by Althusser's ISA and later, upon reading "post-Althusserian" philosophers such as Foucault, Deleuze, Derrida and Badiou, who have come to dominate the French scene, having found Althusser to be an out-moded theorist of ideology, I look at the augmentation and the proliferation of the studies on Althusser's work with amazement. After all, it is possible for any genuine thought to resurrect long after it has been called a "dead dog." What motivates my return to Althusser is perhaps very personal: feeling obliged to revisit a valuable work, which I have hastily read and little understood.

Although, this study owes its initial motivation to Althusser's late texts, it was a post-humously published letter that prompted me to undertake a close reading of his work. This letter, which Althusser wrote to his analyst René Diatkine in 1966, that is, only a year after the publication of his major texts, *For Marx* and *Reading Capital*, contains a very interesting paragraph in which Althusser attempts to clarify his own philosophical project:

Whence the imperative of a *logic* different from that of *genesis* . . . I have for a long time now been insisting on the necessity of constituting that new logic, which amounts to the same thing as defining the specific forms of a materialist dialectic. And yet, in indicating that necessity I have barely

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<sup>18</sup> Although Peden's study is groundbreaking in terms of relating Althusser to French epistemological tradition, Young had already pointed to the importance of this trajectory. Renouncing to take Althusser's work simply as "structural Marxism," Young (2004) argues such representation to be based on disregarding the "distinct intellectual traditions in France whose difference was particularly pronounced in their respective philosophies of history" (p. 83-4).

uttered anything more than critical propositions or analyzed forms belonging to the theory of history. One must go further, but I have not yet broached that “further.” (WOP, p. 59)

In this letter, which Althusser typed and circulated among his friends at the time, yet is only post-humously published in *Writings on Psychoanalysis* in 1996, the task that he clearly sets for himself is to give a positive content to what he claims to have so far stated only in a negative form, or only in terms of its “*certain effects*”<sup>19</sup>: a new logic, which, in the remaining parts of the texts he names “the logic of irruption.” What I find important here, however, is less the forms that Althusser’s determinateness to broach further take, which would be very exciting from the point of view of his latest writings on aleatory materialism, than what he says concerning what he is trying to do until this day, that is, the way in which he defines the content of his project up to this date. If we take Althusser’s word for it, then his writings prior to this date basically involve a critique of the logic of genesis. What I aim to do in this thesis is therefore to re-read Althusser’s canonical texts from the point of view of this meta-analysis presented in this letter, which is itself contemporaneous to these texts. I argue that after Althusser explicitly articulates his project in this letter, after the construction of the concepts of genesis and irruption as central to his work, suddenly different rhythms, punctuations and turnovers become visible in *For Marx* and *Reading Capital* to our “informed gaze.” In *Reading Capital*, for example, a paragraph, in which he states the necessity to renounce “every teleology of reason” and to construct “a new logic” other than “the rationality of the Philosophy of the Enlightenment” now obtains a new depth (RC, p. 44), or one is surprised by the abundant use of the notion of “contingency” and even more of “genesis.” With this

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<sup>19</sup> He says “what I specified in the essay “On the Materialist Dialectic” in *For Marx* is merely the study of *certain effects* and concerns only indirectly the problem of a logic of irruption” (WOP, p. 61).

letter -and two other post-humously published texts from the same period, which I comment below- the type of materialism that Althusser tries to develop in his canonical works with reference to Marx and his critique of idealism targeting Hegel gain a new significance.

Although Althusser does not use the term “logic of genesis” directly and instead uses “ideology of genesis,” “geneticist ideology,” or “geneticist ambition,” this coinage would not be inappropriate since he uses the term “the logic of irruption” as its counterpart and defines the latter as a “*logic* different from that of *genesis*” (WOP, p. 55). The stress on the word logic here is not to contrast genesis with good or scientific reasoning, but to highlight that thinking with reference to geneticist terms implies a kind of logic, a way of reasoning, a system of interrelated principles of inference, which is radically different from the kind of logic that thinking with non-geneticist terms such as “irruption” implies.

Althusser provides the first detailed definition of the logic of genesis in his letter to Diatkine as follows:

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* phenomenon A. (WOP, p. 55)

To understand the genesis of a phenomenon requires to go back in time in order to bring back to life the course of development of this phenomenon. What is presupposed in this approach, according to Althusser, is the existence of “a single and same *subject, identifiable* from the origin of the process to the end” (WOP, p. 55). One can trace, without disruption, only of an individual, which is identifiable from its birth and preserves its identity despite all its transformations. The logic of

genesis presupposes a unity, a wholeness and truth given in the beginning, or in the end. So,

adepts of genesis . . . assign themselves the task of working out the genesis of a phenomenon that is always *identified in advance*, and it is the birth of that *already identified* individual that they want to *witness*, that they want to have us witness. Every genetic thought is literally obsessed by the search for a ‘birth’ . . . which presupposes . . . that what is to be observed in its very birth *already bears its name*, already possesses its identity, is thus to a certain extent already identifiable, already exists in some manner *before its own birth* in order to be born! (WOP, p. 56-7)

Projection of the order of the process of knowledge onto the order of the process of real becoming creates, Althusser says, a “retrospective illusion.” The process of knowledge always sets out from a “result,” but the illusion begins when one presupposes that the result was already contained in the actual process from the beginning. Departing from the end of the process, this end is retroactively superimposed into the past fictively constructing the origin and the process of development of the thing (WOP p. 57-9). This is to say that any change can be understood as the “manifestation,” “coming into existence,” “appearing,” of what was already given at the beginning. Hence, Althusser says, “the structure of every genesis is necessarily teleological” (WOP, p. 57). As stated in the famous Aristotelian analogy, one can discern the promise of the oak in the acorn. This means

that the beginning (the origin in the strict sense, the birth of an identified individual) already contains, if not already formed (in itself and for itself), at least in germ, in itself, the term of the developmental process. (WOP, p. 56-7)

The “model,” or “experience” of generation, in which one can follow the transformation of a seed into a tree “*without any visible interruption*” (WOP, p. 56), without any radical change, is the reference-point for thinking the origin as the anticipation of the result of a process. The logic of genesis thereby offers the

guarantee that one never loses track of the initial subject even if it goes through various transformations; it is the same seed! The emergence of a certain phenomenon is understood as “depend[ing] on a linear development of a certain unity, which transforms itself into a new kind of unity” (Pippa, 2008, p. 22). To know is to appropriate the becoming of this subject in all its phases and mutations. Every succession is treated as a *filiation* that one can trace back to its initial, “embryonic” form, thereby excluding, from the beginning, any idea of a discontinuity, a rupture, a break, a void in the process of its becoming.

The logic of genesis is at work, Althusser says, whenever one invokes notions such as origin, germ, prefiguration, presentiment, draft, promise or thinks with reference to the mechanisms of generation, procreation, filiation or development. Here, Althusser provides us with one of the most important concepts of his theory: “conceptual society,” which refers to the idea that “no concept exists in isolation,” but always in a semantic field in which “it is *practiced*, used, and manipulated” (WOP, p. 54-5). So, whenever we make use of a concept, we invoke a family of concepts that are related to it, that enables the functioning of this particular concept. Althusser’s purpose is, in very much the same vein as a detective that solves a crime tracking down the material evidence presented by the case, to bring to light this conceptual society.

In order to be able to “see” the ruptures, swerves, lacunae in the process of becoming, that is, the emergence of a new structure, or of a new phenomenon, of a “novelty,” according to Althusser, one should first of all renounce this framework in which “the historical relation between a result and its conditions of existence” is understood in its continuity, in terms of an “origin” and an “end.” One has to stop pretending as if one can go back in time and restore an unbroken continuity by

sweeping away the accidents, the errors, the infinitesimal deviations that have led to the present state of things. An approach that breaks with the geneticist logic affirms the “contingency” of the past, the present and the future, an affirmation, which has serious consequences in the way in which we make sense of politics.

### 1.3 The logic of genesis and Althusser’s relation to Hegel and Marx

Reading Althusser’s work from the perspective of the critique of the logic of genesis dramatically affects the perception of Althusser’s relation to two fundamental figures of his thought: Hegel and Marx. Concerning Hegel, Althusser’s critique may at first glance be understood as one last blow to Hegelianism, which, as those who are versed in his canonical works know very well, he criticizes from the point of teleologism. The new logic, which he further develops in his aleatory materialist texts, may seem to be strictly anti-Hegelian and strengthen the image of Hegel as Althusser’s arch-enemy. However, Althusser’s post-humously published early works complicate this verdict by revealing how much he owes to Hegel’s philosophy for developing a materialism, the defining gesture of which is to reject all philosophies of origin. Especially in his dissertation we see how much he is influenced by Hegel’s critique of empiricism, which, in *Reading Capital*, he is to treat as a general theoretical problematic that is existent in any philosophical approach that cannot differentiate between the object of knowledge and the real object.

Looking at Althusser’s oeuvre as a whole, one is surprised to see an outspoken critic of Hegelian dialectic and Hegelian Marxism testifying from his very early to his latest writings that Hegel is a “fundamental reference” for himself.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Let me illustrate Hegel’s lingering influence for Althusser by two references each belonging to a completely different period of his thought. What is interesting in these remarks is Althusser’s preference to talk in the plural about the influence of Hegel. In 1947, in the beginning of his philosophical career, in his thesis on Hegel, Althusser writes “we are all caught up in the

Althusser repeatedly states clearly and indisputably that for him -and not only for him but for his contemporaries as well- it is not possible to conceive “philosophy” in any way other than in Hegelian terms<sup>21</sup>. I think that Althusser’s ambivalent relation to Hegel, on one hand severely criticizing and on the other paying tribute to him, can be made sense if we see that for Althusser, Hegel is the “limit” of philosophy. By limit I mean that Hegel is not only the philosopher *par excellence*,<sup>22</sup> the ultimate figure of philosophy, but also the major stumbling block for a new philosophical practice. To use a term that Althusser borrows from Gaston Bachelard, Hegelian thought -especially its anthropological appropriation, which completely blurs what is novel in Hegel- with its influence over Marxism, acts as an “obstacle”<sup>23</sup> that hides what is original in Marx. So, thinking within the framework of existing philosophy, the horizon of which is delineated by Hegel, obscures that which is capable of shattering this framework.

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decomposition of Hegel” (SH, p. 151). Years later, in a letter to Fernanda Navarro, dated 18 September 1984, Althusser says

Hegel, who remains, after all, the fundamental reference for everyone, since he is himself such a ‘continent’ that it takes practically a whole lifetime to come to know him well. (PE, p. 229)

<sup>21</sup> This is actually a widely shared opinion among French scholars of the postwar period and the ‘60s. For Jean Hyppolite (1973), Hegel is the ultimate figure of philosopher:

For Marx, as, indeed, for Kierkegaard . . . philosophy was identified first and foremost with Hegel, whose system is to us what Aristotle’s was to the ancients. Hegel had given philosophical thought its final form. He is “the last of the philosophers” whose speculative thought distills the very essence of philosophy. After Hegel, it is no longer possible to do philosophy in earnest. To refute Hegel is, therefore, to refute all philosophy. (p. 97)

This is very much in line with what one of Althusser’s contemporaries, the famous French historian of philosophy, François Châtelet pictures Hegel as the philosopher, who:

determined a horizon, a language, a code in which we are still today. Hegel, therefore, is our Plato: the one who delimits - theoretically or scientifically, positively or negatively - the theoretical possibilities of the theory. (Châtelet, cited in Hardt, 1993, p. ix)

<sup>22</sup> See Tom Rockmore (1995), especially chapter 2, for a discussion of the phenomenon of master thinker in France.

<sup>23</sup> This term was introduced in 1938 by Bachelard in his article *La formation de l’esprit scientifique*. For Bachelard, the notion of immediate knowledge is problematic and “there is a very real break between sensory knowledge and scientific knowledge” (Bachelard, cited in Simons, 2015, p. 69). Since they derive from ordinary, everyday knowledge, epistemological obstacles are not external, but are “at the very heart of the act of cognition” (Bachelard, 2002, p. 24).

Yet, in Althusser, the obstacle does not only have a negative meaning.<sup>24</sup> Hegelian thought also constitutes the ground upon which Marx begins to think; it is one of the sources of Marxist materialism. As he puts it, “the nature of the obstacle” is directly related to what it is hiding (HC, p. 272). Just like the functioning of an ideological notion, which “corresponds to some extent [*possède quelque affinité*] to the real problems it recognizes in misrecognizing them” (HC, p. 272), the relation between the obstacle and the new theoretical practice, the emergence of which it blocks, has to be seen not only as “a relationship of opposition [*contrariété*], but also . . . [as] a relationship of correspondence [*affinité*]” (HC, p. 272). This brings us to the other meaning of “limit,” which we can make sense of with reference to Althusser’s formulation of the relation between the visible and the invisible in *Reading Capital*. Hegelian philosophy is a limit also in the sense that being the ultimate point of perfection of philosophy, it opens, if stated in Althusser’s terms, within the “visible field” of the existing philosophy the possibility of “the production of the fleeting presence of an aspect of its invisible”<sup>25</sup> (RC, p. 27). As Althusser states in his thesis, Hegel thought philosophy not as a contemplative activity or as “a corpus of truths,” but as an “act by which truth is fulfilled or accomplished” (*The Spectre of Hegel: Early Writings* (SH), p. 41). Here, Althusser takes Hegel’s rejection to conceive truth apart from its becoming as a very important gesture, which pushes the boundaries of philosophy in its classical sense. Although he credits Hegel time and again with renouncing philosophies of origin in his published texts, it is in his

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<sup>24</sup> In this sense, I disagree with Goshgarian (2003), who takes only the negative aspect of the epistemological obstacle when he evaluates Althusser’s view of the Hegelian dialectic in *For Marx* and *Reading Capital* as “an epistemological obstacle that Marx had to clear away to become Marx” (p. lii-liv).

<sup>25</sup> Theorizing Marx’s novelty through a discussion of the relation between the visible and the invisible of a theoretical field, Althusser claims that “[t]he subject must have occupied its new place in the new terrain,” which is produced -although unintentionally- by the old problematic, so as to see what has until then escaped everyone’s gaze (RC, p. 27-8). I return to this issue in the third chapter.

thesis that we clearly see how Hegel, although *unwittingly*, paved the way for a new practice of philosophy. This more complex picture of Hegel in early texts underlines the fact that, for Althusser, it is not possible to “jump over” Hegel if one is to make sense of the new practice of philosophy Marx introduced and also that Althusser’s relation to Hegel cannot be understood as a simple antagonism between a materialist and an idealist position.

Prioritizing the critique of the logic of genesis also complicates Althusser’s relation to Marx. If we return to the first passage quoted from Althusser’s letter to Diatkine above, Althusser’s self-reflection on his theoretical production up to that date can be read as an acknowledgement that his interest in Marxism mainly lies in his attempt to develop a new logic other than that of genesis. This is to say that much the same as describing Althusser as an anti-Hegelian, reducing him to a Marxist philosopher is problematic. In this regard, I agree with Badiou’s (2005) claim “that it is impossible to penetrate Althusser’s work if one considers it as a ‘case’ of Marxism, or as the (incomplete) testimony of a Marxist philosophy” (p. 59). This is not to suggest that Marx is not a central figure for Althusser, but to reconsider this figure by shifting the focus from the viability or accuracy of his interpretation of Marxism to what he sees as novel in Marx’s practice of philosophy.

For Althusser, the simplest, and perhaps the most complex way of putting Marx’s radical novelty is to say that with Marx, we witness “the irruption of practice into the philosophical tradition” (*Philosophy and the Spontaneous Philosophy of Scientists and Other Essays* (PSPS), p. 248). However, this novelty is assimilated into the following conventional account: Marx gave a genuine materialist twist to Hegelian philosophy, by introducing into it the economic practice, which he borrowed from political economists such as Adam Smith and David Ricardo.

Political economists lacked a historical understanding of society which Marx supplied with Hegel's dialectical method. Hegel lacked an anthropological dimension, which Marx supplied with Feuerbach's materialism, which was itself blind to "the reality of social classes" (FM, p. 67) hence had to be extended to spheres other than religion, which was Feuerbach's central target of critique. Marxism, in this account, is a critical blending of Hegel, Feuerbach and political economists; a theory of human emancipation, which, by demonstrating the historical character of capitalism and the class structure of society, lays the foundations of the overcoming of both. On this account, Marx's achievements may be summarized as follows:

[Marx] set the Hegelian system *back on to its feet* . . . *extended* Feuerbach's materialism to history . . . *applied* the (Hegelian or Feuerbachian) theory of alienation to the world of social relations. (FM, p. 72)

The problem with this view, according to Althusser, is that it cannot register Marx's novelty for it remains within the problematic that Marx tries to escape from. It is only through the lenses of the new practice of philosophy Marx introduces that this "traditional philosophical problematic whose last theoretician was Hegel" (FM, p. 48) can become visible. So, if we accept the radicalism of Marx's discovery, then we should find a way to account for it, that is we should be able to explain the irruption of a new phenomenon, which, owing to its novelty, cannot be understood within the existing conceptual framework that underrates or neutralizes it, or, very simply put, that does not "see" it. What is novel in Marx can become visible only if it is not domesticated by the geneticist narrative, which views Marxist theory as an advancement upon Hegelian philosophy (FM, p. 76). What Marx introduces, and also what is needed in order to understand his novelty is therefore a new logic that does away with such a continuity, which Althusser claims to underlie both the idealist

theories and the existing materialisms, either in the form of an originary essence or a teleology of reason. This new logic, which Althusser names in different ways such as the logic of irruption (FM, p. 82, WOP, p. 61), logic of real emergence (FM, p. 82), of encounter (HC, p. 296, PE, p. 198), etc., is Marx's real discovery and also the theoretical tool with which the radicalism of this discovery can be conceived.

#### 1.4 The notion of practice

Then, how is Marx's introduction of practice to philosophy to be understood? The notion of practice, by itself, does not necessarily guarantee that this new philosophy would be exempt from a logic of genesis. As I elaborate further in the coming chapters, the notion of practice can be *tamed* and absorbed into the existing philosophical tradition by delivering it from all its incongruousness, its singularity. For Althusser, this is how Marxist materialism is generally understood as an inversion of Hegelian idealism, as an attempt to reconstruct the world on the basis of practice rather than on reason or spirit. The fundamental Marxist principle, which gives primacy to practice or reality over theory or consciousness does in no way imply, let us say, "a metaphysics of practice," but as Althusser sees it, a radical problematization of the way in which philosophy relates to reality. As Althusser clearly puts it in a lecture in 1976, practice, in the sense that Marx uses it, is not "any philosophical notion on a par with the 'object-form' and the 'contemplation-form'" (PSPS, p. 248). Practice does not refer to a general philosophical category, which replaces other categories such as Being, consciousness, reason, Spirit, etc. That is why, instead of practice or *praxis*, Althusser suggests that we should be talking about practices. Put in this way, practice ceases to be a new originary principle, by reference to which history, man or thought can be understood, but is placed in a fundamental relation with the idea of contingency. Hence, Althusser says,

the irruption of practice is a denunciation of philosophy produced as . . . 'philosophy'. That is to say, it opposes philosophy's claim to embrace the ensemble of social practices (and ideas), to see the 'whole', as Plato said, in order to establish its dominion over these same practices. It is counter to philosophy that Marxism insists that philosophy has an 'exterior' — or, better expressed, that philosophy exists only through and for this 'exterior'. This exterior (which philosophy wishes to imagine it submits to Truth) is practice, the social practices. (PSPS, p. 248)

By affirming the fact of practice, Althusser claims, Marx makes a radical intervention into the history of philosophy, which we tend to conceive in its continuity and homogeneity, that is, in Bruno Bosteels's (2001) words, as "an uninterrupted chain of solutions to a closed set of seemingly eternal and immanent problems" (p. 202). It is therefore impossible to understand Marx's discovery within a history of thought, in which "nothing happens . . . which is not a product of the history of ideas itself" (FM, p. 57). What Marx introduces is thus not a new "philosophy," but rather "a new practice of philosophy" (*Essays in Self-Criticism* (ESC), p. 167), a new modality of thought.

Althusser's post-humously published works show beyond doubt that his whole oeuvre is an effort to define and practice what he deems to be this new modality of thought. For this purpose, Althusser employs/invents/borrows a new conceptual society, which is composed of concepts such as overdetermination, structure in dominance, determination in the last instance, necessity of contingency, de facto necessity, conjuncture, chance, encounter, swerve, event<sup>26</sup> etc. All these concepts are connected in that they carry a sense of contingency that enables

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<sup>26</sup> Although Althusser does not make use of the concept of event in an articulate manner, with Negri (1996) we may say that Althusser's "destruction of every teleological horizon" is a "positive assertion of the logic of the event" (p. 61). In his interview with Fernanda Navarro Althusser defines aleatory materialism as an attempt "to think the openness of the world towards the event, the as-yet-unimaginable, and also all living practice, politics included" (PE, p. 264)

Althusser to theorize the irruption of a new phenomenon, which is conditioned upon the affirmation of that which is outside the philosophical order, that is, practice.

Focusing on Althusser's early writings and on those that are contemporaneous with his canonical works and the canonical works themselves, which Althusser defines in his letter to Diatkine as attempts to criticize the logic of genesis, the questions that I would like to address are the following: What are the specific forms that Althusser thinks that logic of genesis takes? Which concepts does he use in order to define this logic? Who are the agents, masters, adepts, representatives, executors, perpetrators of this kind of thinking? Where do Marx and Hegel stand in this comprehensive project? Is the historical/philosophical context that Althusser's inquiry takes place relevant to his discussion of this logic? How is Althusser's new way of doing philosophy relate to materialism?

Whether we succumb to the thesis that there is a radical break –or perhaps breaks- or that there is a continuity in Althusser's oeuvre, it is undeniable that the late texts just as the early texts offer us new lenses that effect the way we evaluate his works as a whole. Needless to say, my claim that Althusser's work should be understood as an attempt to “deconstruct” the logic of genesis or, in the form it takes in *Reading Capital*, as a battle against empiricism presupposes some kind of continuity in his thought. Yet, again rather than this discussion on continuity, what is of concern here is the society of concepts that Althusser thinks this logic operates with. Despite the apparent theoretical continuities, it would be wrong to say that a theory of contingency, which was later to evolve into what Althusser called “aleatory materialism,” was already present in its germ in his early works. There is obviously a change of terrain realized by Althusser's determined effort to “broach further” and “track down to its last refugee” (HC, p. 297) all forms of idealism, but it is disputable

whether there is a definitive break as the one Althusser once detected in Marx between his early -humanist and Hegelian- works and his later -dialectical materialist- works.

The present thesis aims to reveal the presence of the problematization of the logic of genesis from Althusser's first writings on and to demonstrate the various forms it takes in his early and canonical texts, that is, way before his latest texts. A close reading of Althusser's discussion of Hegel and Marx in these respective periods serves to disclose the way in which he attacks this way of thinking while proposing with inspiration from Marx or from other disciplines such as psychoanalysis another set of concepts that define a logic of contingency. The problem of contingency becomes an explicit theme and object of philosophical reflection especially in Althusser's late texts, which the present thesis does not further elaborate. The thesis aims to reveal the presence of this problem in a period from '40s to '60s.

### 1.5 Outline of chapters

In the first chapter, I look at Althusser's very early writings on Hegel, first his dissertation and then two articles on the French Hegel Renaissance, which had already begun in late '20s, but then enjoyed a revival after the Second World War, at the time Althusser was writing his thesis. Here, I demonstrate that Hegel is an important ally for Althusser in his struggle with the "philosophies of the origin," a chief branch of which is the subject-centered philosophies of meaning and experience that have proliferated in post-war France. These works also shed light on Althusser's later critiques of humanism and empiricism and show that the scope of humanist controversy, which, as Balibar (2012) remarks, is generally "taken as an internal controversy of one brand of Marxism to another one" is much broader. With

these three texts, which situate Althusser's Hegel against the many other interpretations of Hegel suggested by Jean Wahl, Alexandre Koyré, Alexandre Kojève, Jean Hyppolite and Jean Paul Sartre, we see not only that his critique of Hegel cannot be thought in isolation from the Hegel of the postwar French intellectuals, but also that Hegel is a very important figure that shapes Althusser's anti-humanist and anti-empiricist thought.

The second chapter builds upon Althusser's canonical works, *For Marx* (made up of essays written between 1960-5) and *Reading Capital* (1965), after a brief visit to a posthumously published essay preceding these works, that is, "On Marxism" (1953), which he wrote as a manual that explicates fundamental Marxist concepts. I aim to analyze these texts from the viewpoint of the different ways in which Althusser tackles with the problem of the logic of genesis and the concepts that he presents as an alternative to it; a project, which takes the form of a reconceptualization of the specificity of "Marxist materialist dialectic."

I also continue to examine Althusser's "ambivalent" relation with Hegel, who comes under attack on two grounds, respectively, in terms of his notion of totality and temporality, each of which will be examined under separate headings. Why Althusser thinks that a Hegelian-inspired dialectical materialism is unable to conceptualize novelty and how this verdict relates to his discussion of the logic of genesis are the main topics of these sections. A related theme of reflection in this chapter is Althusser's provoking claim that he repeats several times in different periods of his career: "there is not and cannot be a Hegelian politics" (FM, p. 204). For Althusser, neither a Hegelian understanding of totality, nor his conception of time can accommodate politics as an autonomous practice because they cannot register a novelty-bearing event. This is not, however, limited to Hegelianism. Althusser thinks

that neither Marxist economism, which posits the development of the productive forces as the only determinant of historical change that is to culminate in socialism, nor Marxist humanism, which posits *man* as the constitutive subject of history and the self-realization of man as an advance to communism, is capable of affirming the autonomy of politics. For Althusser, whether the autonomy of politics is jeopardized or not is an important clue to decide the geneticist character of a theory, which is a fundamental point of discussion that this chapter aims to address.

Although these elaborations revolve mainly around Althusser's canonical texts, three other posthumously published texts from the same period, namely his letters to Diatkine (1966), "The Humanist Controversy" (1967), and "On Feuerbach" (1967) also contribute to understanding his effort to found a new logic that can articulate the specificity of the materialist philosophy of Marx.

## CHAPTER 2

### ALTHUSSER'S EARLY WRITINGS

we all begin from a given point of view, which we do not choose; and to recognize it and understand it we need to have moved on from this point, at the cost of so much effort. It is the work of philosophy itself which is at stake here: *for it requires steps back and detours*. . . the need for every philosophy to make a detour *via* other philosophies in order to define itself and grasp itself in terms of its difference. (ESC, p. 133)

Althusser's first writings date back to late '30s. Yet, he begins to produce what we may call his philosophical works after the WWII, most of which he spent in a prisoner-of-war camp in Germany. These early works, which cover a period between 1946 and 1951, are posthumously published in French in 1994 and then in 1997 in English under the title *The Spectre of Hegel: Early Writings*. Compared to the attention that his later work attracted in recent years, they do not seem to have aroused much curiosity. Pointing to this asymmetry between Althusser's posthumously published works, Montag (2013a) talks about "the celebrity of the later text and the obscurity of the earlier" (p.191). This obscurity is partly due to the prevalence of theological, Catholic, humanist, Hegelian, Stalinist elements in the text, which seem to have no connection with the famous Althusser of the '60s, which is also why they are considered as "Althusser before Althusser." However, among the few scholars, who have studied these texts, there is a shared opinion that they herald many of Althusser's central themes and problems (Cesarale, 2015; Hamza, 2016; Lewis, 2018; Montag, 2013a, 2016; Wilding, 1999). I think that early works contribute in various ways to our understanding of the theoretical conjuncture, in which Althusser "had to think," learnt to think, hence in identifying the main problems, the interlocutors and the adversaries formative of his thought. These works provide the opportunity to contextualize Althusser's later theoretical discussions

through situating him within the political and philosophical discussions of the French intelligentsia of '40s and '50s.

There are several intersecting trajectories that make up the postwar French theoretical conjuncture as it appears in and defines Althusser's writings in this period, which can be reduced to two.<sup>27</sup> First of all, 1940s are the heyday of phenomenology in France. From the 1930s onwards, there is a rising interest in German phenomenology, especially in the works of 3 H's, that is, Edmund Husserl, Martin Heidegger and Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, which gradually replace the central position of Neo-Kantianism, the most important representative of which is Léon Brunschvicg, and Bergsonian philosophy in French academy. As opposed to the philosophical formalism of the dominant Neo-Kantianism -with a high concern with the transcendental conditions of possibility of ethics and science and total disregard of history- these new philosophical figures represented the importance of "things themselves," lived experience, practice, and history.<sup>28</sup> Another important element is the apocalyptic discourses, either secular or religious, that flourished in the aftermath of the war and calling out to the responsible citizens of the world for uniting against the threat of humanity's destruction, which Althusser criticizes

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<sup>27</sup> Althusser's early works are also read from the perspective of another important element that marks his evolution: his transition from Catholicism to Marxism. The effects of his Catholicism on his Marxism and whether Althusser remains a Christian after his open denial of the church are also matters of academic interest. See Boer (2004, 2007a, 2007b) and the recent compilation by Hamza (2014), for a detailed analysis.

<sup>28</sup> In his 1930 article on the situation of Hegel Studies in France, Koyré notes French academia's appreciation of Kant and almost total neglect of Hegel. Nearly 20 years later in his "Present Trends of French Philosophical Thought," pointing to the dramatic rise of existentialism among philosophers and literary circles in France beginning from '40s, Koyré (1998) enumerates several reasons, which are enlightening in terms of making sense of the return to Hegel:

Both Bergson and Brunschvicg, with their idealism and optimism, seemed rather inadequate, *in actu*. The world as it is did not seem to fit into their categories; they seemed not to be able to give an answer to the most burning questions of the day. This feeling, that existed already before the war-Prof. Wahl's acute criticism of all traditional philosophy, the spread of phenomenology, the influence of Kierkegaard- was naturally reinforced by the experience of war and resistance. For the younger generation the theoretical life became an impossibility. *Praxis* has been felt as more important than theory. (p. 534)

scathingly in his 1946 article “The International of Decent Feelings.”<sup>29</sup> The popular existentialist view, which pervades both the humanitarian discourses and the French appropriation of Hegel, is that the modern human condition is anguish, fear, and alienation and that a truly novel understanding of the human has become an exigency.<sup>30</sup> My interest lies in Althusser’s early writings on Hegel, who shows up here as an ally in his defense of Marxism against these trends.

Among Althusser’s early works, there are three texts that particularly deal with Hegel and French Hegelianism: his dissertation “On Content in the Thought of G. W. F. Hegel” written in 1947 under the supervision of Bachelard, his 1947 article “Man, that Night,” a review of Kojève’s *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*, and lastly his 1950 article “The Return to Hegel: The Latest Word in Academic Revisionism,” which is a critique of the majestic Hegel revival in France.

Before the posthumous publication of these texts, the only instance that seemed to betray the image of Hegel as Althusser’s arch-enemy was the positive portrayal of him in a speech that Althusser delivered at Hyppolite’s seminar on Hegel: “On Marx’s Relation to Hegel” (1968).<sup>31</sup> Except for this anomaly, anti-Hegelianism was a defining trait that Althusser shared with so many of his

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<sup>29</sup> The article that was intended for publication in the Catholic journal *Cahiers de notre jeunesse*, yet rejected by the editor due to its “virulence” (Elliot 2006, p. 335), is mainly a critique of post-war apocalyptic discourses voiced by Albert Camus, André Malraux, and Gabriel Marcel, whose names we do not see in Althusser’s later articles. I find this exciting article very important for many reasons, one of which is its being the first example of Althusser’s “interventionist” philosophical style. However, I do not discuss the article further, for it would require a whole series of discussions inviting new philosophical figures, which would extend far beyond the scope of this thesis that focuses fundamentally on Althusser’s relation to Marx and Hegel.

<sup>30</sup> See Geroulanos (2010), for an illuminative history of the emergence of “negative anthropology,” that is, the withdrawal from a belief in “an irreducible or given *human nature*” (p. 12) after the First World War in French thought. Geroulanos argues that the context of anti-humanism is even broader than the “victorious moment” of French anti-humanism of the ‘60s and that before the term “anti-humanism” was first endorsed, by Althusser, before it became the “almost official face of French thought,” a series of conceptual changes that destabilized the status of humanism had already taken place in the period between 1925-50 (p. 2).

<sup>31</sup> This article is published in *Philosophy and History: Montesquieu, Rousseau, Hegel, Marx* (PH).

contemporaries in the '60s.<sup>32</sup> Althusser's receptive account of Hegel in his early works, especially in his dissertation, however, oblige us to reevaluate any straightforward claim about his anti-Hegelianism.

It is possible to evaluate, like Matheron (1997) and Elliott (1997, 2006) did, the distance between the early texts to the latter as a journey from Hegelianism to anti-Hegelianism.<sup>33</sup> But, I agree with commentators such as Stefano Pippa, Katja Diefenbach and Montag, who abstain from reading Althusser's relation to Hegel as Hegelian in the beginning and anti-Hegelian afterwards, for I find any attempt at a strict periodization of Althusser's works to betray the polemical character of his style, his endeavor to think *in* the conjuncture. This attitude is different than an "impartial" intellectual analysis, in which the philosopher claims to place himself/herself to a neutral position outside of its object, outside the messy reality. For Althusser, the analysis of a theoretical problem always takes place with a view to contributing to the question of how to intervene in a particular situation. The currency of the situation poses itself as a *problem* that requires action. This is very much like how he portrays Machiavelli's attitude in his lecture in 1972:

Machiavelli merely registers in his theoretical position a problem that is objectively, historically posed by the case of the conjuncture: not by simple intellectual comparisons, but by the confrontation of existing class forces and their relationship of uneven development. (MU, p.18)

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<sup>32</sup> Considering the intellectual atmosphere that dominated the '60s in France, Althusser's anti-Hegelianism is not exceptional. Michael Hardt (1993) says in his book on Deleuze that "for the generation of Continental thinkers that came to maturity in '60s, Hegel was the figure of order and authority that served as the focus of antagonism" (p. ix). Again, for Merleau-Ponty "interpreting Hegel means taking a stand on all the philosophical, political, and religious problems of our century" (Merleau-Ponty, *Sense and Non-Sense*, p. 63-4. cited in Russon, 2011, p. 20).

<sup>33</sup> Elliott (2006) stresses that "Althusser's postwar native philosophical language was that of French Hegelianism; his ideological orientation akin to . . . 'Hegelo-Stalinism'" (p. 334). Hamza (2014) comes close to this thesis when he says that before being a Spinozist, "Althusser was a Hegelian and this can be seen in his Thesis and other essays from that period" (p. 270-1).

In *For Marx*, Althusser warns his readers that the young Marx's opponent was "not the library Hegel we can meditate on in the solitude of 1960," but "*the Hegel of the neo-Hegelian movement*, a Hegel already summoned to provide German intellectuals of the 1840s with the means to think their own history and their own hopes" (FM, p. 65). Early texts plainly demonstrate that the Hegel that turned out to be Althusser's arch-enemy was, very similarly, "a Hegel already made to contradict himself, invoked against himself, in despite of himself" (FM, p. 65). Althusser's relation to Hegel gets complicated -yet also more articulate- when the various other Hegel readers of the time, almost all of whom are also readers of Marx are considered.<sup>34</sup> Althusser returns to Hegel in order to discover the ways in which Hegelianism still informs Marx and the contemporary philosophy of his time. So, rather than viewing Althusser's early texts as solid proofs of his Hegelianism, I intend to show here that they can be interpreted as attempts to develop an alternative reading of Hegel in order to define the specific difference of Marxism in a time when the return to history and practice dominates French thought. These themes, which also resonate -at least to some extent- with some of the Marxist principles, have been popularized especially by the rise of phenomenology and existentialism in French academia. However, as Althusser will continue to discuss in his canonical texts, such "returns" always risk inviting new "idealisms." Althusser's main motivation is to equip Marxism with the theoretical power to account for its philosophical and political position in the most rigorous way.

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<sup>34</sup> As Caroline Williams (2001) states, the increasing importance of the "(q)uestions concerning the relation of the individual to society, action to history and knowledge to humanism" prepared the background "for a reopening of the Marx-Hegel relation" (p. 27).

Contrary to what Althusser says in his memoir,<sup>35</sup> his thesis is a proof that he is a serious *reader* of Hegel and this reading constitutes an important background to his later critique of Hegelian and humanist Marxisms and also in the formation of his blend of materialism that distances itself from all variants of geneticist ideology. Yet, perhaps the most important contribution of the early texts to our understanding of Althusser is to show that his project of rethinking Marxism and Marx-Hegel relation is always coexistent with the problem of necessity and contingency. In this respect, my reading bears closeness to Pippa's (2016) reading of the dissertation, who interprets it as an "attempt both to deconstruct and to reconstruct the notions of necessity that he [Althusser] found in Hegel and the orthodox Marxism of the 1950s" (p.16). However, Pippa's focus, as he states, is particularly on the debates within Marxism, whereas I read the thesis more in relation to Althusser's positioning himself within/against French Hegelianism. I intend to show here that his early writings on Hegel can be read as attempts to save Hegel in order to save Marxism from the influence of both phenomenology and existentialism. It is thanks to these the posthumously published texts, I claim, we have the opportunity to observe Althusser defining himself as an anti-phenomenologist, an anti-existentialist, before being an anti-humanist. Althusser's Hegelianism, if we may call his early years like this, is part and parcel of his stance against all idealist philosophy, which he thinks to find expression in phenomenology and existentialism at the time.

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<sup>35</sup> Althusser claims here to have a very limited knowledge not only of Hegel, but also of Marx (*Future*, p. 165).

2.1 “On Content in the Thought of G. W. F. Hegel”: Philosophy of the concept

Of Althusser’s early works, which have not been studied at length, his dissertation is perhaps, the one that has caught the least scholarly attention.<sup>36</sup> The reason for this may be the technicality of this work, which, despite its very detailed approach, “is unlikely . . . [to] have much retrospective impact on Hegel scholarship” (Milne, 2000, p. 6). Among the many works on Hegel, Althusser’s dissertation is hardly an original one. What is missed here, however, is the new dimension that this work adds to our view of Althusser’s conception of the Marx-Hegel relation, his understanding of materialism, and also the particularity of his *reading* of a philosopher in relation to the conjuncture as an anticipation of his “approach to philosophy” as a battlefield.

Anticipating his reading of Marx in *For Marx*, Althusser differentiates between two readings of Hegel. Hegel’s thought can be treated as “a fully formed historical object held up to our critical judgement,”<sup>37</sup> that is, as an object that is complete and can analytically be “reduce[d] to its constituent elements,” which can then be sifted according to a pre-given, external measure (SH, p. 38). The alternative method that Althusser seeks to develop is treating Hegel as a “subject” (SH, p. 158, n. 34), or if we put it in his later terminology, as a Hegel-effect. This is to read Hegel to understand in him what comes after him, that is, the reasons for the collapse, yet also the “supersession” of his thought by post-Hegelian philosophers, whom, according to Althusser, are totally ignorant of the place Hegelian truth occupies in their thought. For Althusser, to read Hegel means to draw consequences for a reading

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<sup>36</sup> Of these limited works, the most detailed reading is by Giorgio Cesarale (2015). However, Pippa’s (2016) evaluation of the text, which only corresponds to a few pages in his essay on the concept of necessity is also an important contribution to the interpretation of Althusser’s dissertation.

<sup>37</sup> Althusser gives a detailed analysis of this way of reading in his account of analytico teleological method in *For Marx*, which I elaborate in the next chapter. This is to subject a given content, Hegel’s thought in this case, to “a criterion of discrimination from without that would permit us to distinguish, on the basis of certain presuppositions, the good sides of a given philosophy from the bad” (SH, p. 38).

of contemporary philosophy -and of Marx- which “has been created out of Hegel’s decay” (SH, p. 151).

The thesis follows a chronology; it begins with Hegel’s *Early Theological Writings*<sup>38</sup> and proceeds with *The Phenomenology of Spirit (Phenomenology)* and *The Encyclopaedia Logic (EL)*, *Science of Logic* and, finally, concludes with *Outlines of the Philosophy of Right (Outlines)*. Althusser is particularly interested in the discrepancy between *Phenomenology* and *Outlines* and the political and theoretical causes and effects of this discrepancy. According to Althusser, while in *Phenomenology*, Hegel meditated on a content, the French Revolution, that lived up to its form, to dialectic, in *Outlines*, written 20 years later, in a time when the promises of the Revolution were consumed, Hegel’s system legitimized an authoritarian regime that is at odds with the ends of dialectic as he conceived it. Althusser discusses whether Marx’s critique of this work presents a viable alternative to Hegelianism.

Althusser’s main motivation, which is briefly announced in the beginning of the thesis and then followed by a detailed and mostly repetitive and tedious exposition of Hegelian concept of content in the first two chapters, becomes fully manifest in the last chapter of the thesis. Althusser’s reading of Hegel is to serve him in his reading of Marx and especially in breaking with the existentialist and phenomenological interpretations of Marx -and Hegel- that find in Hegel an anthropology and consider Marx as an inheritor of this philosophical approach. Althusser’s Hegel constitutes an alternative to the dominant approach of his time that brings to the fore the anthropological and subjective elements in Hegel. On Althusser’s account, however, Hegel renounces all philosophies of origin, including

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<sup>38</sup> Among these writings, *The Spirit of Christianity and its Fate* is translated by Althusser’s close friend Jacques Martin.

the idea of a human essence, by privileging the process over substance. Accordingly, unlike many of his contemporaries, Althusser does not conceive Marx's relation to Hegel in terms of his indebtedness to the Hegelian conception of subjectivity, but focuses, instead, on Marx's position concerning the problem of "the circularity of the concept" in Hegel. Circularity, which is responsible paradoxically both for the rigor and also the failure of Hegelian system,<sup>39</sup> mainly refers to the structure of the dialectic, that is, to the idea that the end is presupposed in the beginning in such a way that what is arrived at in a dialectical process is what was initially there from the beginning. Marx's take on this structure, as I discuss in the following, however, brings with it a more crucial question that is to occupy Althusser from his thesis on, that is, whether it is possible to retain Hegel's dialectic while leaving out his reactionary system.

Althusser aims to shift the focus from an anthropological account of Hegel to the problem of circularity in Hegelian thought, which is born of its teleological character and has been transferred to Marxism as well. Althusser tackles with this problem particularly in the concluding pages of his dissertation, where he discusses Marx's relation to Hegel and Kant. Also, from the first sentences on, albeit from a very different perspective, the dissertation introduces a number of problems that is to occupy Althusser throughout his career: the problem of empiricism, totality, historical necessity, all of which relate to the problematization of the logic of genesis.

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<sup>39</sup> See Rockmore (1986), for a detailed discussion of the problem of circularity in Hegel. Rockmore's observation as to the rarity of any mention of circularity in French Hegelians despite their "close contact with the sources of Hegel's thought" (p.12), precedes the publication of Althusser's thesis in French in 1994 and the publication of Goshgarian's translation in 1997.

### 2.1.1 The decomposition of Hegel

Althusser's dissertation opens with the following paragraph, which is startling for any reader, who is acquainted with his mature work:

The problem of the content in Hegel's philosophy is, first of all, a historical problem. If truth is nothing apart from its becoming, then the becoming of truth appears as the truth of truth, and the development of truth as the manifestation of what truth is in itself. In a certain sense, history provides Hegelianism with the moment it lacks: the test of the for-itself . . . We need . . . to seek, in the maturity of history, the truth of Hegel, a philosopher who died young: it is we who are living his manhood. (SH, p. 36)

With these lines, Althusser takes his place in the Hegel Renaissance, testifying, like many of his contemporaries, to the fact that "the world has become Hegelian" (SH, p. 36). But, he adds, "Hegel come to maturity" is, at the same time, "the decomposition and decay of Hegel" (SH, p. 37). The decomposition began right after Hegel's death in the form of a battle between the Right and the Left Hegelians, each of which claimed to derive from Hegelian thought the consequences that Hegel did not foresee. This process of decomposition, which grew stronger in nineteenth century and gradually lost its contact with the Hegelian truth itself still continues "in Marxism, in the existentialisms and the fascisms" (SH, p. 37). Althusser undertakes to demonstrate the necessity of the decomposition of Hegelian thought and also how this decomposition shapes post-Hegelian philosophy and social and political reality.

According to Althusser, modern ideologies, without acknowledging the implications of the positions they hold, at best, "resume and develop, abstractly, one or another moment pried loose from the Hegelian totality" (SH, p. 151). They appropriate Hegelian negativity either in its subjective form" as in the case of Kierkegaard and the modern existentialists or in its substantialist form as in Marxist thought, both deliberately neglecting the opposite side. Concerning the first group, Althusser has in mind -as will be clearer in his article on French Hegel Renaissance,

which I discuss in the next section- Wahl,<sup>40</sup> Kojève and Hyppolite, who read Hegel within the framework of the theme of unhappy consciousness. The second group, which is not Althusser's real target neither in the thesis, nor in these early articles on Hegel and Marx, seems to refer to a crude determinist reading of Marx, although he does not mention any names (SH, p. 138). Further, he adds phenomenologists as a third group, who, he claims to take "Hegelian phenomenological 'experience'" while leaving out circularity (SH, p. 151). The main problem for Althusser, however, is not these *ideologies*, to which the decomposition of Hegel has given rise, but also, and more importantly, how this decomposition, that is, Hegel appropriated by modern ideologies, "engendered a *real world* in the form of workers' movements and revolutionary action," that is, "a real political world," which can no longer be conceived in Hegelian terms (SH, p. 151). Instead of "the transparent circularity of Hegelian truth," which ended up in justifying "the least rigorous of institutions," the Prussian state, Althusser says, we are faced with an "obscure totality," which, however, still cannot be thought apart from the process of becoming and decay of Hegelian truth (SH, p. 156). Hence, the fundamental question for Althusser is, if not in Hegelian, then in what terms the relation between this post-Hegelian world of political struggles and its intellectual structure, or more generally, between reality and thought can be conceived. Of the "ideological" responses to Hegel's decay mentioned above, Althusser believes, only Marxism, which has appropriated the substantialist side of Hegelian negativity, can provide a viable answer to this question as the rightful heir to Hegel, for it can illuminate him "from within in ways

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<sup>40</sup> Jean Wahl is the most important representative of Kierkegaardian existentialism in France. Althusser has taken notes on Wahl's "Existence and Transcendence" during 1940s. For an inventory of these archival sources, which are located in Fonds Althusser at Institut Mémoires de l'Édition Contemporaine (IMEC), see [https://portail-collections.imec-archives.com/medias/customer\\_166/MEDIAS\\_INTERNET/PDF\\_ir/ALT20\\_althusser\\_louis\\_ir\\_2019-01.pdf](https://portail-collections.imec-archives.com/medias/customer_166/MEDIAS_INTERNET/PDF_ir/ALT20_althusser_louis_ir_2019-01.pdf).

that are often unexpected, but that do him no disservice” (SH, p. 140) and can thereby account for the “real political world” that the collapse of Hegelian thought has engendered (SH, p. 151). Yet, in order not to be reappropriated by Hegelianism, Althusser cautions, Marxism has to see in what way it is still dependent on Hegelian truth.

### 2.1.2 Philosophies of intuition vs. philosophies of the concept

Positioning himself within the ranks of Marxists in the post-Hegelian world, Althusser draws another important demarcation line than the substantialist (Marxist) vs. subjectivist (existentialist) conceptions of Hegel, which, as will be clear in the following chapter, also cuts across between different conceptions of Marxism as well: philosophies of the concept and philosophies of intuition. This line drawn at the very beginning of his philosophical career is an important component of Althusser’s thought and, although never mentioned in the text, relates to a certain tradition in French philosophy that is associated with such names as Koyré, Bachelard, Jean Cavaillès and George Canguilhem<sup>41</sup> and dominates a period of French thought from ‘40s to ‘80s.<sup>42</sup>

The phrase “philosophy of the concept” first appears in Cavaillès’s doctoral thesis, *On Logic and the Theory of Science*, which was published, after his death, in

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<sup>41</sup> Although Althusser often expresses the importance of these figures for him, direct references to them are conspicuously rare. In his memoir, however, he expresses his gratitude to his close friend Jacques Martin for introducing him Cavaillès and Canguilhem (*Future*, p. 183), whom he acknowledges to be the sources of his thought:

I finally established my own position as a philosopher, on the *Kampfplatz* where factions were irrevocably opposed to one another. Ultimately, they reflected stances taken within the totality of the class struggle. I forged my own personal philosophy, which, though not without its forebears, was very isolated when looked at in the context of French philosophy, since those who had inspired me, Cavaillès and Canguilhem, were either unknown or unrecognized if not despised. (*Future*, p. 185)

<sup>42</sup> See Cassou-Noguès (2010), for a detailed historical account of “the philosophy of concept” and its transformation from Cavaillès to Foucault. Also see Sinaceur (2006), for a very vivid description of the French philosophy of concept, especially calling attention to the centrality of Cavaillès’s work.

1946. Here, Cavaillès uses the term in opposition to a philosophy of consciousness, which he relates with Kant and then Husserl. It was Canguilhem and Foucault, however, who later propagated Cavaillès's distinction presenting it as a dividing line, without which the postwar French philosophy would not be properly understood. According to Foucault (1991), the opposition between philosophies of consciousness, experience, sense, subject and philosophies of the concept, rationality, knowledge can be traced back to two opposing readings of Husserl's *Cartesian Meditations* that place Cavaillès, Bachelard and Canguilhem to one camp while placing Sartre and Merleau-Ponty to the other (p. 8-9).<sup>43</sup> Althusser makes no reference as to the source of the distinction he refers in his dissertation. Yet, the notebooks in Althusser's archives testify that he was familiar with Cavaillès's work at the time<sup>44</sup> and this distinction had gained currency around the same time that Althusser was writing his dissertation.<sup>45</sup> According to Peden (2014), despite the

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<sup>43</sup> For Foucault, the same dividing line also applies to "the return-to-Hegel of Kojève in the thirties, versus the return-to-Kant initiated in the philosophy of the sciences by Léon Brunschvicg in the late nineteenth century" (Young, 2004, p. 83). Although Foucault's taxonomy is widely appreciated, his choice of Husserl's *Cartesian Meditations* as the source of the division is disputed. Badiou (2012), for example, argues the initial opposition to be "between Bergson and Brunschvicg" (p. 68-9). Again, Montag (2013a) claims that, for Althusser, Cavaillès's *Sur la Logique* represents "a new position" outside of the Husserlian framework for it radically breaks from both subjectivism and formalism (p. 51-2). Peden (2014) traces this current back to Spinoza. See also Peter Dews (1994), for a discussion of Althusser's relation to French epistemological tradition and Spinoza. Yet, it is interesting that Althusser refers, as the source of the French epistemological tradition, not to Spinoza, but to Descartes and his idealist rationalist empiricism," which was then "taken up by the only great French philosopher of the nineteenth century, Auguste Comte" and is followed by "Cavaillès, Bachelard, Koyré, and Canguilhem" (HC, p. 4). Althusser does not refer to this lineage again or discuss in what ways Cartesian rationalism effects French epistemological tradition, but he speaks highly of Comte, whom he sees an important figure against the spiritualist tradition (FM, p. 25).

<sup>44</sup> Althusser's archives include notes on Husserl from a course given by Tran Duc Thao and Cavaillès's student Jean-Toussaint Desanti in 1940. And from his autobiography we learn that Althusser is critical of the phenomenological direction of Desanti's work:

when he began to talk as a philosopher about Marx, it was to consider him straight away in Husserlian terms. And as Husserl had established the splendid category of pre-predicative 'praxis' (the original level of meaning linked to the manipulation of things) our friend Touki (the nickname we gave him) was delighted to discover in Husserl a *meaningful basis* for Marx's notion of praxis . . . I detested any philosophy which claimed to establish *a priori* any transcendental meaning and truth at a fundamental level, however pre-predicative it might have been. (*Future*, p. 179)

<sup>45</sup> Peden (2014) notes that with the publication of Cavaillès's *Sur la Logique et la Théorie de la Science* in 1946 the idea of a philosophy of the concept set against a philosophy of consciousness soon became popular among intellectuals (p. 139).

rarity of the references to their works, the members of the French epistemological tradition, along with Lenin and Spinoza,<sup>46</sup> constitute a main source of Althusser's peculiar anti-subjectivist and anti-empiricist position. Totally agreeing with Peden's point, I aim to substantiate the thesis that Althusser's dissertation introduces, to our knowledge, Hegel as important a source as these figures.<sup>47</sup> Althusser's specific take on this definitive division between the philosophies of the concept and the philosophies of experience is to trace it back to Hegel, rather than to Husserl. By doing this, Althusser displaces the main division line that defines French philosophy with respect to different appropriations of Husserl with that of Hegel. According to this new positioning, the battle line is drawn between the substantialist and the subjectivist readings of Hegel.

Althusser classifies Hegelian thought as a philosophy of the concept,<sup>48</sup> a lineage that he claims to follow from Aristotle (SH, p. 84) and which

denies the primacy of intuition and the obvious . . . [and] hold[s] that there can be no direct revelation of the truth, that it is the detour, rather, which is rewarded with the universal. (SH, p. 84-5)

The philosophies of intuition, on the other hand, conceive of the mind as capable of “gain[ing] direct access to the universal” through, for example as in the case of Descartes, “clear[ing] away prejudices and impure images” (SH, p. 84). Althusser refers to Plato, Descartes, Spinoza, empiricists, Romantic thinkers, Reinhold, Fichte,

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<sup>46</sup> It should be noted that Althusser only refers to Lenin's *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism* in “On Marxism” (1953) and while Spinoza's name is mentioned in the dissertation, it has no significance other than being a precursor to Hegel. Of all these sources only Bachelard's name is mentioned in a letter (1947) to Hélène Légotien and not in a philosophical context (Matheron, 1997, p. 15).

<sup>47</sup> Montag (2013a) also argues Hegel to be as important a “philosophical reference” as Cavaillès and Canguilhem for Althusser (p. 49).

<sup>48</sup> It is also possible that Althusser may have been inspired by Hyppolite (1973), who differentiates between Schelling and Hegel by using this terminology: “in the Preface of the *Phenomenology* he [Hegel] will later confront Schelling's philosophy of intuition with his own philosophy of the concept, and to a philosophy of the Absolute as substance he will oppose a philosophy of the Absolute as subject.” (p. 16)

and phenomenologists among those who hold intuition, whether it be sensory or intellectual, “as a vision, in which we behold truth without distance or detour” (SH, p. 85). These philosophies depict man, as if “before Revelation,” as “entirely submissive and passive”; he “participates in the truth only negatively” (SH, p. 85), only as “pure receptivity” (SH, p. 64). Althusser describes the philosophies of intuition in a very similar way with, what he later terms in *Reading Capital* “the philosophies of vision,” according to which knowledge is a matter of *seeing* clearly what is already *given* (RC, p. 37). Hence, Althusser says in the dissertation, what is expected of thought is to “open, like an eye, and look at what is put before it, whether directly, in the world, or, still more directly, in God” (SH, p. 64). The content is conceived as given, as existing long before its reception:

What I come upon was already there; the continent whose shores I land on was waiting for me from the beginning of time. What I seize in an action (*Handlung*), or, simply, with my hand (*Hand*), was *already there*, even if my act revealed its presence and detached it from its usual context. The fact that it was to hand . . . implies a certain priority. In a sense, the apple I grasp is older than my hand; . . . more respectable by virtue of its condition, inasmuch as it was already present when I started to stretch my hand out towards it . . . Thus the given is loaded, and, indeed overloaded with significance, since an *already* is superadded to a simple *in front of*, and since the *before* belongs not only to the order of time, but also to the order of being, designating the very origin of what is. (SH, p. 64)

For the philosophies of the concept, on the other hand, apprehending the truth has less to do with “the content of what is grasped” than “the very act of grasping” or less with “the goal” than “the path” that leads to it (SH, p. 85). In parallel, the defining feature of the Hegelian concept (*Begriff*), Althusser says, is less a passive relation with truth than “this idea of capturing the truth” (SH, p. 85). Hence, Althusser is very attentive to the translation of *Begriff*:

To translate *Begriff* as notion is a pointless travesty that robs *Begriff* of its concrete, active meaning, and replaces it with a feeble, abstract word from

which every positive connotation of ‘grasping’ has disappeared, leaving us with a neutral term dominated by the passive overtones of ‘that which is known’. (SH, p. 163, n. 117)

Althusser praises Hyppolite for his translation of the term as “concept,” for it incorporates “the concrete meaning of Hegel’s thought” (SH, p. 163, n. 117).

Translation of *Begriff* as notion, on the other hand, has a symptomatic value for Althusser in that its emphasis on “idea” implies a certain “interpretation of Hegelianism as a form of panlogism” (SH 163 n. 117) that effaces the concrete individual in conceiving totality as the unfolding of reason, of *Logos*. In this sense, Althusser’s reading of Hegel may also be seen as an attempt to overcome the division between the pan-tragicist (phenomenological/existential) and pan-logicist interpretations<sup>49</sup> that have dominated French Hegelianism, each to the detriment of the other and accordingly of a thorough understanding of Hegel.

Althusser follows Hegel’s argument in *The Encyclopaedia Logic* in order to demonstrate the specificity of Hegelian *Begriff*. Here, Hegel differentiates between three forms of knowledge: experience, reflection and philosophical cognition. The first of these, that is, what, according to Althusser, corresponds to the “immediate knowledge” of the philosophies of intuition, Hegel says, may seem to be superior to the other two, in that such *immediacy* is usually associated with “innocence” and “natural harmony,” in contrast to “pride,” “disruption” and “transgression” that grasping truth through the *mediation* of thought implies (*EL*, §24n). The two other forms of knowledge, Hegel says, “leave that unsought natural harmony behind” and while the former, reflection, operates by “intellectual relations of condition and

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<sup>49</sup> Pan-logicism relates basically to the idea that the real is rational and can be reduced to the laws of thought. Seeing Hegel’s system from this perspective led some to argue that he totally disregarded human agency. Pan-tragicism, on the other hand, reads Hegelian dialectic as human historical action, which resulted in an anthropological reading of Hegel. See Bruce Baugh (2003) for a detailed account of the pan-logicist and pan-tragicist readings of Hegel in French context. Also see Pietro Terzi (2018).

conditioned” (*EL*, §24n), the last one, philosophical cognition, is, for Hegel, the most concrete form of knowledge achieved in the self-actualization of the Idea itself (*SH*, p. 89).

#### 2.1.2.1 Immediate knowledge

In order to explain Hegel’s critique of the first type of knowledge, Althusser refers us to “the Mosaic legend of the Fall of Man,” which, for Hegel, is a narrative on the origin and the meaning of cognition (*EL*, §24n). The myth of the Fall, as Hegel sees it, explains how the given is destroyed the moment it becomes an object of cognition. In Hegel, the naïve notion of the content-as-given is associated with the innocence of Adam and Eve in paradise, who are, in this respect, no different than animals that “simply come upon their lives and unquestioningly accept them” (*SH*, p. 65). The truth of things is simply in their empirical existence and “by simple sight” this truth can be known. However, what Adam and Eve apprehend in sensory intuition in its infinite variety eludes them once they attempt to “grasp” it, that is, once they attempt to articulate *their* experience into *universal* knowledge. In Althusser’s words:

The act of reaching out to take the apple, which was, like all apples, *handgreiflich* (to hand), was also the act by which she acquired knowledge of the apple, and, with it, of everything that had been *given* until then. This revelation brought the end of innocence, the end of the happy meaningfulness of things, and the discovery of the true essence of the immediacy of life: once it had become an object of cognition, the given revealed itself to be divided from itself and different from itself. Its truth now appeared in its destruction, and scission came into the world. (*SH*, p. 65)

The garden of Eden, which Althusser is to revisit in one of his late works again, in relation to the problem of empiricist theory of knowledge and the myth of the state of nature -without forgetting to mention Hegel’s name- (*Philosophy for Non-Philosophers* (PFNP), p. 72-3) is, I think, a central figure in his critique of

empiricism, which he borrows from Hegel (SH, p. 66-7). In *Reading Capital*, where Althusser argues the empiricist conception of knowledge to be a secular variant of the religious paradigm, for example, it is hard not to think of Hegel's elaboration of the immediate knowledge with reference to the story of Adam and Eve.

The most important characteristic of empiricism, according to Hegel, is that, in contrast to metaphysics, it seeks the truth in *experience*, rather than in thought (EL, §38). Yet, whenever "perception tries to discover the truth contained in the given," Althusser says following Hegel, it has to perform "an analytical reduction" through which the given is reduced to a sum of properties (SH, p. 67). The basic tension that defines empiricism lies here: either it chooses to be "benumbed by matter" hence to remain "subjected to the given," which would be equivalent to remaining in the child-like innocence, in "joyous animality" of Adam and Eve in Eden, or it has to "destroy" the given into its properties, into abstract universals in order to *know* it, which would correspond to the destruction of the immediate natural unity. So, Hegel argues, the main characteristic of empiricism is its being unaware of the fact that the "here and now,"<sup>50</sup> is no more than an abstraction:

Empiricism therefore labors under a delusion, if it supposes that, while analyzing the objects, it leaves them as they were: it really transforms the

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<sup>50</sup> Here Althusser refers to first chapter of *Phenomenology*, where Hegel discusses the relation between language and the concrete immediacy. Althusser makes use of Hegel's analysis in *Philosophy for Non-Philosophers* (1975) in order to explain the paradoxical function of language, which serves to designate the immediacy of the concrete, while it "is itself *abstract, general*" (PFNP, p. 54). Althusser refers to the same chapter in his critique of Geoerges Politzer's concrete psychology. Against Politzer, who believes that psychoanalysis must save itself from abstractions such as "the theory of the unconscious," Althusser (1996b) reminds the first chapter of *Phenomenology* and continues with a solid Hegelian argument:

Le concept de première personne se veut concret, mais c'est une abstraction. Exactement comme le « ceci » est une abstraction, une généralité. Le concept de drame, qui se veut concret, est un concept abstrait, c'est une généralité. (p. 39-40).

The concept of first person is intended to be concrete, but it is an abstraction. Just as the "this" is an abstraction, a generality. The concept of drama, which wants to be concrete, is an abstract concept, it is a generality. (p. 39-40, own translation))

concrete into an abstract. And as a consequence of this change the living thing is killed: life can exist only in the concrete and one. (*EL*, §38)

Claiming to set out from the real, from the concrete, empiricism, Hegel says, denies that the “differences” that it attributes to things are nothing, but abstractions. For Hegel, this is exactly the moment that “the axiom of bygone metaphysics reappears”: the empiricist cannot but affirm “that the truth of things lies in thought” (*EL*, §38). As Althusser underlines many times in his dissertation, Hegel rejects that there can be an unmediated relation to the real; the real, the concrete, rather than a point of departure, is a result in that even our most immediate sensory experience is mediated by the categories of language. Hence, the very important lesson that Hegelian philosophy teaches us, Althusser says, is that any attempt “to grasp the content as a given *is to destroy it as given*” (SH, p. 67).

Another important point that Althusser mentions only in passing here is the affinity between empiricism and phenomenology. As Hegel observes, the empiricist’s endeavor to seek truth in experience appeals to common sense:

From Empiricism came the cry: “Stop roaming in empty abstractions, keep your eyes open, lay hold on man and nature as they are here before you, enjoy the present moment.” (*EL*, §38, cited in SH, p. 67)

According to Althusser, the only “equivalent in the history of thought” to “this profound cry of emancipation” is “Husserl’s appeal ‘to things themselves’”<sup>51</sup> (SH, p. 67, RC, p. 62). Later on, in *Reading Capital*, Althusser is to see the same empiricist attitude in the Marxist turn to “practice,” to “the concrete,” or to real history as the proof checkers of theory (RC, p. 39, 56, 154). Althusser agrees with Hegel that there

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<sup>51</sup> This is the fundamental maxim of phenomenology, which Althusser is to trace back to Feuerbach: “*Zu den Sachen selbst* [back to things themselves]: long before Husserl, Feuerbach made his watchword.” (PE, p. 29)

is a certain virtue to this cry, insofar as it invites the old metaphysics, which is lost in “the mirages and the chimeras of the abstract understanding” to “what is here and now,” to “the everyday world,” which is more alive than any abstract concept (SH, p. 67). However, Hegel reminds that any attempt to “grasp” the concrete immediacy is always already in a mediated relation with it. The dissertation demonstrates that Althusser’s critique of phenomenology as a form of empiricism, a thesis, which he will expressly put in *Reading Capital* (RC, p. 62), therefore builds upon his reading of Hegel, which I further elaborate in the second chapter.

#### 2.1.2.2 Pre-Hegelian notion of the concept: Reflection

If we return to the distinction between the philosophies of intuition and the philosophies of the concept, having eliminated the philosophies of intuition as a viable method of ascertaining truth, Althusser now turns to the philosophies of the concept, which correspond, in Hegel’s classification, to two other forms of knowledge mentioned above: reflection and philosophical cognition. The first of these, Althusser warns, is still based upon a pre-Hegelian notion of concept. Again, he refers to the myth of the Fall to make his point. Besides its negative aspect, that is, “the destruction of unmediated innocence,” Althusser says following Hegel, that the myth also has a positivity in that rather than concluding with “a return to the chaos that preceded creation,” to “pure nothingness,” it ends with a “passage to the outside” (SH, p. 73). Althusser writes:

In the intimacy of the beginnings, act and object coincided. Eve discovered the truth of this intimacy the moment she lost it: the truth of Paradise lies in the losing of it . . . henceforth, truth would be exile, would dwell outside, would itself be the outside. . . . since it had to be conquered in the face of adversity, cold, and thorns, in travail and the sweat of man’s brow, and in the struggle in which man learned that he was not merely Nature’s other, but his own as well. (SH, p. 73)

Paradise lost corresponds to the radical separation of nature and man, of content and concept and also to man's alienation of himself. The moment that "concept rises above intuition" is the moment that "the tragedy of the concept" begins (SH, p. 85). The basic problem of the pre-Hegelian concept, then, is how to think the unity of that which is conceived as entirely alien and how to bring together the concept separated from its content. This, Althusser says, following Hegel, is best articulated in Kant's verdict that "[c]oncepts without intuition are empty; intuitions without concepts are blind" (Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* (CPR), cited in SH, p. 40).<sup>52</sup>

Of Hegel's classification of the forms of knowledge, Kant's conception of knowledge corresponds to the second form of knowledge, that of "reflection." The most important characteristic of Kantian thought is that it does not conceive "the world as a relation between terms which are posed *before* thought," hence totally independent of the subject of knowledge. Unlike classical thought, which sets out from an eternal being, or "some primary term - water, fire, earth," or unlike "religious thought, subject to a revelation whose content it merely develops and clarifies" (SH, p. 68), Kant conceived knowledge as a *relation* between "the form of transcendental apperception and the given of sensibility" (SH, p. 54). Hence, converting "the reflexive relations of *being* into reflexive relations of the *subject*," Kant replaced "a philosophy of the world with a philosophy of the self" (SH, p. 53).

According to Hegel, Althusser says, the problem with Kant's transcendental subjectivism, in which pure concepts of understanding define the rules of subjective unification of the contents of intuition, is the absolute separation of the concept from

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<sup>52</sup> It is important to note that Althusser reads Hegel not merely as an external critique of Kant, but also an acute reader of him, who "treats Kant, not as an object, but literally as a subject" (SH, p. 158, n. 34) and attempts to complete and supersede Kant's critical project, which, according to Hegel, remains at a subjectivist and formalist level. In this sense Hegel is faithful to the spirit of Kantian philosophy.

the content. Breaking with the idea of the immediacy of the content, Kant *internalized* the opposition between the content and the concept and conceived knowledge as a relation between the form of transcendental apperception and the given of sensibility, which, however, he thought as two absolutely antagonistic terms. So, although Kant conceived the concept, the “I think” as “pure form,” as “empty unity,” and the content as indeterminate manifold, the I and the manifold are as if “already there, a priori, given outside of all experience” (SH, p. 55). The I of apperception and the thing-in-itself, are conceived “outside the relationship constituting them . . . in a pre-reflexive state,” which pre-exists cognition, “as if they were two separate in-itselfs” (SH, p. 54-5). Here, although he does not put it explicitly, Althusser points to an affinity between philosophies of intuition and reflexive philosophies that would ground his very comprehensive account of “empiricism” in *Reading Capital*, which encompasses Locke and Kant -and even Hegel- alike. Although Kant does not presuppose an original unity or a pre-reflexive state that acts as “the point of departure” for the isolation of the terms (SH, p. 56), he cannot overcome the “ontological primacy” of the notion of the two in-itselfs, both of which are devoid of content. So, while Kant empties the in-itself of reality,<sup>53</sup> according to Althusser, who follows Hegel in this regard, he still maintains it by

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<sup>53</sup> In his later writings, Althusser criticizes Kant for deferring “the old question of the origin of the world” (PE, p. 195). He is critical of Kant’s caution for limiting the inquiry to the conditions of the possibility of knowledge. After all, Kant resolves the problem of origin and totality by treating them as antinomies and thus limiting himself and philosophy only to the study of the a priori conditions of every possible experience. Although in *Critique of Practical Reason*, Kant bestows on reason absolute autonomy, it is only “a unifying, regulatory power” and is not in a position to restore the unity of subject and object, for it remains fundamentally “alien to its contents” (SH, p. 58). So, Althusser argues, with reference to Hegel, that in Kant, contradiction belongs to the mind and not to the being of content; it concerns the use of reason rather than “constitut[ing] the very being of the content” or the fundamental relation between men (SH, p. 57). What is problematic in transcendentalism is therefore not only the universal and the a priori character of transcendental categories, but also its failure to affirm the primacy of the real over thought.

turning it to “an inaccessible point of reference . . . devoid of determination or content” (SH, p. 71).

Kant defines the content in terms of externality, but the content of this externality is merely postulated. So, Hegel criticizes Kant, Althusser underscores, for producing “a phenomenology which discovers only the truth of self-consciousness” (SH, p. 56). This point, which completely resonates with Cavaillès’s critique of Kant, make Hegel and Cavaillès philosophical allies.<sup>54</sup> For Cavaillès (1970), the problem of Kantian philosophy is “the positing of something totally empirical, which, radically heterogeneous to the concept, does not permit itself to be unified by it” (p. 359). Such “a negative position of the empirical, even if it were only to eliminate it,” Cavaillès argues, is problematic, for “the synthesis as an act upon a datum presupposes a preliminary definition of the datum” (p. 359). Kant aims to safeguard pure consciousness by separating the empirical. But since this empirical is “something else” than consciousness, it “eludes all attempts to grasp it,” which, in turn, rightfully generates the suspicion “that this pseudo empirical is only consciousness once again, denying itself in a game in which it is the first to be deceived” (p. 359).

Hegel’s critique of Kant constitutes one of the founding moments of Althusser’s thought. In one of his latest texts, “The Only Materialist Tradition (OMT),”<sup>55</sup> Althusser applauds Hegel for fighting “the effects of Kant’s philosophical theses . . . a *transcendental subjectivist* conception of truth and knowledge” in order “to open up a new space of freedom” (OMT, p. 4). Pointing to the parallel between

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<sup>54</sup> The closeness of Cavaillès’s position with that of Hegel’s concerning the limitations of a philosophy of consciousness is also pointed out by Hyppolite (1993, p. 418).

<sup>55</sup> L’unique tradition matérialiste (April–May 1985), originally included in the manuscript of Althusser’s autobiography, is a project, the first two chapters (‘Spinoza’ and ‘Machiavelli’) of which was first published in 1993. The text is partially translated as “The Only Materialist Tradition, Part 1: Spinoza” by Ted Stolze in 1997.

“Spinoza against Descartes and Hegel against Kant”<sup>56</sup> (OMT, p. 4), Althusser argues, what Spinoza and Hegel did was “to disentangle the mind from the illusion of transcendent [divine] or transcendental [“I think”] subjectivity as a guarantee and the foundation of every meaning or every experience of possible truth” (OMT, p. 5). When we connect this with Cavailles’s critique of Kant and his renowned Spinozism, the philosophical battlefield as Althusser conceives it divides into two fronts: the “Spinoza-Hegel-Cavaillès” vs. “Descartes-Kant-Husserl”.

### 2.1.2.3 Hegel’s philosophy of the concept: Philosophical cognition

For Althusser, the most important characteristic of Hegel’s philosophy of the concept is its determination “to abolish every system of reference, to do away with every pure given, whether a priori or a posteriori, by exposing its abstract nature” (SH, p. 71). Hegel distances himself from his predecessors in several ways. First of all, he rejects the conception of the in-itself as *given* and instead conceives it as “an original void which, through its own movement, constitutes itself as a whole” (SH, p. 71). The totality is henceforth *fulfilled* at the end, rather than being *posited* at the beginning. Althusser quotes the following lines from Hegel’s *Science of Logic*:

that which constitutes the beginning, the beginning itself, is to be taken as something unanalyzable, taken in its simple, unfilled immediacy, and therefore *as being*, as the completely empty being (*Science of Logic*, p. 75 quoted in SH, p. 70).

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<sup>56</sup> In *Philosophy of the Encounter*, Althusser enumerates the other important figures of this front: I see clear as day that what I did fifteen years ago was to fabricate a little, typically French justification, in a neat little rationalism bolstered with a few references (Cavaillès, Bachelard, Canguilhem, and, behind them, a bit of the Spinoza-Hegel tradition), for Marxism’s (historical materialism’s) pretension to being a science (PE, p. 3).

Reading Althusser’s philosophical position as a defense of Spinozism and science against the rise of phenomenology in France, Peden (2014) underscores that for Althusser “‘philosophy as such’ seems to have been largely equated with subjectivism, idealism, and anything sympathetic to Husserl or Heidegger” (p.138).

Hegel does away with the notion of the content as given, that is, “the old notion of the *in-itself*, whether it be taken at the level of perceptual knowledge, founding principle, or the logical notion of origin” (SH, p. 70). Several examples of this notion of the in-itself, which can either be a priori or a posteriori depending on “whether one takes the world serving as reference point in its ideal or empirical totality” are: “the Platonic Idea . . . the Epicurean atom . . . Descartes’ substance . . . Spinoza’s notion of God” (SH, p. 71). What is common to all, Althusser says, is the idea of a substance that “is posited as *ens per se*”<sup>57</sup> (SH, p. 71). Hegel, on the other hand, eliminates this “‘substantialist’ [*mondaine*] conception of the in-itself” and focuses instead on the movement, the emergence of the in-itself (SH, p. 71). So, as opposed to a model, in which the in-itself is already a “constituted totality,” a totality that is posited at the outset, Hegel takes totality to be “not primary, but ultimate” (SH, p. 48).

Hegel is in total agreement with Kant when he rejects the “substantialist” accounts of the in-itself. For Hegel, the in-itself “is an original void,”<sup>58</sup> but unlike Kant, he conceives this void as positive: through its own movement, the void “constitutes itself as a whole” (SH, p. 71). Hegel’s radical difference, according to Althusser, is that he discerns in the void, not only an “absence,” but also “the promise of a fulfillment, the moment requisite to this fulfillment” (SH, p. 49). In Hegel, “the totality constitutes itself by means of negativity,” that is, through a “*process* [emphasis added] that preserves the annulled content in the form of

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<sup>57</sup> *Ens per se*, which refers to that which contains its own necessity within itself is used in opposition to *ens per accidens*, which comes into being by accident, through chance encounter. See Aristotle, *Metaphysics* V.7, VI.2.

<sup>58</sup> The concept of void and the void/plenitude dialectic occupy a central place in Althusser’s reading of Hegel. Matheron (1998) remarks that Althusser initially planned to entitle the first chapter of his dissertation, which focuses on Hegel’s early writings and his relation to Kant and the Enlightenment, “The Horror of the Void” (p. 26). See Matheron (1998) and Goshgarian (2019), for a detailed reading of the significance of the concept of void for Althusser. Again, see Cesarale (2015) on the void/plenitude dialectic.

negation, and re-establishes it in its authentic truth in the negation of the negation” (SH, p. 88). Hence, Hegelian substance is characterized by an internal development, through which the void (like the emptiness of categories in Kant) generates its own content (whereas in Kant, categories apply to a content originally foreign to them) and constitutes itself as a totality only at the end of this “process.” Rejecting any idea of an ontological anteriority, including the transcendental categories a priori embedded in pure reason, Hegel makes the void the *motor* of conceptual determination. He conceives entities as processes, as coming into being and passing away, rather than “things.” As Althusser is to put it time and again in his later writings, the idea of process, or as he coins it, the “process without a subject” that refers directly to this idea of void/negativity as the motor of dialectic is the key concept that Marx inherits from Hegel (PH, p. 182, HC, p. 239, 241).

According to Althusser, the pre-Hegelian conception of concept is not successful in overcoming the externality of the concept to its content. In Kant, the concept is “an empty category dependent on an external content that is a pure given” (SH, p. 85-6), hence, Althusser says, it “posits a truth that is universal but emptied of its content, over against a content that is full but contingent” (SH, p. 85). As two important representatives of the philosophies of the concept, both Kant and Hegel are aware of the fact that “conceptual truth is . . . capture, not grace,” that is, it is not a direct revelation, but needs to be seized, to be gripped as implied in the notion of *Begriff* itself (SH, p. 89). This capture has a double aspect in that it assumes both that which is grasped and that which grasps. What is therefore “recognized” in the idea of concept is the existence of this duality. For Hegel, Kantian conception of the concept is unable to overcome this duality, for it is still trapped in the illusion that cognition is an external relation between subject and object. Hegel, on the other hand,

Althusser says, overcomes the externality of truth by demonstrating the *unity* of “the taker and the taken” (SH, p. 85). For Hegel, the concept is not external to the content, and accordingly, the Self is not an external negativity defined in opposition to content (SH, p. 89). Rather than conceiving the concept as reflection, Hegel conceives it as “self-reflection,” as “pure interiority.” This corresponds to the third form of knowledge mentioned above: “philosophical cognition.”

Such *internalization* of the externality has two important consequences: first, the Hegelian concept “draw[s] everything within its embrace” (SH, p. 87). Unlike Kant’s transcendental subject, the unity of the Self in Hegel is not “the undifferentiated solidity of an entity which is simply given” and therefore external to the content. Rather, for Hegel, it is a unity that has come about as a *result* of the interiorization of the solid content confronting it. By overcoming the negativity, by “tarrying with death,” by finding itself in the other, the Self becomes an absolute totality with no outside. Hence, “any grasping of the concept in whatever form is nothing but the grasping of the Self by itself” (SH, p. 87). Secondly, the Hegelian concept is the “Absolute Whole,” that is, all the separate elements are merely the parts of this whole. The constituent elements can be conceived in a “pseudo-independence,” only because “the totality has not yet been revealed” to them. Yet, this absolute totality is in no way a transcendent in-itself “in the form of the Word, Nature, or Spirit, [that] produces and presides over the world” (SH, p. 93); rather, it is an “immanent totality,” in which “the concept is its own element” (SH, p. 87). As I discuss in the next chapter, the nature of Hegelian totality is one of the founding problems of Althusser’s canonical works. Yet, it should be noted that, in these works, he formulates the relation between the elements and the totality as an expressive or spiritual unity rather than in terms of immanence.

Hegel has rejected the notion of an in-itself as given *ens per se*, as a “constituted totality” and also a transcendental solution to the problem of knowledge, in which the I and the content remain separate from each other. Hegel undertook to close the gap between reality and truth, Althusser says, by conceiving totality, as neither given, nor as reflexive, but as “the syllogism of the given and reflection in the Self” (SH, p. 89). The self is “a totality resulting from its own mediation by itself” (SH, p. 88). But Hegel had also claimed that totality is not primary, but ultimate and that “[t]he ‘nothing’ . . . is the first out of which all being, all the manifoldness of the finite has emerged” (SH, p. 70). When this notion of a logical void generating its own contents comes together with the idea of a totality as “the development and, simultaneously, internalization of the Self” (SH, p. 93), Althusser remarks, then the Self is “a substantialization of the void” (SH, p. 88). Hegelian totality is absolute, for it “posits the origin it springs from” (SH, p. 92); it is its own result. As Hegel puts it:

The True is the whole . . . the true [is] a result . . . The result [is] the result together with the process through which it came about. (*Phenomenology*, p. 11, cited in SH, p. 89)

Hegelian totality is circular to the extent that the concept is defined as “the movement through which the result recovers its origins by internalizing them, by revealing itself to be the origin of the origin” (SH, p. 88). This brings us to an important concept, which relates to Hegel’s teleological concept of history that constitutes one of the founding problems of Althusser’s work: memory. In order to differentiate the circularity of Hegelian totality, Althusser refers to the seed analogy, which Hegel himself uses. The seed generates and determines the subsequent growth of the plant and the end-point of this development is “an actuality like itself, with the production of the seed” (*Philosophy of Mind*, p. 6, cited in, SH, p. 91). So, concept might be thought as comparable to a seed “that develops and reproduces itself

unaided” (SH, p. 91). However, Althusser says, this analogy is flawed in three respects:

first, because the seed is in externality, drawing sustenance from an earth which is foreign to it; second, because ‘the seed produced is not identical with the seed from which it came’; finally, because this ovular schema is simple repetition: the seed has no memory, and the content it internalizes is its own past, which, since it repeats itself, is, rather, a present. (SH, p. 91)

Hegel’s absolute totality, the Spirit, unlike nature, does not simply repeat itself like a circle that “endlessly completes its own circuit”; it is “a memory that cannot reproduce itself, because it transforms its own law as it gains mastery over it” (SH, p. 91-2). What the seed *naturally* does, must take place *consciously* in the dialectical development of the concept. The determination of the concept is the *mediation* of its *immediacy* through different stages. So, Hegelian totality is neither “given,” nor simply “reflexive”; it is an absolute totality, which has internalized the process through which it came about. There is a *process* of transformation from the immediate (abstract universality) to the concrete unity, through the overcoming of the earlier moments by digesting them. Still, Althusser warns, it should be noted that the movement of the Spirit is a “circle.” As Hegel (1975b) says, the activity of Spirit

consists in transcending and negating its immediate existence so as to turn in again upon itself; it has therefore made itself what it is by means of its own activity. Only if it is turned in upon itself can a subject have true reality. Spirit exists only as its own product. The example of the seed may help to illustrate this point. The plant begins with the seed, but the seed is also the product of the plant’s entire life, for it develops only in order to produce the seed. (p. 50)

Hegel’s thinking is teleological since the “truth is revealed only at the end - when the seed (the in-itself) discovers it is the fruit of the tree which emerges from it” (SH, p. 92). So, the result embodies “the memory of its becoming,” which, in turn, makes the

Hegelian concept “the memory of itself” (SH, p. 89). Yet, Althusser notes, this memory is “strange” in that it

conquers the truth of its childhood only at the end of its history . . . the remotest memory surges up only at the end . . . Self finds the truth again, that is, the revealed reality of its beginnings, only in its end. The end is the meaning of the beginning, while the beginning, considered in isolation from the ultimate, meaningful totality, is mere nothingness - yet the beginning is the reality of the end, or, in other words, the reality of the content is won back in the end (by virtue of the double negation) . . . the Self is nothing other than this reality in the movement of its own mediation. (SH, p. 89)

Since Hegel does not conceive Spirit as external to Logos and Nature, as transcendent to them, Hegelianism is never a “creationist philosophy.” Rather, Hegel’s absolute is the “content born and brought to fulfilment in its own history”; “Spirit is History” (SH, p. 93). The particularity of Hegel’s philosophy of concept is best summarized in Althusser’s definition of Hegelian totality as

merely something *hidden*, a germ, something non-existent which will emerge as something existent, something immediate, something yet-to-come [*a-venir*]; one discerns the promise of the Whole in the in-itself as one discerns the promise of the man in the child, or, in the acorn, the promise of the boughs of the oak. But this very anticipation accentuates the Hegelian reversal, in which the in-itself is no longer an *already-there*, but is rather a *not-yet*; it is its own absence, is contained within itself only latently [*en creux*]; and, let us note, it is not latent within something else, which would thus be the in-itself of reference, it is *latent within itself*, constituting itself only by way of the dialectical discovery of itself in its own nothingness. The in-itself has to conquer its own Self. (SH, p. 71-72)

In this dense passage, which is also very illuminating in terms of Althusser’s later critique of Hegel in *Reading Capital* and *For Marx* and also what he conceives as the logic of genesis in 1966, we see at work the “void/plenitude dialectic” as the central movement of Hegelian philosophy. In Hegel, Althusser says, history is a teleological process in which the end bestows meaning to the otherwise “free contingent happening[s]” (*Phenomenology*, p. 492 quoted in SH, p. 96). Only from the view of

the fully accomplished totality the necessity of the process becomes apparent and “the origin appears as the end” (SH, p. 66). Hegelian circularity is such that “an original content . . . is destroyed as original content, yet subsists amidst its destruction, and has therefore to be conquered, developed, and revealed before being possessed in its own result” (SH, p. 61). Yet, Althusser underscores, “if the content had not been, in a sense, already present at the beginning of its adventure, it would not be there at the end” (SH, p. 61). So, what is attained at the end of the dialectical process is what was already there. In Hegel, “the end is the beginning and the beginning the end” because, as is implied in the idea that “the Self has no outside,” the content “is already contained in the movement by which it destroys the form of immediacy in itself and undertakes its self-conquest” (SH, p. 66). So, Hegelian totality, Althusser says, is not only teleological, but also requires that it is already accomplished. The journey of the spirit is such that at the time it sets off, it has already returned. Hegel speaks from the end of philosophy, in the manner of a Sage. Yet, he “can be this Sage only if Spirit has overcome all opposition, if history is ripe, if Spirit contemplates itself in the world” (SH, p. 104). Hence, “the identity of truth and reality” is “the absolute condition” of the coherence of Hegel’s thought. It is only by acknowledging that Hegel attained the absolute knowledge and the history has come to an end, Althusser says, that this system gains consistency and the gap between reality and truth is closed. So,

the book [*Phenomenology of Spirit*] is also an event, like the different figures of consciousness in history, and it is a decisive event that is, for Spirit, the other face of the Spirit forged in war. Like Hegel, then, we can only regard it as miraculous that Napoleon should have completed the construction of Europe right under the philosopher’s windows, just as Hegel was completing, in his notebooks, the Absolute Knowledge of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*. (SH, p. 105)

The reason for the decomposition of Hegel's philosophy cannot be sought outside it, for as Hegel has very well noted and Althusser likes to repeat throughout his thesis, results cannot be thought "apart from the process of their becoming" (SH, p. 39). The problem with Hegel's historical dialectic is its legitimization of the Prussian state as "the apex and glorified body of history" (SH, p. 117). If Hegel's political position is not external to his philosophical system, this is problematic for a Marxist, who acknowledges Marx's debts to Hegelian thought. So, the last chapter of Althusser's thesis is devoted to a discussion of the way in which Marx's philosophy of the concept diverges from Hegel's.

#### 2.1.2.4 Marx's philosophy of the concept

##### 2.1.2.4.1 The failure of Hegel's system

The last chapter of Althusser's dissertation, is a discussion of Marx's critique of Hegel and how Hegelian legacy is taken over by him. Marx's *Critique of Hegel's 'Philosophy of Right'*, is Althusser's main reference here. In this text, Marx points to the incompatibility between Hegel's philosophical thought and his account of the state as the "ultimate totality" (SH, p. 118). According to Hegel, "the content conforms to its concept" when "the empirical existence of the totality is . . . the fully realized form" (SH, p. 116). This is "negativity *in actu*, real freedom" (SH, p. 116). In the Greek city state, for example, although universality was achieved, particularity was not yet present (*Outlines*, p. 235). The modern state, on the other hand, is universal in that it "actualizes the essence of Spirit: 'I' that is 'We' and 'We' that is 'I'" (SH, p. 1217). By becoming a citizen, man, who is no longer a master or a slave, "is elevated to a new dignity": the universality of the state now lies "in his

empirical existence itself” (SH, p. 117-8). The modern state is thus the form, in which the universal and the particular are reconciled.

Marx’s critique exactly aims at this representation of the modern state as the actualized Idea, for the structure of the state described in externality to the civil society in *Outlines* is far from meeting this idea. While “the state is for Hegel the body and soul of the universal,” civil society, which is the other moment of the totality, corresponds to the “particular interests” of the people that are defined as “outside the absolutely universal interest of the state proper” (Marx cited in SH, p. 119). Civil society, which is a sphere of never-ending individualistic needs and desires, is “a pseudo-content”; the individual, totally immersed in daily struggle, seeking to satisfy his “hunger” is incapable of “attaining to the for-itself of universality” (SH, p. 120). The citizen and man are separated, so it is only by abstracting from one’s civil being that political activity, which is none other than “an activity of delegation” can be performed (SH, p. 121). Politics then becomes merely a formal affair, not a determination of the universal. The modern state is therefore not the ultimate totality, but the alienated existence of man’s generic essence:

The individual finds, in the state [*État*], not fulfilment and emancipation, but official acknowledgement of his servitude and alienation . . . But, if real men find their truth only outside themselves, this truth can only be unreal, that is, can only be alienation *in actu*. (SH, p. 121)

Drawing a parallel between Hegel’s work and his biography, Althusser says that *Phenomenology* (1806) was a meditation on the French Revolution, which “realized the abstract universality of the Enlightenment” (SH, p. 144). Yet, in *Outlines* (1821), under the authoritarian regime of the Prussian State, “the substantial union between reality and truth” Hegel had previously discovered was broken (SH, p. 146).

However, Althusser claims, abandoning “the idea of the identity of truth and reality”

would jeopardize the coherence of Hegel's system of absolute truth. Hegelian necessity, which is essentially a teleological necessity, being, in fact, indifferent to the concrete determinations of history, is only considered "in the abstract element of thought" (SH, p. 150). Hegel's understanding of the in-itself as "a not-yet," rather than "an already-there," is based on an idea of final totality, which bestows unity and meaning to that which precedes it (SH, p. 162 n. 93). Reality, which is never "the fruit of chance," legitimizes thought. Hence, it was "inevitable" for Hegel to defend the Prussian State. It is this "error," which, Althusser says, is a necessary result of Hegel's thought that did not escape Marx's attention (SH, p. 117). Working out Hegel's premises, Marx proves the externality of the state to its concept and rejects modern state as the accomplishment of history. However, Althusser says, Marx does in no way object to Hegelian necessity, but only repositions the accomplishment of history to a future moment, in the form of a revolution (SH, p. 133). In order to demonstrate this, Althusser discusses the idea of economic determinism in Marx.

A noteworthy feature of Althusser's account of Marxian necessity is the absence of any reference to *Capital*, except for a brief but influential mention in the very concluding paragraph of his dissertation. Marx gives history, Althusser says, which is still an abstract concept in Hegel, a concreteness, when he ties it to the concept of labor (SH, p. 129).<sup>59</sup> Referring heavily to Marx's *Economic and*

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<sup>59</sup> In "On Feuerbach," Althusser argues that Hegelian dialectic already contains a concreteness. Contrasting between Hegel and Feuerbach, Althusser claims that the latter, when inverting the former, takes away the only materialist element in his thought: 'Bildung' and labor, as the essential element of Bildung. As opposed to history in its abstract sense, such as the history of religion or the history of philosophy, Althusser argues, Bildung has a concrete reference, which is also inherited by Marx:

When in the *1844 Manuscripts*, Marx attributes to the *Phenomenology of Mind* the inestimable merit of having 'grasped labour as the essence of man', and reintroduces the Hegelian dialectic of history, he perceives what Feuerbach had eliminated from Hegel and tries to restore it. (HC, p. 88-9)

Again, in "The Humanist Controversy," Althusser highlights when discussing the difference between Hegel's and Feuerbach's concept of alienation:

Nothing is said in Feuerbach about the process by which the objects of the human 'world' are produced; nothing is said about the *labour*, to which Hegel had assigned the crucially important role of producing the Works of Culture [*Bildung*]. (HC, p. 242)

*Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, Althusser claims that, for Marx, everything that presents itself as “natural” is, in fact, a product of human labor, a human artifact.

Man is governed by a necessity, which is, in fact, his own creation, that is, an internal necessity, a human necessity:

In the alienated product, man externalizes himself, is transformed into a natural body, and, to the extent that he is unaware that the body of the product is nothing but his own body, treats what he himself has produced as if it were nature, that is, a substance that is simply given, matter in its own right, governed by natural laws and natural necessity. (SH, p. 138-9)

Just as nature in Hegel is nothing but “Spirit in alienated form,” (SH, p. 140)

capitalism in Marx is an alienated humanity. Hence, just as in Hegel “Spirit emerges from Nature,” or to put it differently, “Nature naturally produces within itself, in the form of man, the natural being who has to reappropriate it,” human freedom in Marx is born of “economic-natural determinism” (SH, p. 139). So, economic determinism is not a simple naturalism. For Marx, the categories of the natural or purely material do not exist; these are “human forces,” which only *appear* “inhuman” (SH, p. 138). Hence, Althusser says, conceived from a Hegelian perspective, “Marxian naturalism is a humanism” (SH, p. 139). Marxian necessity is both *natural* and *human*, in that what appears to men as natural is actually “an alienated human necessity” (SH, p. 138). This is how Marx is still informed by Hegelian necessity, which is the teleological necessity of the concept. Hence for Marx, the development of labor is a necessity that goes beyond the present content and anticipates its future:

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From this quote we can infer that Althusser dismisses the category of labor insofar as it refers to the “essence of man.” Hence, a few pages later Althusser can argue, in a way that seemingly contrasts with his former point on the importance of labor in Hegel, that:

Is it decent to disrupt it by pointing out that if the concept of labour has its place in Hegel, it is never declared to be the essence of Man (even assuming that one can find a definition of the essence of Man in Hegel, whose definition makes man a ‘sick animal’, not a ‘labouring animal’), for the very good reason that, labour being a moment in the process of the alienation of Spirit, it is no more the origin or subject of History than Man is? (HC, p. 250)

With a modicum of attention, humankind could discern within itself the implicit universality that is destined to mature and claim its kingdom. Speaking of the communist workers, Marx says: “They have no ideals to realize, but to set free the elements of the new society with which old collapsing bourgeois society itself is *pregnant*.” The proletariat is this implicit universality; in its present state, it contains the future and the freedom of all humankind. It is, potentially, the circularity of absolute content. (SH, p. 150)

Althusser will later claim such a conception of proletariat to be, in fact, the effect of Feuerbach’s influence on Marx, who conceives humanity as “pregnant with the imminent revolution which will give it possession of its own being” (FM, p. 43).<sup>60</sup>

What is to be done, according to Feuerbach, is to “become conscious” of the *truth* of man. Again, as Althusser is to make clear especially in his detailed comparison between Feuerbach and Hegel in “On Feuerbach,” it is not Hegel, but Marx’s attempt to historicize Feuerbach’s philosophy through Hegelian dialectic that is responsible for the humanist elements in Marx.<sup>61</sup> Marx’s solution to the Hegelian problem of

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<sup>60</sup> Althusser’s involvement with Feuerbach begins with his translation of a selection of Feuerbach’s writings published under the title *Philosophical Manifestoes* in 1960. He gives a detailed account of the historical and the theoretical significance of the texts that were chosen for this translation in his article that bears the same name with this compilation, “Feuerbach’s Philosophical Manifestoes” and which first appeared in *La Nouvelle Critique* in December 1960 and later republished in *For Marx*. These writings, Althusser says, are not only important for understanding the impact of Feuerbach’s philosophy on the theoretical development of the Young Hegelians, but also for making sense of the role of Feuerbach in the proliferation of “the ‘*ethical*’ interpretations of Marx” in his time:

Such famous expressions as ‘philosophy’s world-to-be’, ‘the inversion of subject and predicate’, ‘for man the root is man himself’, ‘the political State is the species-life of man, the ‘suppression and realization of philosophy’, ‘philosophy is the head of human emancipation and the proletariat is its heart’, etc., etc., are expressions *directly* borrowed from Feuerbach, or directly inspired by him. (FM, p. 45)

<sup>61</sup> Hegel’s conception of the non-originary nature of the origin is in perfect contrast with the geneticism of Feuerbachian materialism, which takes historical process to be the emanation of Man. Reading Althusser’s valuation of Hegel’s thought as an attempt to do away with all philosophies of origin, I agree with Goshgarian (2003), who claims that in the *1844 Manuscripts*, Marx eliminated Hegel’s “genuinely materialist notion of process” and “imprison[ed] Hegel in Feuerbach” (p. liv). So, as Althusser clearly expresses in “The Humanist Controversy,” history as Marx defines it in *1844 Manuscripts* is not Hegelian at all:

Once Hegelian History, *as a process of alienation*, has been inserted into the specular theoretical field ‘subject (Man) =Object’ (products of the human world with its various spheres: economics, politics, religion, ethics, philosophy, art, etc.), it inevitably takes the following form: History as *the process of alienation of a Subject, Man*. History in the *1844 Manuscripts* is, in the strict sense this time - to repeat a phrase which, as we have already noted, cannot be Hegelian – ‘*the history of the alienation (and disalienation) of man*’. This phrase rigorously expresses the effect of Hegel’s intervention in Feuerbach, because the Hegelian concept of history as a process of alienation (or dialectical process) is *theoretically*

circularity by introducing proletariat as the “implicit universality” therefore bears Feuerbachian tones. What is restored after the “tragic adventure” of man is the unity of the laborer and his product and again the reconquest of the original harmony does not imply neither for the worker, nor for the product a return to an “original” state. The “natural unity is destroyed” and replaced by a *human* unity. This centrality of Hegelian necessity in Marx leads Althusser to ask whether, as Engels claims, it is possible to retain Hegel’s dialectic while leaving out the content:

the status of this necessity is so obscure in Marxism, and why Marxism both adopts and rejects it, as the notion of turning the dialectic ‘right side up’ indicates: Marxist reality accepts Hegelian truth only if it is ‘placed back on its feet’ (what would circularity put back on its feet be?). (SH, p. 151-2)

The inversion thesis, which is to constitute one of the main elements of Althusser’s critique of Feuerbachian materialism in his canonical texts, proves here that Marx’s critique of the irrationality of the Hegelian state is based on Hegelian necessity again. However, Althusser believes that Marxism, so deeply penetrated by Hegelian truth, still has an original statement to make and can be a “guide to action” in “the disintegration of Hegelianism.”

#### 2.1.2.4.2 The new transcendentalism

In the last pages of his dissertation Althusser introduces several concepts that hint in the direction of a new understanding of necessity and totality in Marx, such as “de facto necessity,” “empirical transcendental” or “dialectical transcendental” (SH, p. 153). These concepts, which he unfortunately leaves largely undeveloped and does not return in his later writings, helps Althusser to point to an instance in Marx that

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*subjected* to the non-Hegelian category of the Subject (Man). Here we are dealing with something that makes no sense at all in Hegel: an anthropological (or humanist) conception of history. (HC, p. 249)

“rehabilitates”<sup>62</sup> Hegel -and accordingly Kant- by introducing concrete elements of history to philosophy. Besides his being a heir to Kantian/Hegelian legacy of the philosophies of the concept, what is emphasized in Althusser’s account of Marx here is the element of contingency that Marx’s turn to concrete historical reality introduces into post-Hegelian philosophy. Here, I present a reconstruction of Althusser’s dense line of argumentation, which, I think, shows us his first attempt to clarify what is original in Marx by placing him in the history of philosophy in direct relation to Kant and Hegel. From ‘50s on, Althusser defines Marx’s breakthrough not as founding a new philosophy, but a new “practice” of philosophy, which he sees as a “break” from philosophy in its traditional, pre-Marxist sense.<sup>63</sup> I think the reason why he does not make use of the concepts mentioned above, could be due to his cautiousness to reinscribe Marx in the history of philosophy suggesting in the direction of a continuity between the projects of Marx, Hegel and Kant.

The disintegration of Hegelian truth has revealed that the structure of the “real world is not circular, or, at least, inasmuch as the totality has not been fully realized, its circularity is not *in actu*” (SH, p. 152). This reopening of the gap between truth and reality takes us back, Althusser says, to an intellectual situation similar to that of “a pre-Hegelian period, i.e., transcendentalism” (SH, p. 152); a

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<sup>62</sup> Rehabilitation is a term that I borrow from Diefenbach (2016). I think that the most illuminating interpretation concerning Althusser’s relation with Hegel belongs to Diefenbach and Montag (2013a) in their appeal to the notion of “rehabilitation” to describe this relation. Given that for Althusser and for many of the thinkers of his generation Hegel has given philosophy its most advanced form, rehabilitating Hegel is to rehabilitate philosophy itself. According to this reading, even Marx can be viewed as one of the figures via which this rehabilitation is realized. This rehabilitation is an urgency, for Marx lacks a philosophy and Althusser is convinced from the beginning that this philosophy cannot be supplanted by leaping over Hegel, the philosopher. The rehabilitation of Hegel through a detour from other philosophers such as Spinoza or from those who are not regarded as genuine philosophers such as Machiavelli or Freud is the rehabilitation of philosophy itself.

<sup>63</sup> I think that Derrida makes an incisive observation concerning this issue. In Althusser’s canonical works, Marxism is never conceived as a part of the philosophical tradition and is rather represented as “a new conception of philosophy” (FM, p. 32). Interpreting Althusser’s description of Marxism in *For Marx* as a “*theoretical domain of a fundamental investigation*” that is indispensable not only to sciences, but also to philosophy itself (FM, p. 26), Derrida (2019) says that here, Althusser makes “a displacement that is remarkable and . . . absolutely new in the history of philosophy” (p. 46).

transcendentalism, which nonetheless having gone through a detour from Hegel and Marx, illuminates Kantian transcendentalism “by going beyond it” (SH, p. 153).

As a guide in this new intellectual structure Althusser turns to Marxist political practice, which, he thinks, shares an important characteristic with scientific practice: a peculiar understanding of necessity. Attributing a fundamental importance to “conditions,” Althusser says, Marxism takes political activity to be always subordinate to “the concrete historical totality” as its *a priori* condition: “it is not possible to attempt just anything at any given moment” (SH, p. 152). Althusser points to a similar understanding of necessity, “a kind of necessity of discovery,” that determines scientific practice. In science, he says, it is not the subjective acts and intentions, that is, “the genius of the researcher,” but “the pre-existent scientific totality,” which acts as the *a priori* condition of the scientific process. Scientific research and its results

are subordinate . . . to the organic set of hypotheses, theories, instruments and results in existence at a given point in the history of science. It is this conditioning totality that lends both revolutionary activity and scientific research their meaning. (SH, p. 152)

These lines where Althusser talks about an internal necessity of scientific development, while rejecting the idea of a subject as the supreme actor in the emergence of scientific content, bring to mind Cavaillès’s critique of philosophies of consciousness. According to Cavaillès’s (1971) anti-subjectivist view, science is not “a simple intermediary between the human mind and being in itself” (p. 371). The researcher acts within the “internal coherence” of scientific processes, which are determined by the open problems in existing theories and the new methods and instruments. Scientific development cannot therefore be explained by reference to the achievements of a creative mind, but by own “its own reality,” by its autonomous

dynamism, its self-determining, expansive force.<sup>64</sup> Each stage in the historical development of a science is prepared by the last, so partially dependent on it, yet also each novelty transforms the conditions of the earlier stage from which it develops:

That is to say . . . the act having been accomplished, by the very fact of it appearing, takes its place in a mathematical system extending the earlier system'. (Cavaillès, *La pensée mathématique*, cited in Sinaceur, p. 358)

What Cavaillès attempts to conceive here is “an internal necessity” which is unpredictable from the viewpoint of scientific knowledge attained so far, yet also appearing necessary after its accomplishment. Hence, for Cavaillès, any essential nature that we may attribute to science is actually “determined by its own development” so that the “empirical history” of its progress is never external to its “rational structure.” This is exactly the conception of necessity that Althusser spots both in Marxist politics and scientific practice.

Just as “the existing conditions” that political practice is subordinate to, “the organic set of hypotheses, theories, instruments and results in existence at a given point in the history of science” form the “*a priori* condition” of all scientific practice (SH, p. 152). So, just like in Kantian transcendentalism “the transcendental in the political or scientific sense” is *a priori*, for it is the condition that makes a revolution or a scientific discovery possible or gives form/rule to a political or scientific content. But, this is where the similarity ends, for unlike in Kant, this transcendental is also *a posteriori* in that it “is not deduced, but discovered”; being determined in its own development, it is “dialectical”:

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<sup>64</sup> Earlier, I had pointed to the closeness between Hegel’s and Cavaillès’s position with respect to subjectivism and Hyppolite’s remark on this. In his *Logic and Existence*, Hyppolite (1997) draws attention to the similarity of the way in which Cavaillès conceives the development of mathematics. “As in Hegelian dialectic,” Hyppolite says, “there is . . . an internal progression from singular content to singular content” (p. 52 n. 6). Yet, Hyppolite adds that “in Hegel the self is more immanent to the content than in Cavaillès,” which, on this point, brings him closer to Spinoza than to Hegel.

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 conditions. Thus scientific discovery, shaped by the totality of theories and instruments, modifies them in its turn; over the course of history, the ‘transcendental logic’ of the sciences changes as a result of the advances science makes. Similarly, the economic and political structure that conditions revolutionary action is in turn modified by it. (SH, p. 153)

Accordingly, scientific or Marxist/political *a priori* is not to be thought of as belonging to a metaphysical or to a logical, but to a “historical” order. Althusser calls the necessity that relates to these conditions a “*de facto* necessity” (SH, p. 153). With this concept, which he claims to have borrowed from phenomenologists<sup>65</sup>, Althusser problematizes the distinction between the empirical and the transcendental, an issue, which was already brought up by Hegel in his critique of Kantian categories. Althusser attempts to think two problematic situations with this single concept: by calling it “*de facto*,” he means that this transcendental is not *a priori*, that is, it is not related to the innate workings of consciousness, its source is not pure reason, but facticity and by referring to a notion of necessity, he states that there is a structure to otherwise unintelligible diversity of facts. Althusser argues that if Kant had

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<sup>65</sup> Althusser does not cite any particular source as to where he might have borrowed this notion from. I think the way Merleau-Ponty (2002) uses this notion in *Phenomenology of Perception* is the closest to Althusser’s:

Man is a historical idea and not a natural species. In other words, there is in human existence no unconditioned possession, and yet no fortuitous attribute. Human existence will force us to revise our usual notion of necessity and contingency, because it is the transformation of contingency into necessity by the act of taking in hand. All that we are, we are on the basis of a *de facto* situation which we appropriate to ourselves and which we ceaselessly transform by a sort of *escape* which is never an unconditioned freedom. (p. 198)

*De facto* necessity also bears resemblance to the concept of “historical *a priori*,” which Husserl makes use of. See A. Smaranda & A. A. Allen (2016). Also, Althusser was not alone in France in wedding the Kantian transcendental to history. For example, the title of Foucault’s thesis (1949), which was led by Hyppolite is “La Constitution d’un transcendental dans La Phénoménologie de l’esprit de Hegel” (“The Constitution of a Historical Transcendental in Hegel’s Phenomenology of Spirit”). Although Ian Hacking (2002) points directly to Kant as the source of the concept of historical *a priori* Foucault made use of in *The Order of Things* (1966) and later in *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (1969) (p.5, 79, 91), Jean-Baptiste Vuillerod (2017) emphasizes the importance of Althusser and Jacques Martin, whom Foucault knew during his time at the École Normale Supérieure. It was “in the small circle of Hegelians of the Rue d’Ulm” that Foucault came up with the idea of historical transcendental” (n. 29).

recognized, as Hegel demonstrated, that “[t]he categories of transcendental logic are derived from the table of judgements,” that is, that “they are *found*,” then “he would have been obliged to conceive the existence of an empirical transcendental, the *a priori* character of the *a posteriori*” (SH, p. 153). This would mean to reject its eternal, timeless character. If Kant had seen “that the *a priori* was *a posteriori*,” Althusser says, then he “would have had to think history,” that is, he would have “to conceive time not simply as an *a priori* form, but as the element of all form” (SH, p. 153).

What is it that this new transcendentalism introduces? What happens if we remain at this empirical transcendental level and do not posit, unlike Hegel did, an end to history, a moment, in which truth and reality are reconciled? As Althusser discusses later in “Marx’s Relation to Hegel” (1968), the Hegelian conception of history is problematic “for its teleological conception of the dialectic” and Marx’s break from Hegel consists in his rejection the “structure” of Hegelian dialectic implied in the category of “the negation of the negation” (PH, p. 181). Here in the dissertation, however, Althusser argues Marx to be still informed by this structure, for what he does is basically “to translate Hegelian circularity into reality” (SH, p. 150). Marx’s turn from contemplation to action, to the actual world, is still motivated by the search for a “dialectical element,” which is to bring history to completion by overcoming alienation. He finds this dialectical element in the proletariat, who, through revolutionary transformation will make history circular. So, for him, this circularity, which is not in action yet, can still be conceived as realizable.

However, Althusser makes another point as to where Marx’s real significance lies: his response to Kantian transcendentalism provided through a detour from Hegel. Marx’s real novelty is his discovery that “the transcendental [is] history,” his

displacement of “history in general” with “the *concrete content* of the dominant historical totality” (SH, p. 155). Yet, Althusser reminds that history in Marx is not an external conditioning factor, in that “the rational nature of this totality” completely corresponds to “the nature of the human totality” (SH, p. 154). On Althusser’s account, Marx develops this idea by working out something that was only “touched on in passing and buried in the *Phenomenology*” (SH, p. 154). Hegel has established that “there is no reason outside the community of consciousnesses that come face-to-face in struggle for mutual recognition” (SH, p. 154). Hegel’s identification of reason as “our reason” is an advance upon the Kantianism (SH, p. 154). So, by drawing the inferences of this “our,” Althusser claims, Hegel rescues reason from the solipsism that weakened Kant’s account of transcendental subjectivity and establishes “that reason is . . . subject to the domination . . . of the universe of consciousnesses in their concrete relations with one another” (SH, p. 154). It is no longer a faculty; it emerges from history, from the real conflicts that transform it. Since reason is now conceived as subject to the determination of human totality, “knowledge of history is not a knowledge external to history,” which is another way of saying that “temporality is not a category or a form” (SH, p. 154). For Althusser, Hegel may have introduced the conception of history as the a priori condition of totality, but it is still being conceived in abstract terms and in connection with self-consciousness very much akin to the theorization of transcendental I in Kant (SH, p. 154). What is new in Marx, what he has done in *Capital*, is to focus on the concrete historical determinations, which enables him to provide “the table of human categories that govern our time.” So, Althusser puts in plain terms, yet in a way that feels strange to his faithful readers: “*Capital* is our transcendental analytic” (SH, p. 154). Unlike Hegel, who posited the Prussian state as the actualized Idea “in an ongoing history,”

Marx conceived the capitalist society as a “contradictory totality.” Hence, instead of thinking this “categorical totality as eternal,” as Kant did and obviously as Hegel did, Marx conceived it “as dialectical, that is, as modified by the very manifold that it conditioned” (SH, p. 154). For Althusser, this is actually Marx’s response to the transcendentalism, that is, the separation of reality and thought, that resurfaces after the decomposition of Hegel’s thought. What Marxist practice teaches us is therefore “the pre-eminence of the concrete historical totality” (SH 152). While in Hegel, history is a teleological process, in which all “free contingent happening[s]” are recovered as “moments of the fully accomplished totality”<sup>66</sup> (SH, p. 96), the concrete historical totality in Marx is unfinished and is still open to determination. So, if we return to the question raised at the beginning of this paragraph, what the new transcendentalism introduces is the idea that “there is no eternal transcendental logic,” in other words, the transcendental is open to change due to the very simple fact that “history is not over”:

If we abandon the idea of the end of history and the eternal nature of meanings, i.e., the absolute circularity of reality, then history becomes the general *element* in which we move and live; it becomes the concrete transcendental, the only place in which the entities and meanings that condition and determine us come into being. 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 conditions. (SH, p. 153)

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<sup>66</sup> It should be noted that the “Hegel” that is presented here is radically contested by scholars such as Žižek, Adrian Johnston and Catherine Malabou, who defend the primordially of contingency in Hegel. I think that Althusser finds the possibility of such thinking in Hegel, but his reading will always be challenged by the existence of a kind of teleology that he finds inhabiting Hegel’s work.

As will be discussed in the following chapter, the definition of Marxist totality presented here bears striking resemblance to Althusser's account of totality in "Contradiction and Overdetermination," in which the principal contradiction is depicted as "determining, but also determined in one and the same movement" by the various *instances* of the social formation that it animates (FM p. 100-101). Yet, I would also like to point to an ambivalence about Althusser's gesture of "abandoning" the end history. First of all, in the dissertation Althusser oscillates between a position in which he thinks that for Marx "the identity of truth and reality" is postponed to a later time and another in which he seems to suggest that Marx, in *Capital*, totally abandons the idea of "the end of history." So, although especially the passage above clearly demonstrates Althusser's critical distance to a specific understanding of totality and time, it does not readily imply his later -more complicated- conception of totality. Abandoning the end history might be, in a Sartrean fashion, defending that "totality was never totalized because it was always still in process and could never be closed" (Young, 2004, p. 94). This position as Young succinctly puts it, is radically different from defending, as Althusser does in his canonical texts, that "totality is never totalizable because it is decentered and displaced in time" (p. 94). So, we should be careful not to judge this passage as already properly Althusserian.

Yet, again, heralding Althusser's anti-humanist position, the "transcendental logic," which he claims to be at work in science and politics, in those fields, which "we gain access to the basic structure of the human totality" (SH, p. 155) is not defined in subjectivist terms. Althusser underlines, for example, that it is not with reference to the *psychology* of the scientific researcher, but to the scientific process itself, which is always part of a historical context, that we can understand scientific development. Just as scientific development is conditioned upon the set of

hypotheses, theories and tools existent in a specific moment in the history of science, and which it also modifies in its turn (SH, p. 153), the revolution is not result of the intentions or decisions of the actors, but of specific historical conditions, which again would undergo a transformation by the revolution they have given rise to. However, Althusser still thinks in a theoretically humanist framework insofar as he sees this social totality as a “human” totality and even in a very phenomenological way as “a community of consciousnesses” (SH, p. 154). Althusser is very cautious in his canonical works to note that he does not see economic relations as a form of intersubjectivity, as mere relations between men such as “recognition, prestige, struggle, master-slave relationship, etc.” (RC, p. 174). The problem with such an approach is thinking a social relation as if it is a “natural quality” that belongs to “a *substance* or a *subject*.” So, from a perspective of intersubjectivity “class struggle” becomes a “natural attribute of ‘man’,” who is “*by nature* free,” and who “*by nature* . . . makes history” (ESC, p. 52). The idea of social totality, however, is not simply to shift the focus from “I” to “we,” to a plural subject, a *Lebenswelt*, but, as Althusser already explicates in the case of the scientific researcher, to the production processes and their material conditions. Hence, in this early work, Althusser seems to waver between two positions, that is, a transcendental framework, which, despite all efforts to inject “history” cannot detach itself from “subjectivism,” hence humanism, and a materialist/scientific one, which, I think, best comes in to view in his effort to distinguish the “philosophies of consciousness” from the “philosophies of the concept.”

Although, in his later writings Althusser does not use the concepts or think within the framework that he has developed here, defining Marx’s relation to Hegel remains one of Althusser’s major concerns, for it is this relation, which helps him to

identify Marx's immense philosophical revolution concerning the conceptions of totality and time. What even more accentuates Hegel's importance is Althusser's view of Marx as a descendant of Hegel in the demarcation line he draws between the philosophies of intuition/essence/experience and the philosophies of the concept, which is to form the basis of Althusser's critique of empiricism in *Reading Capital*. The dissertation is also important in demonstrating that the problem of necessity and contingency has from early on determined Althusser's thought and his appropriation of Marx and Hegel. In this context, Althusser's problematization of teleological thinking in Marx and Hegel and his effort to clearly articulate what is novel in Marx are perhaps the most important themes that tie his dissertation to his writings from '60s to '70s and even to his much later thoughts on "the philosophy of the encounter."

## 2.2 Essays on Hegel Renaissance

During 1947-50, after defending his dissertation, Althusser published two important articles targeting two major Hegel interpreters, Kojève and Hyppolite, whose works were recently released and had received considerable attention in French academic circles. In these articles, Althusser problematizes the return to Hegel in postwar France with a view to distinguishing between the two most important influences on the interpretation of Hegel in France: Marxism and existentialism.<sup>67</sup> While he sees the former as the true successor of Hegel, the latter, he argues, neutralizes the potency of Hegel's revolutionary meaning. Althusser is critical of the existentialist readings of Hegel that draw heavily on Hegel's early works and interpret *Phenomenology* as a narrative of the tragedy of "the human condition," which

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<sup>67</sup> See Baugh (2003) and Poster (1975) for a detailed reading of French existential appropriation of Hegel.

revolves around the themes of unhappy consciousness, struggle for recognition and master and slave dialectic. Hegel, now turned into a philosopher of subjective experience, a phenomenologist, is no longer a dialectician. This reading, according to Althusser, is part and parcel of the post-war “conjuncture,” which witnesses the flourishing of new currents of thought and a radical transformation of the philosophical universe in France. As I discuss below, especially in 1950 we witness a change in Althusser’s attitude towards Hegel. Hamza (2014) depicts this change “from an interesting defense of Hegel against the fascist revisionism, to dismissing Hegel as the philosophical rationalization of the existing state of things” (p. 271). Yet, in approaching this transition I find it crucial, as Montag (2013a) insists, “not to take this period as an epistemological break in the sense that Althusser ultimately rejected: a break reducible to a before and an after” (p. 30).

### 2.2.1 “Man, that Night”: The humanization of the Hegelian concept

Of the two articles, “Man, that Night” (1947) is a short, but condensed review of Kojève’s *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*.<sup>68</sup> The title that Althusser chooses for his essay is drawn from Hegel’s 1805-6 Jena Lectures on the “Philosophy of the Human Spirit.” In this phrase and the paragraph that follows, to which Althusser refers nearly in all of his early works, he finds the finest expression of the existentialist appropriation of Hegel:

Man is that night, that empty nothing, which contains everything in its simplicity: a wealth of infinitely many representations, images, none of which occurs to it directly, and none of which is not present. This is Night, the interior of nature, existing here - pure *Self*. In certain phantasmagoric representations, it is night everywhere: here a bloody head suddenly shoots

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<sup>68</sup> Kojève’s *Introduction à la lecture de Hegel: Leçons sur La phénoménologie de l’esprit, professées de 1933 à 1939 à l’École des Hautes-Études* was first published in 1947. Althusser reads this “brilliant interpretation of Hegel” (SH, p. 171), while writing his dissertation and mentions in a letter to Hélène Legotien that it can be “very useful for [his] thesis” (Matheron, 1997, p. 16).

up and there another white shape, only to disappear as suddenly. We see this Night when we look a human being in the eye, looking into a Night that turns terrifying; it is the Night of the World that rises up before us. (Hegel, cited in SH, p. 172, n. 1)<sup>69</sup>

Kojève (1980b) presents these lines as “the central and final idea of Hegelian philosophy,” that is, “the idea that the foundation and the source of human objective reality (Wirklichkeit) and empirical existence (Dasein) are the Nothingness which manifests itself as negative or creative Action, free and self-conscious” (p. 574). Unlike the animal, which is at one with nature, man, “an absurdity, a gap” at the heart of nature, negates nature and thereby transforms it into a world, the primary characteristic of which is nothing but evanescence. For Althusser, this passage is the profound summary of all the images that dominate “the whole of contemporary anthropology” (SH, p. 170): nothingness, struggle for recognition, man as sickness, human alienation, Reign of Freedom, the end of history, etc. He praises Kojève for revitalizing Hegel, yet also criticizes the one-sidedness of this revitalization, which only gives prominence to “the subjective aspect of Hegelian negativity” while disregarding the equally important objective aspect of it, a problem Althusser had already touched upon in his dissertation concerning the reductionism inherent both in pan-tragicist and pan-logicist readings of Hegel. In Kojève’s (1980a) words, *Phenomenology* is “a philosophical anthropology,” that is, a phenomenological description, in the modern, Husserlian, sense of the term, “of the existential attitudes of Man, made with a view to the ontological analysis of Being as such” (p. 57, own translation).<sup>70</sup> Kojève (1980b) makes connections between Hegelian philosophy and

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<sup>69</sup> See Rabaté (2002, pp. 28-9) for a comparison between Althusser’s account of these themes with that of a disciple of Kojève’s, Georges Bataille.

<sup>70</sup> Again, for Kojève (1980a):

La méthode hégélienne n’est donc nullement “dialectique”: elle est purement contemplative et descriptive, voire phénoménologique au sens husserlien du terme. (p. 449)

the Husserlian phenomenological method (p. 195) and even goes so far as to argue that Heidegger's *Being and Time* "adds, fundamentally, nothing new to the anthropology of the *Phenomenology*," stating immediately afterwards that if it was not Heidegger, *Phenomenology* "would probably never have been understood"<sup>71</sup> (p. 259, n. 41). This one small reference to Heidegger put in a parenthesis in a footnote does not escape Althusser. The question, as he already stated in his dissertation, is the direction in which the decomposition of Hegel, "the mother-truth of contemporary thought" will take. For Althusser, the problem is not only about the reinvention of Hegel as a phenomenologist in the Heideggerian (or Husserlian) sense<sup>72</sup>, but about how this phenomenologist reading of Hegel influences Marxist thought and political practice: the Hegel-effect. This concern is understandable if we keep in mind that Kojève's seminars not only contributed to a revival of Hegel, but also to a revival of

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The Hegelian method is therefore in no way "dialectical": it is purely contemplative and descriptive, even phenomenological in the Husserlian sense of the term. (p. 449, own translation)

<sup>71</sup> Rockmore (1995) notes the importance of Kojève's insistence on the "continuity between the views of Hegel and Heidegger," and argues that this "influenced the initial reception of Heidegger's theory as philosophical anthropology that finally peaked in Sartre's famous lecture after the war" (p. xvii), that is, "Existentialism is a Humanism" (1945). Although Althusser never directly addresses this lecture in his early works, Sartre's definition of humanism and his efforts to synthesize Marxism and existentialism constitute an important component of Althusser's critique of French Hegel Renaissance.

<sup>72</sup> Historians of the period point to the effect of Heidegger's work in French Hegel Renaissance. John Russon (2011) states that the existentialist philosophers of the '40s became interested in Hegel's work upon reading Heidegger's *Being and Time*, which was published in 1927 (p. 25). Koyré was the first philosopher to promote Heidegger in France. He was also, along with Wahl, an important figure in revitalizing Hegel in the late '20s against the Neo-Kantianism and Bergsonism that dominated the French academic circles. For a detailed discussion see C. Arthur (1983), B. Baugh (1993, 2003), F. Dastur (2008), R. Jeffs (2012), T. Rockmore (1995, 2013), M. Roth (1988), J. Russon (2011), A. Schrift (2009, 2014). Also, almost any scholar studying the post-war French intelligentsia testifies it is often very hard to distinguish Heidegger's influence from Husserl's, or Hegel's influence from Heidegger's, since their French readers mostly interpreted each through the other. Alan Schrift (2009) underlines the role of Levinas and Koyré in introducing Husserlian phenomenology, which effected "a renewal of interest in Hegel's philosophy, in particular, Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*" (p. 23). Russon (2011) also points to important tensions between these different phenomenologies: the effect of Heidegger's work was to inaugurate an 'existential' approach to phenomenology that challenged such a 'transcendental' phenomenology that was identified with Husserl. The existentialist philosophers, in advancing this 'antitranscendental' orientation, found Hegel's phenomenology a welcome ally, partially because of the Hegelian-Marxist focus on engagement, but especially because of Hegel's emphasis on the experience of others and the 'dialectic of recognition'. (p. 25-6)

Marx as well.<sup>73</sup> Kojève, who focused mainly on the “Lordship and Bondage” section of Hegel’s *Phenomenology*, was highly influenced by Marx’s *1844 Manuscripts*,<sup>74</sup> which were recently discovered. The anthropological view of human labor that Marx presented in this work plays a key role in Kojève’s reading of alienation in Hegel as an existential crisis, which is to be resolved at the end of history. Relating class struggle, which Marx had presented as a factor defining capitalist society, to Hegel’s discussion of lord and bondsman, Kojève claims the struggle for recognition to be the motor of all historical progress and the desire for recognition to be “a universal feature of all human life, as well as the condition for historical action” (Butler, 2012, p. 63-4).

As we have seen in the dissertation, for Althusser, the idea of “nothingness” is an important element of Hegel’s thought. He goes even so far as to say that Hegelian philosophy is a philosophy of the void. Likewise, critical of the panlogistic approaches, which places Hegel in the ranks of Platonism or Leibnizian dogmatism, Althusser appreciates Kojève for reminding the notion of the void in Hegel, however, he reminds that Hegel begins with nothingness in order “to rule out every possible presupposition” including the idea of man. Kojève takes dialectic to be a process, in which the alienation of man is overcome through negativity, through human historical action. But, this is, according to Althusser, is totally at odds with Hegelian dialectic:

The movement by which Logic becomes Nature and Spirit is not an act of creation that would presuppose, in its turn, a subject who plays the role of

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<sup>73</sup> That what is more important than Hegel is the role he plays in the case against or for Marxism is nicely put by Kojève in 1946:

Thus we can say that for the moment, any interpretation of Hegel, it is more than idle chatter, is but a program of struggle and of work (one of these “programs” being called Marxism). And that means that the work of an interpreter of Hegel is equivalent to a work of political propaganda. (Kojève, cited in Heckman, 1974, p. xv)

<sup>74</sup> Marx’s *1844 Manuscripts* were published between 1929 and 1937 (Roth, 1988, p. 13).

creator; nor is it an analytic operation, an inventory. It is rather the process by which the logical Idea conquers its own content. (SH, p. 69)

Objecting to Kojève on the grounds that he “culls an anthropology from Hegel” (SH, p. 171), Althusser claims that in Hegel “subject is always substance, already expressed in objective form” (Montag, 2013a, p. 30). For Althusser, Hegelian philosophy is neither simply panlogistic, naturalist, nor theistic (SH, p. 92-98) because, for Hegel, “there can be no result without its becoming,” no universality without a detour. Since Hegel negates any ontological or anthropological postulate in the form of a given,<sup>75</sup> alienation cannot be understood as a *loss* of this postulated given. As Althusser puts plainly in a letter to Jean Lacroix<sup>76</sup> in 1950,

*alienation* has a precise meaning in Hegel: it is the existence, in *externality*, of *absolute Self-Consciousness*, the existence of absolute self-consciousness *outside itself*, in nature and in history, in Nature, things, empirical man, historical man, historical conflicts, historical development . . . alienation, according to Hegel, is the existence of absolute Self-Consciousness in externality, or the objectivity of History and Nature, it is not just any ‘alienation’ of man – in other words, Hegel thinks alienation in relation to absolute self-consciousness (SH, p. 207)

Hence, he adds, “historical and empirical man” is not the actor, but “a part or moment of this alienation of absolute self-consciousness” (SH, p. 207). Yet, Althusser does not seem to have done with humanism tout court. Even when he criticizes Kojève for “develop[ing] the subjective aspect of Hegelian negativity, while deliberately neglecting its objective aspect” (SH, p. 171), he still thinks within

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<sup>75</sup> Althusser is very clear on this point. He says in 1967 that there can be no “answer to the non-Hegelian question of the ‘essence of man’” (HC, p. 92). In 1974, he repeats this argument: “The posited beginning is negated: there is no beginning, therefore no origin . . . Spinoza, like Hegel, rejects every thesis of Origin, Transcendence or an Unknowable World, even disguised within the absolute interiority of the Essence.” (ESC, p. 135)

<sup>76</sup> “Letter to Jean Lacroix,” which finds its place in the compilation of Althusser’s early works, involves a critique of Lacroix’s book *Marxisme, Existentialisme, Personnalisme*, several theses on Marx-Hegel relation and, very interestingly from the point of view of Althusser’s canonical works, a defense of Marxist humanism.

the “humanist” framework when he says that history, which Kojève interprets as “merely the becoming-Substance of the Subject,” is also “the becoming-Subject of Substance . . . that is, the production of man by nature” (SH, p. 171). This second thesis is problematic even for the Althusser of the 1950, who defends, against Hyppolite, that the process of alienation in Hegel does not refer to human history and man as its subject. As Althusser is to put later,

the thesis of exclusively human (or historical) privilege of the dialectic (see Sartre, etc.) . . . shows that spiritualism’s defense of the religious privilege of the Nature and Destiny of Man is an ideological constant. (HC, p. 282)

In this same article, Althusser reminds that the idea of dialectic of nature is formulated as part of Engels’s critique of Dühring, who defended “the religious privilege of the human species” (HC, p. 282). The thesis that there is a Dialectic of Nature was indispensable to Hegel’s theory of History as a *non-anthropological* theory of History: it indicates, in the Hegelian context (which continues to bear the stamp of spiritualism in the teleology of the process of *alienation*), that the dialectic does not begin with Man, and that History is therefore “a process without a subject.”

### 2.2.2 “The Return to Hegel”: Defending Marx

In his text entitled “The Return to Hegel: The Latest Word in Academic Revisionism” (1950) and published, anonymously, under the name “La Commission de critique du cercle des philosophes communistes”<sup>77</sup> (The Commission for criticism of the circle of Communist philosophers), Althusser problematizes the burgeoning interest in Hegel’s work in French academic circles primarily in terms of its political implications. According to Althusser, the Hegel Renaissance has to be thought in the

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<sup>77</sup> See Matheron’s (1997) editorial notes.

context of the transformation of capitalism from liberalism to imperialism, in which the rationalism of Cartesianism and Kantianism leaves its place to the irrationalism of “the reactionary philosophies of imperialism”<sup>78</sup>:

The philosophy of liberalism, which had, despite all, maintained a certain optimism and confidence in science and history, now began gradually to disappear: there sprang up philosophies of ‘experience’, ‘action’, ‘intuition’, ‘existence’, ‘life’, the ‘hero’, and, soon enough, of ‘blood’. The world was emptied of its reason and peopled with these myths. (SH, p. 178)

Althusser is insistent to interpret the “return to Hegel” via the same demarcation line that he had earlier drawn in his dissertation between the “philosophies of intuition” and the “philosophies of the concept.” The former has proliferated in the face of the defeat of liberalism and the growing skepticism towards modern science. What is noteworthy here, however, is Althusser’s positioning of Hegel as a source of inspiration for these philosophies of intuition that fill the void created by the collapse of reason. I think it is important to make sense of this transformation in Althusser’s thought. Yet, again, Hegel’s name does not seem to fit in with the philosophies of intuition, among which Althusser mentions Bergsonism, phenomenology, pragmatism, and Dilthey’s *Lebensphilosophie* (SH, p. 178), but not Hegelianism. This oddity is clarified in the following pages of the essay, where we see that it is not directly Hegel, but a certain appropriation of Hegel that leads to Althusser’s change of mind.

The French return to Hegel is reactionary, Althusser defends, for its aim is not to “understand the real historical significance of [Hegel’s] thought” or to find out

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<sup>78</sup> If not in such polemical terms as Althusser’s, many commentators point to the political aspect of the return to Hegel in France. For example, in his *Existential Marxism in Postwar France: From Sartre to Althusser* Mark Poster (1975) argues that Hegel filled the “conceptual vacuum” left by the retreat of the liberal bourgeois intellectual and political traditions after the defeat of France in 1940 and the “decisive philosophical event” of this period “was the discovery of the Hegelian dialectics” (p. 3).

“the promises of a revolutionary method in the rational dialectic,” but to resurrect the tragic and religious themes of Hegel’s early works to legitimize the existing state of things, that is, the crisis-ridden world of imperialism (SH, p. 179). *Phenomenology* interpreted as a “‘Robinsonade’<sup>79</sup> of master and slave” (SH, p. 181) provides the bourgeois philosophers a variety of concepts such as “struggle unto death,” “unhappy consciousness,” and “nothingness,” by the help of which they can recognize and thereby justify, defend, and maintain their own world<sup>80</sup>:

they find in it the idea that the basis of the ‘human condition’ is anguish and violence, the ‘struggle for prestige’, the ‘struggle unto death’, a new ‘will to power’ which quite simply becomes the universal key to every human problem. They thus project onto the Hegelian myth the major themes of contemporary fascism, and conceive the condition of their own class, in its death agony, as the ‘universal human condition’. (SH, p. 181)

Already in his dissertation, Althusser had touched upon “the problem of Hegel’s status in our world” stating that the decomposition of Hegel has not only generated new *ideologies*, but also “a *real world* in the form of workers’ movements and

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<sup>79</sup> For Althusser, who objects to any anthropological reading of Hegel, Hegelian Robinsonade is a contradiction in terms. Robinsonade belongs to the tradition of natural law/state of nature theories, which Hegel (2004b) severely criticizes in his 1802-3 essay on “On the Scientific Ways of Treating Natural Law, on its Place in Practical Philosophy, and its Relation to the Positive Sciences of Right.” Hegel objects to “the use of contrary-to-fact thought experiments, like “state of nature”” for they “presuppose precisely what they set out to prove” (Benhabib, 1986, p. 21). According to Benhabib, [t]he widespread distrust of counterfactual argumentations in the Marxist tradition, and the well-known charge that such “Robinsonades” which claim universal validity in fact only serve to justify bourgeois civil society, can be traced back to Hegel’s *Natural Law* essay. (p. 22)

<sup>80</sup> In *Being and Nothingness* (1943), Sartre refers to “the famous Master-Slave relation which so profoundly influenced Marx” (cited in Arthur, 1983, p. 67). In *Genesis and Structure* Hyppolite (1974) says:

The dialectic of domination and servitude has often been expounded. It is, perhaps, the best-known section of the *Phenomenology*, as much for the graphic beauty of its development as for the influence it has had on the political and social philosophy of Hegel’s successors, especially Marx. (p. 171)

The view that Marx was influenced by Hegel’s master–slave dialectic originates in Kojève (Arthur, 1983, p. 67). In 1939, in his translation of a section from *Phenomenology* Kojève uses a quotation from Marx’s *1844 Manuscripts* in the epigraph: “Hegel . . . grasps labour as the essence, as the self-confirming essence of man” (cited in Arthur, 1983, p. 68). In “Man, That Night” (1947) Althusser reads this connection that Kojève sees between Marx and Hegel as the weakness of Kojève’s reading: “Marx emerges from Hegel fully armed with the dialectic of master and slave . . . It is here, perhaps, that Kojève’s brilliant interpretation reaches its limits.” (SH, p. 171)

revolutionary action” (SH, p. 151). Although, in the dissertation Althusser does not directly point to Hegel’s early works as a possible inspiration for pan-tragicist interpretations of him, he clearly distinguishes this period from Hegel’s mature thought underlining that a longing for “a time now dead and gone or a lost original unity,” which Hegel is later to criticize, is a recurring theme in these works (SH, p. 46).<sup>81</sup> Having said that, he adds that even at this earliest stage of his theological writings, an important feature that anticipates later Hegel was already present, that is, the idea that content, including religious content, is not a mere given. However, in the dissertation Althusser is well aware of the possibility of “re-establish[ing] a philosophy of intuition in Hegel,” for which he criticizes Nicolai Hartmann<sup>82</sup> (SH, p. 114). Althusser now connects the primacy attributed to the early works and a “theological,” “phenomenological,” “anthropological,” or “subjectivist” reading of Hegel to a certain political position. The choice of themes that are fit for “resurrection” serves, according to Althusser, the bourgeoisie’s efforts to rescue and re-establish its class position that is threatened by the class struggle, which is itself based on a reading of Hegel diametrically opposed to the former. Althusser takes Marx’s famous statement in the preface to the second edition of *Capital* as his guide in positioning himself among the different appropriations of Hegel:

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<sup>81</sup> Mark Roth (1988) points to a parallel between Marx’s early manuscripts and Hegel’s early texts, which were also very recently introduced to French circles. The theme of alienation that were both present in these texts allowed an anthropological reading of both of these philosophers and connected them in this respect (Roth, p. 14). In “On Marxism” (1953), Althusser warns that the centrality attributed to Marx’s early works “will command our general interpretation of Marxism” as Hegel’s early works dominated the interpretation of Hegel in France (SH, p. 242).

<sup>82</sup> Althusser criticizes Hartmann for he “identifies the totality with the process in its unfolding, because he wants to maintain both the intuitive character of dialectical experience and its teleological incompleteness - i.e., to posit the content as both total and non-total” (SH, p. 114). The problem with such an approach is its focus on “experience,” on the internal dialectic of the consciousness. On this view, *Phenomenology* is reduced to a reflective study of the essence of consciousness. Hence, for Althusser, abandoning circularity is not a move that seeks to open space for concrete history, but eventually to abandon history. Hartmann has been influential in Koyré’s and Kojève’s perception of Hegel through a Husserlo-Heideggerian phenomenological lens. See Jeffs (2012, p. 48, n. 15); Queneau (1963, p. 697-8); Baugh (2003, p. 16); Hyppolite (1974, p. 9-10).

In its mystified form, the dialectic became the fashion in Germany because it seemed to transfigure and glorify what exists . . . In its rational form it is a scandal and an abomination to the bourgeoisie and its doctrinaire spokesmen, because it includes in its understanding of what exists a simultaneous recognition of its negation, its inevitable destruction, because it regards every historically developed form as being in a fluid state, in motion, and therefore grasps its transient aspect as well. (Marx, Preface to the second edition of *Capital* cited in SH, p. 175).

Althusser returns to these same lines in “Transformation of Philosophy” (1976) in a passage, in which he discusses the reasons for Stalinist terror. In order to demonstrate how Stalinist philosophical position has served the political line of Stalinism, he makes use of Marx’s distinction between two forms of dialectic and concludes that “Stalin regressed to the first conception” (PSPS, p. 263), that is, the dialectic in its mystified form. Although there seems to be no parallel between the Stalinist philosophical position and the existentialist readings of Hegel at first, Althusser objects to both on the same grounds. He believes that a certain use of Hegelian dialectic that “glorif[ies] what exists” suppresses an equally important dimension of it: its recognition not only the existence and persistence, but also the “transient aspect” of things, that is, their becoming and decay. According to Althusser, the prioritization of process over substance enables to grasp this transience and accordingly to think the possibility of the “transformation” of things, that is, politics.

The bourgeoisie of the imperialist period finds in Hegel, Althusser argues, “the ‘tragic’ concepts of crisis in which it recognizes its own world” and conceiving its class to be representing the human species, it presents these myths as “the universal human condition.”<sup>83</sup> Bourgeoisie’s insistence on its universal status, which

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<sup>83</sup> The notion of human condition is different from the idea of human nature. See Balibar (2012), for a discussion of this noteworthy displacement of the basis of humanism from the human nature to the human condition and its relation to the appropriation of Heidegger and phenomenology in France. Although Althusser does not refer to such transition, he “intervenes” in the utilization of the notion of

was, Althusser argues, a politically progressive position in the face of feudal domination, is a reactionary position in this new period of capitalism, in which bourgeoisie, as Marx foresees it, is destined to lose its supremacy before the rising working class. Hence, clinging unto the idea of a “human condition,” a humanity in misery on the verge of its total destruction, is a conservative attitude akin to that of the feudal state’s before the new bourgeoisie. As these ideas become “the universal key to every human problem” (SH, p. 181) to justify the bourgeoisie’s particular class interests as universal, the class struggle is subverted. Pointing to a dangerous liaison between the interest in Hegel and the rising fascisms, Althusser claims that the Hegel, which is welcomed by the bourgeois ideologues of the imperialist period, serves to legitimize the extreme political measures and the suppression of the antagonism in society.

Although Althusser cites the names of many different commentators and thinkers that contributed to the Hegel renaissance in France, such as Wahl, Kojève, Eric Weil, his primary target in this article is Hyppolite and his interpretation of Hegel and Marx, which, as he is to admit years later, has been very influential not only on Althusser’s, but also on his contemporaries’ reading of Hegel (PH, p. 163). As Matheron notes, the typescript version of Althusser’s article is entitled “Hegel, Marx, and Hyppolite; or, Academic Revisionism’s Latest Word” and begins with a paragraph in which Althusser announces his project as “a discussion of the works of

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human condition especially in his “The International of Decent Feelings.” The most influential figure, who has popularized this notion is Sartre. Rejecting the metaphysical definition of a universal human essence that takes man as a member of a species, the distinctive characteristic of which is the capacity of reason, Sartre famously defends that “existence precedes essence.” Although Sartre’s name is only briefly mentioned in Althusser’s essay, Althusser discusses here how an abstract notion of man, which is attributable to all subjects, still operates in the idea of “human condition.” For him, the main problem lies in the universalization of this condition to the extent that it absorbs and tames all antagonisms. Invalidating the existing political and social differences and condemning any politics that bases itself on existing antagonisms is a typical characteristic of any political position that hides its antagonistic character while basing itself upon a discourse of humanity that needs to be rescued from itself (SH, p. 23).

M. Hyppolite” in order “to address the problem of Hegel’s apparition in bourgeois philosophy in France” (SH, p. 183 n.1). Here, Althusser blames Hyppolite, for consolidating the phenomenological-existential interpretation -which was started by Wahl’s *The Unhappy Consciousness in Hegel’s Philosophy*<sup>84</sup>- not only of Hegel, but also of Marx. Hyppolite’s reading of Marx in his “Marx’s Critique of the Hegelian Conception of the State”<sup>85</sup> (1947) is important in this regard. Hyppolite is critical of Kojève’s conception of alienation in Hegel as an existential crisis which is to be resolved at the end of history, a conception which Kojève derives from his reading of Marx’s *1844 Manuscripts*. According to Hyppolite (1973), while Marx fails to see the positivity of the negative and therefore attempts to abolish the necessity of human suffering by conceiving an “end” to history, Hegel rejects that there be such an end to the “tragedy of the human situation” (p. 113, 116, 117). He says:

By some curious reversal of perspective, which becomes intelligible if one grants that at a given moment in his development Hegel, like Marx, imagined an effective end to the alienation of man but dropped the thought upon reflections over certain historical events - it is Hegel who in this case seems to be involved in *an endless dialectical development* in which the Idea would be reflected, whereas Marx looked forward to an *end of history*. (p. 116)

We find Althusser’s detailed response to Hyppolite’s argument, not in this article, but in his letter to Lacroix. His objection concerns three points: first, he defends that the notion of the “end of history” is absent in Marx, second that this notion is Hegelian and though it corresponds to the end of alienation in Hegel, the content of alienation is not, as Hyppolite assumes, historical and empirical man, but Absolute Spirit, and third, that Marxist concept of alienation is not a metaphysical crisis to be

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<sup>84</sup> According to some commentators such as Baugh (2003), it was Wahl’s *Le Malheur de la Conscience dans la philosophie de Hegel*, which presents “a pan-tragicist Hegel behind the pan-logicist of the System,” that ignited the anthropological reading specific to the French Hegelianism of this period (p. 24).

<sup>85</sup> This article is published in Hyppolite’s *Studies on Marx and Hegel* (1973).

reconciled at the “end of history.” When Marx uses the Hegelian concept of alienation, Althusser claims, he uses it in a totally different context; for Marx, alienation is economic at base. So, while “Hegel thinks alienation in relation to absolute self-consciousness . . . Marx speaks of the alienation of the proletariat of 1848” (SH, p. 207-8). The proletariat is “*deprived by other men of what he actually produces, and, hence, of his own realization as a human being endowed with real capacities that have been diverted from their proper end*” (SH, p. 209). Alienation, Althusser says, can be thought as “a description of surplus-value” insofar as it is “of that part of what men concretely produce which is taken from them” and also “of that part of the real development of their personalities that is taken from those same men in a given economic system” (SH p. 209). In this sense, alienation is not a metaphysical or existential concept that relates to the realization of an abstract essence such as “human nature,” but it is the name given to “*the part of history that, at a given moment, is wrested from the man who produces it*” (SH p. 209). Althusser reminds that in Hegel history is the alienation of absolute Spirit, yet in Marx:

history is the product of human activity, of the totality of human activity; whether or not men are ‘alienated’, history is always the product of their activity, it is their reality, their human truth. Thus, history *is never the Alienation* of anything whatsoever. (SH, p. 208)

What is eye-catching here from the viewpoint of Althusser’s later texts is that although he objects to the metaphysical, existential notion of alienation, the idea of the end of history, and a conception of history founded upon “men’s ‘self-consciousness’,” he still holds onto the Viconian “*verum factum principle*,” which states that man can know history since he has made it.<sup>86</sup> Man is the author of history,

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<sup>86</sup> The longer version of Vico’s thesis is “*verum et factum convertuntur*,” that is, the truth and the made are convertible. Since truth (verum) “can only be obtained in regard to what one has created oneself,” Vico believes, “only God can have certain knowledge about nature, because he created it,

the subject, which deliberately transforms it, therefore history, which is basically a human artifice, is knowable by the human subject. Althusser will openly reject this idea in his later writings, for it reduces the relations of production, which Althusser claims to be “the real stage-directors of history,” “to inter-human, inter-subjective relations” and thereby fallaciously turning “the ‘actors’ of history” into “the authors of its text, the subjects of its production” (RC, p. 139, 140). So, even this very cautious use of the concept of alienation is problematic from the viewpoint of Althusser’s canonical texts, in which he strengthens his anti-subjectivist position by dismissing further from his discourse concepts such as man, alienation, human activity, the emancipation of man, creative labor, etc.

### 2.3 Concluding remarks

Early texts show that Althusser’s critique of Hegel is aimed not only at Hegel per se, but also and predominantly at the Hegel of the postwar French intellectuals.

Althusser’s Hegel must be read against the many other interpretations of him suggested by Wahl, Koyré, Kojève, Hyppolite and Sartre. Already at the beginning of his philosophical career Althusser has taken his position in a battle that defines French philosophy as the clash between philosophies of the concept and philosophies of experience. This distinction underlies his later problematization of the difference between materialism and idealism. It is very interesting that in none of these texts he uses materialism in order to delineate Marxism from forms of idealism. One can sense this smooth transformation in Althusser’s thought in his change of words that he chooses to depict the post-war philosophical battlefield in 1954:

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whereas the most certain knowledge man can have is that of culture and its artefacts and customs because man himself created these” (Lahtinen, p. 119, n. 23). See Jay (1984, p. 32-9) for a discussion of the influence of Vico’s *verum factum* principle in Marxist tradition.

on the one hand, a current which is linked directly or indirectly to the phenomenological *idealism* of Husserl or to the existentialism of his epigones; on the other hand, a Marxist current *rationalist* and *materialist* . . . This is how we can understand the new form taken, before and after the war, by the *idealism* which found, either in Hegelianism interpreted in the “tragic” mode, or in Husserlian phenomenology and Christian or Heideggerian existentialism the themes accorded to the anguish of witnesses of a deep crisis: the themes of *division*, *temporality*, *historicity* and *commitment*. (Althusser, 1954, p. 859, own translation)<sup>87</sup>

Here, Althusser’s coupling materialism with rationalism is noteworthy. In opposition to the idealist front, which consists of phenomenologists, existentialists and pan-tragicist Hegelians, Althusser (1954) opts for the materialist front, which he characterizes by a rationalist and scientific predisposition:

This is how we can understand the prestige of Marxist materialism which, in Marx’s words, proposes “the positive understanding of existing things,” and sees in the crises of science and history not the philosophical revelation of the destitution or of the freedom of man, but the processes of withering and growth, the death of an outdated world and the becoming of a new world. (p. 859, own translation)<sup>88</sup>

That Althusser thinks this rationalist and scientific predisposition, which he first links with the French epistemological tradition before relating it to materialism in an opposition to the “philosophies of experience” is visible in an essay that he wrote under the pseudonym Pierre Decoud in 1949. The essay problematizes the transformation of the focus of the agrégation exam from an “atemporal” question

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<sup>87</sup> Althusser (1954) says:

D’une part un courant qui se rattache directement ou indirectement à l’idéalisme phénoménologique de Husserl ou à l’existentialisme de ses épigones; d’autre part un courant marxiste rationaliste et matérialiste . . . C’est ainsi qu’on peut comprendre la nouvelle forme prise, avant et après la guerre, par l’idéalisme qui trouva, soit dans l’hégélianisme interprété sur le mode “tragique,” soit dans la phénoménologie husserlienne et l’“existentialisme” chrétien ou heideggerien des thèmes accordés à l’angoisse des témoins d’une crise profonde: les thèmes du déchirement, de la temporalité, de l’historicité et de l’engagement. (p. 859)

<sup>88</sup> Althusser (1954) says:

C’est ainsi qu’on peut comprendre le prestige du matérialisme marxiste qui, selon le mot de Marx, se propose “l’intelligence positive des choses existantes,” et voit dans les crises des sciences et de l’histoire non pas la révélation philosophique du dénuement ou de la liberté de l’homme, mais des processus de dépérissement et de croissance, la mort d’un monde dépassé et le devenir d’un monde nouveau. (p. 859)

concerning the idea of truth, “a vintage pre-war subject,” in 1946 to the possibility of the science of human phenomena in 1949. Althusser takes the question concerning the human sciences as a symptom of bourgeoisie’s reluctant attitude towards science and its inclination towards “the ideology of subjectivity,” which he presents as two incompatible positions:

It [the bourgeoisie] created ‘its’ human sciences after the great fear of 1848 (Comte), the Commune (Durkheim), and communism (Anglo-Saxon psychologists and sociologists); these were mystified sciences, and yet the bourgeoisie had no choice but to pretend to believe in their laws. The whole problem, that is, the whole crisis of the bourgeoisie, can be summed up as follows: how was the science (even if mystified) that it wished to fashion to be reconciled with the ideology of disaster, blindness, and diversion represented by the ideology of subjectivity and the divided consciousness? Where is the answer to this question to be sought? “In the consciousness of the sociologist, which is likewise divided . . .” (report [on the examination results] by M. Davy, a sociologist and the president of the jury) . . . The conclusion is ineluctable: the bourgeoisie would rather abandon science, and even its claim to science, than the ideology which translates its fear. May science, even mine, perish, as long as I survive! (SH, p. 229, n. 42)

Althusser positions science on the part of materialism and against idealist philosophies, which show up, in his early works, in the form of French Hegelians that have transformed *Phenomenology*, in a tragic key, into a Robinsonade. Hegel, who, in Althusser’s canonical works, is described as perhaps the most accomplished representative of idealism and the main obstacle in understanding the specificity of Marxist materialism, I have tried to demonstrate, was Althusser’s ally rather than his adversary in defending against the subjectivism of philosophies of intuition, of experience, of consciousness, a philosophy of the concept, which does away with any notion of origin by introducing the very materialist notion of process. The privileging of process as opposed to an external criterion, which is posited in advance of that which it is supposed to explain, is the fundamental gesture of Hegelian thought. So, I think that Althusser’s early thinking about Hegel has a

worthwhile effect in the formation of his blend of materialism, which is based on a critique of the logic of genesis.

In the next chapter, I present a new episode in Althusser's intellectual trajectory, which is very different from the context of early writings, marked by post-war concerns for the future of humanity, a majestic revival of Hegel and a rise of interest in phenomenology. In this new episode, Althusser seems to have abandoned his receptive reading of Hegel, which has been very influential and functional in positioning himself against any philosophy of origin. Although Althusser continues to praise Hegel for not succumbing to philosophical anthropology, which he sees as a serious threat to Marxism, he does not think, for the reasons of which I elaborate in the next chapter, Hegelian philosophy to be a viable alternative to it.

## CHAPTER 3

### ALTHUSSER'S CANONICAL WORKS

The third chapter focuses on a different conjuncture, which, however, does not altogether dismiss the problems that shaped Althusser's thinking in the '40s. The chapter builds upon Althusser's canonical works *For Marx* (1965) and *Reading Capital* (1965), and an article, "On Marxism" (1953), posthumously published in *The Spectre of Hegel*, a text, which introduces the new theoretical and political problem that determines all these works: the rise in interest in Marx's early works. In the introduction to *For Marx*, Althusser acknowledges that this turn had already begun in the '30s, that is, when Marx's early works were published piecemeal between 1929 and 1937. From this moment on, there was an effort to reevaluate the meaning of the whole of Marx's thought in light of these works. We have also seen in the second chapter that the publication of these works also effected the appropriation of Hegel. Yet, what draws Althusser's attention to Marx's early writings is their gradual rise to prominence among the communist intellectuals, making its peak at a time when "Crimes of Stalin," the title of Khrushchev's 1956 speech, became widely known<sup>89</sup> and Marxism was equated with totalitarianism. In order to liberate Marxism from the "inhuman," from the terror, repression, irrationality and dogmatism of the Stalin period (FM, p. 237), from the purely mechanistic and economicist framework to which it is confined, these intellectuals, Althusser says, turned to Marx's early writings, which are grounded upon a philosophy of man dominated by the

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<sup>89</sup> In his English introduction to *For Marx*, Althusser points to two important elements that shape the essays in this book and the articles in *Reading Capital*: the critique of Stalinism and the Sino-Soviet split. Althusser emphasizes that the essays in *For Marx* are "*philosophical* essays," yet they "do not derive from a merely erudite or speculative investigation. They are, *simultaneously*, interventions in a definite conjuncture" (FM, p. 9).

philosophical themes of alienation, the realization of human capacities and freedom (FM, p. 10). For Althusser, however, these texts, instead of offering a new interpretation of Marx, are not even truly Marxist; they are permeated by pre-Marxist, that is, Hegelian and Feuerbachian, elements.

In this sense, there are significant parallels between Althusser's early and mature texts. In the same way that Althusser argued Hegelian philosophy to have provided the French intellectuals with "the myths" that orientated them in a post-catastrophic world, he now argues that Marx's early works, which are ultimately grounded upon a philosophy of man provide the Communist intellectuals with the myths to recover from the terror, repression, irrationality and dogmatism of the Stalin period (FM, p. 237). However, for Althusser, as it was problematic to understand the deep crisis of imperialism as a "natural" consequence of human condition, it is also problematic to understand Stalin's crimes as the result of a personality cult, which would reduce the criticism to questions of psychology and legality and find the solution perhaps in restoring law or creating a culture of "awareness." What should be done, instead, is to rethink Marxist (or, in the previous case, Hegelian) theory, which is used, and obviously abused, in order to back up the rather un-Marxist solutions offered for this crisis situation. As a response to the urgency of the conjuncture, to the danger of "Marxist theory to fall behind its own frontiers" (FM, p. 247), Althusser devotes his writings in *For Marx* and *Reading Capital* to the conceptualization of the rupture between Marx's early works and *Capital* and to a precise articulation of Marx's specific difference from his predecessors, mainly from Hegel and Feuerbach.

As I have stated in the Introduction, with the publication of Althusser's early works and also some other unpublished or semi-public works from the '60s such as

“On Feuerbach,” “The Humanist Controversy” and his letters to Diatkine, his canonical works gain a new depth, which enables us to approach Althusser’s critique of Hegelian and Feuerbachian elements in Marx, as well as his famous critique of economist and humanist versions of Marxism not only as part of an internal controversy between different Marxisms or a debate merely addressing the Communist movement or the French Communist Party, but as a more comprehensive and ambitious project. This project involves constructing “a new logic,” which basically consists in redefining the distinction between idealism and materialism by clarifying the specificity of dialectical materialism. Since Althusser claims in his letter to Diatkine (1966) that, so far, he has only stated his project in negative terms - which is unfair to say considering the extent of concepts that he has produced up to this date- *Reading Capital* (1965) and *For Marx* (1960-65) can be read as a *critique* of “the old logic,” that is, as efforts to detect and define a particular way of thinking, which has infected even the most materialist philosophical discourse and to which Marx’s thought, as it is “practiced” in *Capital*, is the only antidote.

In the previous chapter, I have focused on Althusser’s discussion of the use of such concepts as the given, the immediate, human condition, alienation or the end of history and their political and philosophical implications. In his canonical works, Althusser advances this inquiry by targeting the use of anthropocentric or teleological categories as explanatory principles in philosophy, science, history and in politics. This chapter focuses on Althusser’s further attempts to reveal the conceptual society, in which this particular way of thinking, that is, what I have called with inspiration from Althusser, the logic of genesis, is *practiced*. For this purpose, I read his canonical texts as a comprehensive discussion of the way in which this logic operates in differing and even opposing philosophical discourses

such as Feuerbachian humanism that operates with a generic concept of ‘man’ or Hegelian idealism that rejects all philosophies of origin, including the essence of man, or Marxist materialism that gives primacy to the concrete. A central question that defines Althusser’s project is how change, or “the irruption of a new reality” (WOP, p. 62) can be explained. This question underlies Althusser’s theorization of Marx’s “epistemological break,” his attempt to articulate the distinction between ideology and science and his explanation of a political event such as the October Revolution, or a scientific discovery. Defending that novelty cannot be thought in a geneticist framework, that is, with reference to the mechanisms of procreation, filiation, and development, which are all “continuous” processes, hence incapable of theorizing the “radically” new, Althusser seeks to introduce a new conceptual family that can incorporate novelty. Yet, his aim is not only to understand the “irruption” of a phenomenon but also, and perhaps more importantly, to explain how that which irrupts continues to exist, how different elements “form” a particular unity and how this unity “endures” in time. His mature works can be read as an attempt to answer these questions, which takes the form of a theoretical discussion of the more general philosophical problems of time, totality and causality without recourse to an ontological anteriority in the form of a substance, a constitutive subject, transcendental categories, or a teleological principle. I think that in this framework, “conjuncture” features as the fundamental concept of Althusser’s thought, through which he addresses the questions of totality, causality (and accordingly agency) and time: how to define the specificity of a unity without reducing it to a simple principle, how to explain the diversity that forms this unity without falling into hyper-empiricism and how to conceive the formation and the destruction, that is, the becoming and the decay of this unity.

Althusser's canonical works are situated in a context, which relates to the discussions in Communist movement between differing appropriations of Marx on the one hand and to the discussions within French philosophy between differing appropriations of Hegel on the other. This second context enables us to trace a continuity between Althusser's post-war writings and his work from the '60s. In the French introduction to *For Marx*, Althusser comments on the absence of "a real theoretical culture" in French communist movement and the orientation of Marxist intellectuals to "political activism" -in order to pay "the imaginary Debt they thought they had contracted *by not being proletarians*"- while sacrificing scientific and theoretical work (FM, p. 27).<sup>90</sup> The "real," which appeared to "most of our good 'Humanists' . . . richer and more vibrant than any concept," was "religiously" juxtaposed to "theory" (HC, p. 276). The determination of Marxist philosophy by politics, which is encouraged by the eleventh thesis on Feuerbach that "counterposes the transformation of the world to its interpretation" (FM, p. 27) is visible, according to Althusser, in all forms of devaluation of theory, in "the baptism of history," in the proclamation of "the end of philosophy," and in the discourse on alienation. Althusser draws attention to the close relation between the turn to Marx's early works and the turn to the concrete, to "things themselves" in French philosophy, both of which raise the category of practice to a privileged position. According to Althusser, while claiming to incorporate practice into theory, these philosophies assimilate the concept of practice into a notion of the act or activity of a subject and thereby provide explanatory primacy to consciousness rather than advocating a truly materialist position as is expected from the use of the notion of practice.

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<sup>90</sup> It is Michael Sprinker's (1985) article on Althusser and Sartre that has turned my attention to this context, which is actually elaborated at length in the introduction to *For Marx*.

Although, Althusser's critique of the primacy attributed to practice may sound to be a distancing from a materialist position, what he actually does is to distinguish between the proper Marxist, that is, materialist approach to practice from an idealist one. Althusser's position becomes much clear when looked from the point of view of the clash between the philosophy of the concept and philosophy of consciousness. In light of his early writings and the theoretical and political conjuncture that dominates his mature thought, it seems more pertinent to take his problematization of the distinction between idealism and materialism and his critique of Hegelian/Feuerbachian conceptions of Marxism as part of this foundational critique that constitutes the very axis of French philosophical thought from the '30s onwards and also Althusser's contingent beginnings. My effort to "contextualize" Althusser's reading of Marx along these lines resonates with the views that sees the defining moment of the French philosophy as the critique of humanism (Balibar, 2009, 2012) or as the debate between Spinozists and phenomenologists (Montag, 2013a; Peden, 2014; Williams, 2001). This context also helps to explain Althusser's ambivalent attitude towards Hegel, who is one of the few philosophers that rejects an anthropological account of history. The second chapter intended to demonstrate that Althusser's Hegel cannot be thought in isolation from the discourses on Hegel in post-war France. This chapter intends to advance this inquiry by looking at Althusser's relation to Hegel in his canonical works.

### 3.1 “On Marxism”: Materialism and practice

“On Marxism”<sup>91</sup> (1953) is classified as one of Althusser’s “works of the break” (Elliott, 2006, p. 365), as “the first explicit statement of what we have come to know as specifically Althusserian ideas” (Wilding, p. 193), a text, which “marks the transition from the ‘early’ to the ‘mature’ Althusser” (Matheron, 1997, p. vii) or “from Catholic to Marxist universalism” (Boer, 2007a, p. 469, 475). Intended as a manual on Marxist theory,<sup>92</sup> the text is composed of four sections, which respectively presents fundamental aspects of Marxism. The first section is a discussion of Marx’s works through a periodization of it into its (idealist) philosophical and scientific moments. The second section is devoted to the elaboration of historical materialism. The third section intends to clarify the meaning of dialectical materialism under two headings: dialectic and materialism.

I find the text important not only because it includes many “first”s that is to define Althusser - at least as we have known him before the posthumous publication of his works- such as his first intervention to the growing popularity of Marx’s early works on the understanding of Marx’s thought in general, or his first open critique of the inversion thesis, his first attempt to distinguish between (Marxist) science and (idealist) philosophy, his first definition of what a materialist position in philosophy means, but also because all these firsts, while heralding the themes and the style of his canonical works still step on the fertile ground that has shaped his earlier writings. Writing only three years after “The Return to Hegel,” Althusser repeats his

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<sup>91</sup> The text posthumously published under the title “On Marxism” is in fact composed of two articles: “À propos du marxisme” and “Note sur le matérialisme dialectique” both published in 1953 in *Revue de l’enseignement philosophique*.

<sup>92</sup> Althusser presents his aim as “to provide a few guideposts that may make approaching and studying Marxism easier” (SH, p. 241). See Montag (2017b) and Goshgarian (2017) in their introductions to another manual by Althusser, *Philosophy for Non-Philosophers*, for a discussion on the meaning of a “manual,” and how this genre functions in Marxism.

worries concerning the influence of the French appropriation of Hegel on Marxism. Hyppolite is still an important target of his critique and although Kojève's name is not mentioned, it is the notions that he popularized, e.g. alienation and the end of history that Althusser goes on to discuss here. Most importantly, his main concern is to delineate Marxist science and Marxist notion of practice as a criterion of truth from a transcendental or a phenomenological perspective that gives a founding role to consciousness and experience. Despite being a manual on Marxism, and given Althusser's abundant use of Lenin's writings, and his many references to Engels, Stalin, Mao and Zhdanov, the presence of the elements mentioned above suggests, I argue, that the text be situated in a broader context than that of the history of Marxism and the internal debate on the distinction between historical and dialectical materialism.

### 3.1.1 Scientificity of Marxism

"On Marxism" is a precursor to Althusser's mature works stating clearly that in order for Marx's truly materialist statement to be understood, it should be saved from the dominant influence of his early works, which are imbued with Hegelian and Feuerbachian elements. Although Althusser had already pointed to the problematic nature of the idea of the "end of history" or the notion of "alienation" from his earliest writings on, it is only now that he associates these themes with Marx's early period and with Hegel's and Feuerbach's "transitional" influence on him. Following Marx's own classification of his early works such as *On the Jewish Question* or the *1844 Manuscripts* as *philosophical*,<sup>93</sup> Althusser defends the specific difference of

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<sup>93</sup> See Marx (1996), where he describes his works from *The German Ideology* on as a "settling up with our [Marx and Engels] former philosophical conscience" (p. 161).

Marxism to be its *scientific* character: Marx founded a new science, “the ‘science of the development of societies’,” that is, “historical materialism” (SH, p. 245).

What makes Marx’s conception of history a scientific theory, according to Althusser, is its anti-subjectivist and anti-determinist character: it is neither founded upon “men’s ‘self-consciousness’” nor on the “ideal objectives of history” (SH, p. 245). For Marx, the *motor* of history is “the material dialectic of the forces of production and relations of production” (SH, p. 245). This is an important turning point in Althusser’s work, for by displacing the laboring man with the material conditions of production as the *motor* of history, he once and for all dismisses the Viconian *verum factum* principle, that is, the very question of a *maker* of history. For Marx, both the idea that the human subject makes history and the teleological utopian models, which read the unfolding of history as a process moving towards a fulfillment, such as “the ‘realization of freedom’, the reconciliation of ‘human nature’ with itself,” or the overcoming of the alienation of man, are problematic in their positing of an external principle, which explains everything -only by bending that which stands out the explanatory scheme- yet is itself outside the order of explanation.

Here, one can easily notice the continuity in the way in which Althusser defines Marx’s conception of history with his later writings such as “Montesquieu: Politics and History”<sup>94</sup> (1959) or *Reading Capital*.<sup>95</sup> Although these elements make Althusser’s manual important in making sense of the chronological development of his thought, what I find more important here is what/whom he tries to dismiss as

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<sup>94</sup> In this text, Althusser argues Montesquieu to be “*the first person before Marx who undertook to think history without attributing to it an end*, i.e. without projecting the consciousness of men and their hopes onto the time of history” (PH, p. 50). Like Marx, Montesquieu did not give in to “the already widespread and soon to be dominant ideology, the belief that history has an end, is in pursuit of the realm of reason, liberty and ‘enlightenment’” (PH, p. 50).

<sup>95</sup> Here Althusser openly rejects Viconian principle (RC, p. 139).

anti-materialist or pseudo-Marxist by emphasizing these characteristics of Marxist science of history. Althusser positions his reading against what we may call the “philosophies of praxis,” that is, against those, who view Marxism as “the immanent philosophy of the proletariat” (SH, p. 246), as “the theoretical expression of the revolutionary movement of the proletariat” (Korsch, cited in Elliott, 2006, p. 65). This view, which privileges the “experience” of the proletariat, treats historical materialism, Althusser argues, as “a theory that is valid for the proletariat and gives expression to its condition and aspirations” (SH, p. 246). For Althusser, to think the relation between theory and practice in such “expressive” terms reduces Marxism “to a subjective (‘class’) theory,” undermining its “claim to scientific universality and objectivity” (SH, p. 246). Althusser is also critical of any form of spontaneism assuming that the “universal class” position of the proletariat supplies Marxism with the universality and objectivity that science requires. According to this view, “labour” is the transhistorical praxis of man’s species-being and historical materialism is the “spontaneous philosophy” of this alienated subject, proletariat, whom in its “impoverishment” stands for the whole humanity. Against this, Althusser defends, following Lenin and Kautsky, that “Marxism . . . is a science that must be taught to the proletariat” (SH, p. 246), for the spontaneous consciousness of the proletariat could only be a bourgeois consciousness.<sup>96</sup> At this point, Althusser seems

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<sup>96</sup> Lenin’s critique of spontaneism is an important element in Althusser’s interpretation of Marxist materialism. In *For Marx*, the critique of spontaneism shows up when discussing the difference between scientific and technical practice, which, unlike the former, has “an *external*, unreflected relation” with knowledge (FM, p. 171 n. 7). For Althusser, “the necessity to *import* Marxist theory” in the spontaneous practice of the proletariat is born from the need to question the “ends” of a particular practice. So, he says,

a spontaneous (technical) practice produces only the ‘theory’ it needs as a means to produce the ends assigned to it: this ‘theory’ is never more than the reflection of this end, uncriticized, unknown, in its means of realization, that is, it is a *by-product* of the reflection of the technical practice’s end on its means (FM, p. 171 n. 7).

Later, in *Reading Capital*, his critique of historicism and humanism, both of which he claims to have arisen as a revolutionary response to the mechanistic and fatalist doctrines of the Second International and yet resulted in “an idealist and voluntarist interpretation of Marxism as the exclusive product and expression of proletarian practice,” also builds upon Lenin and Kautsky’s thesis (RC, p. 119, 140-1).

to contradict his own view that Marxist theory, from the outset, developed within the workers' movement. Very much akin to the idea of a necessity taken up in his dissertation, he still thinks that a necessity, which is always conditioned by what it conditions, is the distinguishing characteristic of Marxist science of history in that it "not only inspires political action, but also seeks its verification in practice, developing and growing through political practice itself" (SH, p. 247). Marxist science is possible only on the grounds that its results are constantly "submit[ted] to the test of concrete human practice" (SH, p. 247). Hence, while he is pointing to the immanent relationship between Marx's theory and the class struggle, he nonetheless sees this theory as "something introduced into the proletarian class struggle from without" (SH, p. 246). Theory and practice remain two independent fields; they are not united, as spontaneism suggests, in the praxis of the proletariat as the agent of history. However, I think that here Althusser's aim is not to devalue proletarian experience, but to demarcate the plane of scientific practice from the plane of subjective experience. Also, rather than Althusser, it is the spontaneism that places theory against practice, as if theory is to destroy some "innocence," which is so naturally attached to the immediacy of practice. The debate concerning the spontaneous ideology of the proletariat is thus related to a wider discussion about whether experience can be a criterion for truth or not.

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In "Marx in His Limits" (1978), however, Althusser problematizes this need to "import" Marxist theory into the proletariat. Here, he accuses Lenin to have committed the same mistake that his critique targeted, that is, by presenting "an idealist, voluntarist representation of the relation between theory and practice, between the Party and the mass movement" (PE, p. 25). Yet, this relation, which again inevitably "reproduce[s] bourgeois forms of knowledge . . . and exercise of power," he argues, is displaced into the relation "between the leaders, the guardians of knowledge, and the led" (PE, p. 25-6). It should be noted, however, that Althusser is pointing to the same "spontaneism," this time displaced into the "guardians" of theory. It is interesting to see the similarity of this argument with Rancière's (2011) critique of Althusserian Marxism:

reading of Marx via Althusser . . . does little more than give a new sheen to a thesis Kautsky had already defended: science belongs to intellectuals, and it is up to them to bring it to producers necessarily cut off from knowledge. (p. 47)

As I have outlined in the previous chapter, Althusser criticizes phenomenology due to its privileging of the subject, of the contents of lived experience as the object of philosophical reflection. Despite the influence of phenomenology in shaping the twentieth century French thought, there is, we have seen, an equally effective current, which attempts to counter phenomenology's influence.<sup>97</sup> According to this tradition, experience of the knowing subject cannot be the basis of scientific knowledge; science is anti-intuitive. This also relates to what, in the first chapter, I have discussed in the context of Althusser's dismissing, with reference to Hegel, any thought, which conceives that an immediate relation with the "given" is possible, be it the notion of substance or the experience of the subject, as a philosophy of intuition. I think Althusser's distrust of any discourse that presents itself in the form of spontaneity is not because of the hierarchy that he assumes to exist between theory and practice, but the "non-problematicity" of the relation between knowledge and the real. This is very much akin to the problem of empiricism addressed by Hegel: empiricism "supposes that it leaves [the given

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<sup>97</sup> The importance of the tension between the several "renaissances," the Hegel renaissance, the phenomenological renaissance, the epistemological renaissance, which have taken place in between the two World wars, in forming French thought is now well-documented through the efforts of such scholars as Edward Baring (2011), Peden (2012, 2014), Peter Hallward & Peden (2012a, 2012b). For example, a selection of texts from the *Cahiers pour l'Analyse*, which was founded by students of Althusser and Jacques Lacan in 1966, was brought together by Hallward and Peden in their two-volume co-edited book, *Concept and Form*. The second volume also includes a series of interviews with the contributors of *Cahiers*. Besides these, Badiou (2012) also presents a vivid picture of the period in his *The Adventure of French Philosophy*. I would like to quote here, however, from an interview that he made with Elisabeth Roudinesco (2014), which he tells his philosophical journey underlining the relation between the critique of phenomenology, anti-humanism and commitment to science:

At the beginning of the 1960s . . . I was . . . a convinced Sartrean. But, with the help of Althusser, the time came for me to break with phenomenology, and Sartre was one of its most illustrious representatives. Why this inevitable break? From its invention by Husserl, phenomenology folded the thought of the subject back onto a philosophy of consciousness . . . In order to free up a thought of revolutionary emancipation supported by science (our "common program" at the time), we had to extract ourselves from this phenomenological model of the subject that was at once reflexive and existential. To take leave of it, we could lean on the human sciences, scientific objectivity, and logico-mathematical formalism . . . The structuralist constellation finds its completion in "theoretical antihumanism" to use Althusser's crucial phrase or in the "death of man" to cite Foucault. (p. 6-8)

objects] as they are,” while, in fact, it transforms them, while “hiding” that it does. In a very similar way, the spontaneous is never really spontaneous, but always mediated and conditioned; it is always already transformed. Hence, in order not to sink back into ideology, from which it had laboriously rescued itself, Marxist scientific practice cannot take as its basis the spontaneous consciousness of the proletariat, which, in its immediacy, cannot be known to have rescued itself from bourgeois ideology. This is why, for Althusser, political and scientific practice need the guidance of theory, of the conceptual, which is to supply the worker’s movement with the moment of reflexivity it lacks.

Dialectical materialism steps in at this point: what is going to provide Marxism and historical materialism with the philosophical theory of its scientificity? Here, Althusser asks two questions addressing the two components of dialectical materialism: in what sense is dialectic, which Marxists view as “the most advanced form of *scientific method*,” different from the Hegelian dialectic and how does materialism distinguish itself from idealism?<sup>98</sup> I will come back to the second question later. Concerning the first, in his dissertation Althusser had defined Hegelian dialectic in opposition to any kind of formalism and subjectivism. So, to conceive that one can take the form without the content as if they can be separated from each other is problematic. This problem had revealed for Althusser one of the paramount paradoxes of Marxism, which in turn led him argue that Marx, who imported dialectic to his system, “is thoroughly informed by Hegelian truth” (SH, p. 140).

So, Hegel was right to criticize Kantian formalism for its privileging of the formal conditions of the unity of experience by absolutely isolating it from the given

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<sup>98</sup> Both of these questions relate to the famous “inversion” thesis, that is, whether Hegelian form can be retained, while its content is abandoned (SH, p. 134, 140, 248).

of experience (SH, p. 63). In “On Marxism,” however, Althusser accuses this time Hegel for committing the very same mistake, that is, with imposing the *a priori* structure of the dialectic to reality bending every difference to fit this structure (SH, p. 248). This makes it impossible to “surrender to the life of the object” (*Phenomenology* cited in SH, p. 63), which Hegel had aimed for. Here, Althusser goes back, via Lenin, to a problem that he had already identified in his dissertation. The typical characteristic of Hegelian dialectic is its positing, in thought, a moment in which the separation of consciousness and reality is overcome. Hegel rewrites reality “in terms of . . . [its] ideal-logical significance,” that is, as the incarnation of the “moments of the logical Idea in beings” (SH, p. 126). At this point, Althusser reminds Marx’s (2009) distinction between true and dogmatic criticism:

However, this comprehension [*Begreifen*] does not, as Hegel thinks, consist in everywhere recognizing the determinations of the logical concept [*des logischen Begriffs*], but rather in grasping the proper logic of the proper object. (p. 92)

Althusser had already referred to these lines twice (SH, p. 126, 1344) in his dissertation by a slight modification of the translation arguing that Marx “by no means imposes a form on a content, but rather thinks out ‘the particular logic of the particular object’” (SH, p. 134). Althusser had used this reference first in order to present Marx’s critique of Hegel for “making the real over into a phenomenon of the Idea” (SH, p. 126) and then when discussing the difference of Marxism from any form of formalism and empiricism that Hegel would be critical of claiming that this “particular object” is not a given, but a result that “points to its development as its origin” (SH, p. 134). Six years later, having already demarcated in “The Return to Hegel” between a mystified and a rational use of the dialectic, Althusser still seems uneasy about the status of dialectic, remarking in a footnote Georg Lukács’s efforts

to respond to whether the dialectics can be isolated from Hegel's system and be given a positive scientific use (SH, p. 256, n.6). The scientific use of dialectic, Althusser now claims, aims to understand the "internal" necessity that determines "the existing state of things" (SH, p. 249), which is possible on the condition that Hegelian idealism that creates its own matter is abandoned. Now, the question is whether a simple substitution of matter for Hegel's absolute idea would be enough for this.

### 3.1.2 Althusser's first definition of materialism

The definition of materialism, the first attempt of which we find in "On Marxism," is a fundamental problem that defines Althusser's philosophy. His reference to Sartre's essay "Materialism and Revolution" (1946)<sup>99</sup> -though without any further discussion of it- indicates that in defining the specificity of Marxist materialism, one of the addressees Althusser has in mind is Sartre. As the name of his essay suggests, Sartre (1962) problematizes the self-evident requirement on the part of a revolutionary to be a materialist (p. 199). For Sartre, materialism is a "metaphysical doctrine," but "a self-destructive" one, since "by undermining metaphysics out of principle, it deprives its own statements of any foundation" (p. 201). Without being aware, Sartre claims, materialists make metaphysical assumptions about the relation between mind and matter just as the idealists that they accuse. Yet, if not as a coherent philosophy, materialism still has a pragmatic value as a "myth"<sup>100</sup> against idealism, which has

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<sup>99</sup> Althusser also refers to this essay in his dissertation to criticize the understanding of economic determinism in Marx as "iron necessity." This "reduced" conception of necessity, Althusser argues, is based on the failure "to get beyond the antinomy of necessity and freedom," a failure that Althusser associates with Sartre (SH, p. 168, n. 251).

<sup>100</sup> Previously in the article, when discussing those who view historical materialism as the immanent philosophy of the proletariat, Althusser mentions Sorelian conception of myth as the capacity to mobilize human beings into political action. For Sorel, social myths are not descriptions of things, but "expressions of a determination to act" (Shapiro, 2004, p. 303).

historically represented God or the ruling class ideology (p. 222). The materialist myth, “the epic of the factual,” is grounded upon a “primordial contingency” that subverts the existing system of values, hence implying a fundamental equality among all human beings (p. 233-4). While this characteristic mobilizes workers to political action, the determinist element inherent to materialism, its elimination of human subjectivity in place of social forces or modes of production denies the very reality of human freedom, which is the basis of action itself. What is thus needed, according to Sartre, is the rejection of both idealism and materialism for the creation of “a philosophy of freedom,”<sup>101</sup> “a new humanism,” the premises of which are given in “the revolutionary act” as “the free act *par excellence*.”<sup>102</sup>

Against such a conception of materialism, Althusser’s first move is to redefine the terms within which the question of materialism is posed. He distinguishes Marxist materialism from both a “vulgar materialism,” which simply denies “the reality of thought, consciousness, and ideals,” and “a metaphysics of nature,” which reconstructs the world on the basis of matter, as opposed to spirit. Rather than a metaphysical position about the nature of the real, materialism is a response to “the *fundamental epistemological question*: primacy of matter or mind?” (SH, p. 251). Marxist materialism searches for the answer to this question not within the framework of classical philosophy, in which materialism is understood as a

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<sup>101</sup> For Sartre, this new humanism, which is based on an idea of human condition rather than human nature, is distant both from the idea of universal inalienable rights and the idea of an “inner freedom” (either Stoical, Christian, or Bergsonian) “that man could retain in any situation” (p. 237).

<sup>102</sup> The revolutionary “demands, within the oppressed class and for the entire oppressed class [and for all humanity], a more rational social status”. This “rational social status” corresponds to the “recognition of other freedoms” (Sartre, 1962, p. 250).

Revolutionary man claims to be a contingent being, unjustifiable but free, wholly plunged into a society which oppresses him, but capable of transcending that society through his efforts to change it. Idealism deceives him in that it binds him with rights and values that are already given; it conceals from him his power to blaze his own path. But materialism, by robbing him of his freedom, also deceives him. Revolutionary philosophy should be a philosophy of transcendence. (p. 236-7)

simple inversion of idealism and matter is thought as an “absolute substance” or an “immutable essence,” but within the framework of scientific practice. For the materialist, as well as for the scientist, the structure of reality is not something *deducible* from an immutable essence or substance, but something that needs to be *discovered* (SH, p. 250). In this regard, Althusser endorses Lenin’s thesis that “sciences are spontaneously materialist”<sup>103</sup> in that they affirm the primacy of external reality at the outset. Hence, being a materialist primarily means defending science<sup>104</sup>:

The theses of materialism . . . do no more than articulate and consciously draw out the implications of the ‘spontaneous practice’ of the sciences, itself a particular instance of human practice. (SH, p. 251)

Scientific practice, which Althusser takes to be the most abstract form of human practice, is “the origin and criterion of all truth” in science (SH, p. 251). In other words, “scientific truths” cannot be considered “apart from scientific practice” (SH, p. 251). Althusser bases his argument on Marx’s (1992) second thesis on Feuerbach, which asserts objective truth to be not a theoretical, but rather a practical question:

The question whether objective truth can be attributed to human thinking is not a question of theory but is a practical question. Man must prove the truth — i.e. the reality and power, the this-sidedness of his thinking in practice. The dispute over the reality or non-reality of thinking that is isolated from practice is a purely *scholastic* question. (p. 422)

According to some commentators, Marx is arguing here that “all thinking is inherently practical or problem-solving in nature,” hence renouncing the idea of “a ‘theoretical practice’ unconnected to the satisfaction of practical needs” (Smith, 1985, p. 649). For Althusser, however, the second thesis in no way implies a

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<sup>103</sup> Althusser presents a detailed explanation of the spontaneous materialism of the scientist in PSPS.

<sup>104</sup> Althusser remains loyal to this position. As an answer to what brought him to Marxist philosophy, he says in 1968: “My interest in philosophy was aroused by materialism and its critical function: for *scientific* knowledge, against all the mystifications of *ideological* ‘knowledge.’” (Althusser, 1971, p. 11)

“pragmatism” that seeks the guarantee of “truth” in the success or failure in practice.<sup>105</sup> Marx’s claim to practice philosophy in a non-metaphysical way, Althusser argues, invalidates neither the category of truth nor theory. This can be made sense with reference to French epistemological tradition, which refuses “to seek guarantees of scientific truth outside the activity of science itself” (Thomas, 2008, p. 113). The emphasis on “activity” is crucial here, since science, according to this view, is “a mode of productive or creative activity, and not merely an object of reflection or cognition”<sup>106</sup> (Badiou, 2012, p. 70-1). In a similar way, Althusser points the intricate relation between scientific practice and scientific truth (SH, p. 251). For him, the fundamental characteristic of Marxist materialism is its “radical” rejection of “all questions about the ‘possibility of knowledge’, i.e., all transcendental philosophies,” yet also of all forms of pragmatism, which reduce theory to practice (SH, p. 251). With this move, Althusser puts materialism in a position, which rejects both *de jure* and also *de facto* guarantees of truth,<sup>107</sup> yet still remaining “in a fundamental relation to the sciences” (SH, p. 254). According to Althusser, Marx dispenses with not only the external criterion of a “beyond” or “beneath,” and a subjective interiority that acts as a guarantee or condition for the possibility of

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<sup>105</sup> For Althusser, political pragmatism and its twin ideology, spontaneism, that takes experience, “the immediate presence to self of a subjectivity *in actu*” (Smith, 2008, p. 628), as the bearer of truth, form the doublet of theoreticism, which, in mirror opposition to the former two, is “to read off from theory the transparent evidence of a political practice” (Sprinker, 1985, p. 1006). According to Althusser, despite their apparent opposition, these are the ways in which the distance between theory and practice and accordingly the different spheres of the complex social whole are flattened. See also Lecourt (1977, p. 107, n. 8).

<sup>106</sup> Again, Badiou (2012) argues that the French epistemologists “interrogated science for models of invention and transformation that would inscribe it as a practice of creative thought, comparable to artistic activity, rather than as the organization of revealed phenomena” (p. 70-1). It should be noted however that creativity in Badiou’s context does not refer to a creative subject.

<sup>107</sup> In *Reading Capital*, Althusser claims that pragmatism acts no different than the idealist “theory of knowledge”; it is also “on a hunt for guarantees.” Unlike idealism, however, pragmatism is content with a *de facto* guarantee. So, both ideologies have as their motivation to respond to “the question of the guarantees of the harmony between knowledge (or Subject) and its real object (or Object)” (RC, p. 57). Yet, Althusser reminds, a *de jure* guarantee “is merely the legal disguise for a *de facto* situation” (RC, p. 57). So, in Althusser’s view, Sartre can be both a theoretical pragmatist and idealist at the same time.

knowledge, but also the *de facto* criteria of spontaneism and pragmatism. Let us now look at how Althusser conceives practice as the criterion of truth.

### 3.1.3 Practice as the criterion of truth

Affirming that the fact of practice envelops all questions as to the legitimacy [*droit*] of knowledge, it rejects any *philosophical* reflection that purports to arrive at the truth, the truth of this fact included, by seeking a *de jure* foundation [*un fondement de droit*] for knowledge beyond this *fact*. At this level, rigorous reflection, in conformity with the truth it seeks to attain, can by itself do no more than articulate the reality of the practice that engenders truth. (SH, p. 251)

For Althusser, it is crucial that Marx's turn to practice should be carefully distinguished from its pragmatist, positivist, empiricist and phenomenological variants. At this point, a late text in Althusser's trajectory, "Elements of Self-Criticism" (1974), may help us. To say that practice is its own criterion is to do away with the notion of criterion as a "form of Jurisdiction" that identifies "the Truth of what is true" (ESC, p. 137). What is dismissed here is not only the effort to find a legitimate foundation for knowledge "beyond" the *fact* of practice, but also to the effort to turn practice into a new absolute criterion (Lenin). Practice is not a "Judge" that can [certify] "authenticate and guarantee the validity of what is True" (ESC, p. 137). Since practice is a process of transformation, which is subject to its own conditions of existence, criterion of practice is never exterior but always interior to practice.

Although Althusser does not refer to it in this text, this approach to practice relates to a fundamental principle that characterizes his thought: the Spinozist principle of *verum index sui et falsi*, which simply states that truth is its own measure, hence not verifiable by any external criterion. According to this principle, truth, or better if we would be faithful to Spinoza's nominalism, "what is true" is not

to be thought “as a Presence but as a Product,” which echoes Hegel’s rejection of substance as given *ens per se*. Here, Althusser points, product has two meanings: truth is the “*result* of the work of a process which “*discovers*” it” (ESC, p. 137). This means that practice, which is its own criterion of truth, cannot be conceived in transcendental terms that point back to an originary legitimation rather than to a process in which truth emerges in its own production. The difference between transcendentalism and Marxist materialism is best articulated, according to Althusser, in the case of “scientific practice . . . [which] can be defined only in terms of its real evolution, that is, its history” (SH, p. 253). Unlike the a priori categories of understanding that enable and also constitute the limits of knowledge, Althusser takes the limits of knowledge to be determined by scientific practice - more precisely, the history of scientific practice- which does not itself constitute a founding moment in the transcendental sense. So, if we try to make sense of Althusser’s critique of transcendentalism through Cavallès’s (1970) critique of Kant’s subjectivism, the problem in Kant for Cavallès is not his claim that there are rules governing thought, but his positing as the source of these rules the understanding, which accordingly results in a view of science as “the product of certain faculties” (p. 358). When “[t]here is nothing prior to consciousness” (p. 358) this results in a formalism in which all positive content is set aside and rules of thought are conceived “as an internal armature,” which apply uniformly “on the indefinite ‘every object’” (p. 361). Such a formalist account of experience is unable, according to Cavallès, to make sense of the necessary, yet also the dynamic process of scientific practice. As is exemplified in scientific practice, which refers to its internal process as the criterion of its truth, Althusser says, “[t]he *fact* of practice points back, not to an originary legitimation [*droit originaire*],” but to its historical

process, “to *its own real genesis*” (SH, p. 252-3). Again, Althusser does in no way refer to the sources of this particular understanding of scientific practice, but he states that it is distinct from that of Husserl’s, who likewise was critical of “the subjectivist, pragmatist, and empirio-critical” approaches in science (SH, p. 252). Asking whether Marx’s approach to practice is reminiscent of an “analysis of essence” of the Husserlian kind, Althusser answers that Marx does not search for the “ideal conditions of possibility” of practice or aim to go back to an “original intention,” or give an “explanation of scientific ‘praxis’ as constitution” (SH, p. 252).<sup>108</sup> In order to understand the “becoming” of a science, one has to study concretely the history of that science, which cannot be contained in the logical axioms of that science. This history has its own internal necessity, which can only be made sense by analyzing how this science is “produced” in response to the open problems within an existing field. William Corlett’s (1996) explanation of theory-practice relation in Althusser with reference to Wittgenstein’s conception of the rule-following is illuminative in this regard. Althusser, Corlett argues, substitutes the “rules that allow guarantees of fit between thinking and its objects” with new (scientific) rules (p. 472). While “the former rule following relies on guarantees that its rules are not of its own making, the latter acknowledges that it ‘produces’ the objects it thinks according to rules of its own making” (p. 472). This “making” is always conditioned by the concrete historical totality. Hence, affirming the primacy

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<sup>108</sup> The way Peden (2014) summarizes the problem with phenomenology is illuminative in terms of its difference from materialism: “phenomenology renders absolute what is in reality historical and contingent” (p. 121). Again Montag (2013a) points the very important difference between Husserlian phenomenology and Hegelian thought to lie in the idea of a “pre-reflexive” world, which is prior to knowledge. Hegel conceives “the separation of self (*moi*) and world” to be a “moment” “in the long return of spirit to itself,” while for Husserl this separation cannot be overcome (p. 49-50). Althusser also points to this difference in his dissertation when criticizing Hartmann’s Husserlian interpretation of Hegel on the grounds that Hegelian phenomenology cannot be limited to a reflective study of the essence of consciousness, to the internal dialectic of the consciousness abandoning circularity: it is only through a detour, through mediation the concept arrives at absolute knowledge (SH, p. 114).

of matter over consciousness, points to the inseparable link between practice, history and knowledge.<sup>109</sup>

This history defines ‘the limits . . . revealed by practice’ with respect to the ‘objective truth we are capable of attaining’ (Lenin, *Empirio Criticism*, p. 177) . . . But within these historical limits, the truths acquired through practice are absolute (there is no truth outside them). (SH, p. 253).

Althusser’s emphasis on the “historical limits” as conditions of truths in this passage seems to commit him to a certain type of -if not Kantian, but a- historical transcendentalism, which reminds the notion of *de facto necessity*. Very similar with the notion of historical a priori or historical transcendental that is employed by Foucault -and by Husserl- *de facto necessity* is not a logical necessity, which is universally valid, but is framed by a historical condition. Althusser’s theory of knowledge that acknowledges the *work* of the scientist is an attempt to displace the problem of the conditions of possibility of knowledge/science with the problem of the becoming of knowledge/science, that is, of the actual processes of production, by tracing the paths, the short-cuts, turns, pauses and perhaps the dead-ends that lead to a certain knowledges, practices, concepts, thoughts, or objects.

It is important to note in this context that Althusser also subscribes to a realism, which is summarized in Lenin’s thesis that the sole property of matter consists in the fact that it exists (SH, p. 252). For Lenin,

nature is infinite, but it infinitely *exists*. And it is this sole categorical, this sole unconditional recognition of nature’s existence outside the mind and perceptions of man that distinguishes dialectical materialism from relativist agnosticism and idealism. (Lenin, *Empirio-Criticism*, cited in SH, p. 253)

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<sup>109</sup> Althusser had discussed this relation in his thesis with reference to Hegel, for whom “knowledge of history is not a knowledge external to history” (SH, p. 154). However, in Hegel, the problem of externality is solved by introducing a spiritual totality, the unfolding of which we call the historical process. Here, Althusser argues that what is knowable is always already conditioned by the concrete totality.

For the materialist, the real is the condition of thought. The materialist theory of knowledge does not provide us with a set of principles, from which we can *deduce* scientific results “capable of taking the place of the truths the sciences discover,” as in the case of Kant’s theory of knowledge, which provides a priori foundations for the laws of Newtonian physics. The materialist theory of knowledge does not claim to be a “science of sciences,” rather, it reminds the sciences “the primacy of reality” (SH, p. 254). In this sense, the main target of materialist critique, according to Althusser, is “philosophy as pure ‘theory’ or pure ‘interpretation’,” which, claiming to be superior to sciences and to speak their truth, conceives itself to be “exempt from the obligation to submit to the criterion of practice and verification” (SH, p. 255). To think in materialist terms is thus the constant effort to avoid the idealist temptations of a theory of knowledge that searches “its own origins within itself or constitute[s] itself as a closed world” and to remember the material reality, “the world men transform” is the condition “not transcendental, but historical” of thought and every other activity (SH, p. 255). Historical materialism is therefore not a simple turn to things; it claims to be a science, which “not only inspires political action” but “also seeks its verification in practice, developing and growing through political practice itself” (SH, p. 247).

### 3.2 Althusser’s canonical works: Totality and temporality

“On Marxism” demonstrates that as early as 1953, Althusser had problematized Marx’s early works, the inversion thesis, the difference between Marxist and Hegelian dialectic and the relation between science and Marxist materialism. In *For Marx* and in *Reading Capital* as well, Althusser seeks to identify what is scientific in Marx’s thought and to develop a materialist philosophy that can respond to the demands of this science, that is, a philosophy of Marxism, which, he claims to be

embedded in Marx's work "in a practical state." Writing in a context rather different than the '40s and '50s, two important movements, which he sees as major deviations from Marxism, constitute the primary targets of his critique during the '60s: economism and humanism, that is, in Althusser's words, Stalinism and the critique of Stalinism. As Gal Kirn (2013) succinctly puts, "these deviations do not oppose each other, but constitute a scientific-philosophical duality that forms the One, which we could name the One of the actually-existing materialism" (p. 340).

Althusser sees Stalinism as mainly the product of an overriding focus on the forces of production, which reduces men to labor power and views the bureaucratic planning of this power as essential in order to advance towards communism (FM, p. 212-3). Against this excessive concern for economy in Stalinist socialism, Marx's early works are distinguished by their emphasis on humanist themes such as alienation, the realization of human capacities, and freedom. Positing alienation as the fundamental problem of class struggle, the critiques of Stalinism see communism as the self-realization of a universal human essence, which is alienated in capitalism. What is assumed in these seemingly opposite approaches, according to Althusser, is the idea of an original essence, either in the form of "a generic, and reductive, concept of the economic" or "a generic, and reductive, concept of man," which is supposed to "flourish under the right conditions" (Peden, 2014, p. 134). When the complexity of the historical processes is conceived on the basis of a simple determinant principle, be it economic or anthropological, Althusser says, the different domains of a social formation are reduced to simple "expressions" of this principle. What makes humanist and economist Marxisms the mirror images of each other, according to him, can be easily seen in their approach to politics. In both these views,

political action is conceived as instrumental<sup>110</sup> in objectifying a pre-determined end, which may be described as rational, true or as the one that best suits the ends of man or humanity. While crude economism posits the auto-development of the productive forces as the determinant of historical change, which is to culminate in communism,<sup>111</sup> humanism posits *man* as the constitutive subject of history and the self-realization of man as an advance to the same ideal. Both these positions assume a singular and determinant essence that needs to be discovered and then carried on to its realization. Political action, in this framework is reduced to the “organization” of this process.

Althusser interprets such a conception of political practice as a vehicle to a pre-established end as a collapse into ideology. Against this line of thinking, which incorporates a belief in the possibility of the end of politics, he devotes his work to the exploration of a new logic, the structure of which he has so far likened to scientific practice understood on the basis of Marx’s conception of historical totality as dialectical, “as modified by the very manifold that it conditioned” (SH, p. 154). In his canonical works, Althusser repeats his call for a “return to Marx” this time carefully specifying the texts to return. This return takes the form of a coming to terms with Hegel and his “materialist” critique by Feuerbach, or better, what these figures represent in Marxist circles and in French philosophy in Althusser’s time.

Althusser’s critique of Hegel and Feuerbach aims at the problem of essence, which, for Althusser has “a double articulation” (Levine, 2006, p. 29). In its Feuerbachian sense, the idea of essence relates to the idea of a “species being” or a

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<sup>110</sup> J. D. S. Estop (2013) points to the affinity between Althusser and Carl Schmitt in seeing the economism- humanism pair as jeopardizing the autonomy of politics.

<sup>111</sup> Saying that Stalin succumbs to the idea of finality, which was an essential element of “the Second International’s evolutionism,” Althusser (2014) argues that in Stalin’s view, which “the regulated, ‘progressive’ succession of modes of production, [tend] towards the end of class society,” there is no place for “class struggle” (p. 213).

human nature that all individuals universally partake. In its Hegelian sense, which actually descends from the Aristotelian notion of essence as telos, it relates to the conception of history as a ruse, as a teleological process, the moments of which are thought as meaningful manifestations of the fully accomplished totality -and not as “free contingent happenings.” In this section, I focus on Althusser’s attempt to define Marxism as a persistent attempt to withdraw from any form of essentialism, which may either appear as “a theory of ‘ultimate ends’” or as its mirror image, “a theory of the radical ‘origin of things’” (PSPS, p. 82).

In the first part, I present Althusser’s critique of Hegel in his essays in *For Marx* and in the second part in *Reading Capital*. It is primarily these texts we refer when we talk about his anti-Hegelianism. Althusser criticizes Hegel on two grounds: first in terms of his conception of totality and second the notion of historical time that issues from it. He seeks to demarcate a Marxist social totality, which he claims to be neither teleological, nor grounded upon an origin, from a Hegelian social totality, which he claims to be centered in one simple original principle that reduces the different instances of society into its “expressions.” He is particularly critical of the mode of political analysis that issues from this conception of totality, which, as will be clear in the following, closely relates to a linear conception of time and teleological conception of history. Here, I only focus on Althusser’s critique of Hegel and not of Feuerbach.<sup>112</sup> Although, I find Feuerbach to be a very important figure in

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<sup>112</sup> From the viewpoint of this dissertation, taking Feuerbach as an element within the Hegelian problematic, although is a reductionist reading, does not radically affect the main argument of my thesis. In Althusserian context, these two figures may be reduced to one in so far as economism and humanism are read as Hegelian deviations. For Simon Choat (2010), for example, “both Stalinist determinism and its humanist critique were effectively forms of Hegelianism for Althusser” (p. 22). Choat adds that while in Althusser’s reading, “[t]he economistic-evolutionism propounded by Stalinism was little more than an inverted Hegelianism . . . [i]ts humanist adversary . . . did little more than put a Marxist gloss on Kojève’s anthropological reading of Hegel, now retold as a story of the journey of Man towards Communism” (p. 22). Again, Elliott (1993) underlines that economism and humanism can also be interpreted as two different forms of historicism actually belonging to the Hegelian problematic: “a philosophy of history as a process with a subject and a telos” (p. 22).

understanding Althusser's debt to Hegel and in his positioning himself in the trajectory of French epistemologists, for the purpose of this dissertation, I have restricted my interest only to his reading of Feuerbach from the point of view of the critique of the logic of genesis.

### 3.2.1 *For Marx*

In *For Marx*, Althusser takes up the concept of totality in the context of the interpretation of Marx's early works in "On the Young Marx" and in the context of his discussion of dialectical materialism in "Contradiction and Overdetermination" and "On the Materialist Dialectic." He will take up the problem of totality again in "The Object of *Capital*" in *Reading Capital*, this time focusing on a theory of historical time.

#### 3.2.1.1 "On the Young Marx": Reading Marx

In Althusser's mature works, the question of totality is first raised in the context of "reading" and, in particular, reading Marx. In "On the Young Marx" (1960) Althusser reviews several studies on early Marx published in the periodical *Recherches Internationales*<sup>113</sup> the same year. For Althusser, how we read Marx's early works is essentially related with how these works relate to the totality of his oeuvre and how this totality itself is conceived. Generally, early texts are interpreted through the lens of the mature texts (FM, p. 58). Looking at the process from its end point, it is a common attitude among the interpreters of Marx to "read the end back into the beginning retroactively conferring a unified development from origin to end" (Pfeifer, 2015, p. 45). The historical development of Marx's works, in this reading, is

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<sup>113</sup> Althusser discusses the special issue "Sur le jeune Marx" of the journal *Recherches Internationales à la lumière du marxisme* published in 1960.

presumed to obey a teleology, the unfolding of which is the task of the interpreter to reveal. “On the Young Marx” is a detailed discussion of this particular way of reading, which Althusser names “analytico-teleological method”<sup>114</sup> or “philosophy in the ‘future anterior’” (FM, p. 54, p. 60). Althusser is interested in deciphering the fundamental logic inherent in this method: geneticism. Rather than judging each work in its “effective living unity,” Althusser says, this method separates a work into its “essential” elements, the essentiality of which is decided in relation to a later text, which is supposed to reflect the truth of a former text (FM, p. 61). In this reading, Althusser says, the end, that is, the theoretical framework offered by the late texts, retroactively decides both the decomposition of the early texts into their elements and their reconfiguration. It is as if these texts, which “*must* develop into Marxism,” did not have a meaning of their own or this meaning was held “*in abeyance*, waiting on a stage it has not yet reached” (FM, p. 60). Until the “final synthesis,” Althusser says, “the question of the whole could not be raised, just because all totalities earlier than the final synthesis have been destroyed” (FM, p. 60). So, when, for example, an interpreter (Nikolai Lapine) reads Marx’s *Critique of Hegel’s ‘Philosophy of Right’*, which is by itself a “*perfectly consistent and complete work*,” in comparison with the late works that are supposed to *complete* it, this work ceases to be “*an organically complete whole*” (FM, p. 58).

The fundamental characteristic of the analytico-teleological method is that it can only approach a text *descriptively*, and not *theoretically*. This distinction between “theory” or “explanation” and “description” plays a key role in Althusser’s work. In “Montesquieu: Politics and History” (1959), for example, Althusser

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<sup>114</sup> Although Althusser does not tell the reader with especially whom he associates this method, in an interview with Hallward (2012b), Yves Duroux, a former student of Althusser’s, remarks that “‘On the Young Marx’ . . . became famous for its critique of Sartre’s analytico-teleological method” (p.170).

appreciates Montesquieu for his return to “facts” in order to explain what makes a society what it is. Montesquieu’s study is not a simple enumeration of various elements that make up a society, but an attempt to “explain” the “causal” link that hold these elements together without recourse to meaning and ends:

Before him political theorists had certainly tried to explain the multiplicity and diversity of the laws of a given government. But they had done little more than outline a logic of the *nature* of governments, even when they were not, as in most cases, satisfied by a mere description of elements *without any inner unity*. The immense majority of laws, such as those that determine education, division of lands, degree of property, techniques of justice, punishments and rewards, luxury, the condition of women, the conduct of war, etc. . . . were excluded from this logic, because their necessity was not understood. (PH, p. 47)

For Althusser, Montesquieu is the “the *founder of political science*,” for he not only rules out intentionality and teleology as explanatory principles of history, but he is also careful not to fall into a simple description of facts. The distinction shows up again in “Contradiction and Overdetermination,” in Althusser’s comparison between “a true theory of economic history” and “a description and foundation of economic behaviour” (FM, p. 109), and later in “On the Materialist Dialectic: On the Unevenness of Origins,” when he presents Lenin’s texts on October Revolution as “an analysis of theoretical scope,” as opposed to “a simple description of a given situation, an empirical enumeration of various paradoxical or exceptional elements” (FM, p. 177). Again, much later in *Machiavelli and Us*, we see the same idea at work in the distinction he draws between thinking *in* the conjuncture and “thinking *on* the conjuncture” (MU, p. 18). Thinking in the conjuncture requires “taking account of all the determinations, all the existing concrete *circumstances*, making an inventory, a detailed breakdown and comparison of them” (MU, p. 18). Yet, such an inventory would be insufficient to account for the *unity* of the various, even conflicting, elements that make up a specific conjuncture. What is therefore problematic in a

descriptive approach, regardless of how accurate a description may be, is the absence of an account of the “*necessary link*,” that is, “*the objective internal reference system*” of the elements that constitute the specific unity of a text, a social formation or a historical event (FM, p. 107). Theoretical approach strives to construct a causal order, which is indifferent to intentions, tendencies or ends. In the absence of a theoretical explanation concerning the relation between the elements, the *necessity* that *binds* these elements, is merely *postulated* and not *proved*. Accordingly, a reading, which merely “depend[s] on free association of ideas or . . . a simple comparison of terms,” thinks of the relation between these elements in terms of an external necessity, that is, either in terms of “a theory of *sources* -- or . . . a theory of anticipation” (FM, p. 56). These two positions, which are the mirror images of the same model of thought, either postulate the end (the late works) or the origin (the early works), that is, an element external to the “unity” of the specific text in question, as its explanatory principle (FM, p. 56). In both cases, in which the necessity is imposed externally, this necessity only *contingently* relates to its object, that is, to the text, the political or historical situation that it is assumed to explain. Why such and such a principle rather than the other is chosen needs no further inquiry as it must already be obvious to everyone. By virtue of the “*auto-intelligibility*” that such an external necessity demands, Althusser deems these approaches “ideological” (FM, p. 107).<sup>115</sup>

According to Althusser, there are three principles that an analytico-teleological approach to a text tacitly assumes: first, it presupposes that a theoretical

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<sup>115</sup> See Geoff Waite (1996), who points out to the “relativism” inherent in such a reading in his discussion of the interpretations of Nietzsche:

The result is that—basically—Nietzsche is one of us, whoever we may be. At the end of the day we rest in peace, confident that he’s on “our side”—whatever that side is, no matter where it leads. And so, finally, we also Rest in Peace. (p. 40)

system is “*reducible to its elements*,” which makes possible to conceive “any element of this system *on its own*, and to compare it with *another* similar element of *another* system” (analytic presupposition); second, these elements are *instituted* as elements by “a secret tribunal of history,”<sup>116</sup> which measures them “according to its own norms as if to *their truth*” (teleological presupposition). These two suppositions cannot do without a third, which views “the history of ideas as its own element, [and] maintains that nothing happens there which is not a product of the history of ideas itself” (FM, p. 56-7). Since the criteria, according to which the reduction of the text into its elements is performed, are external to the text and are *posited in thought*, and since “the meaning of [a] whole . . . depends . . . on its relation to a truth other than itself,” Althusser says, this method presupposes that it is possible to extract from a text an element without the slightest change in its meaning (FM, p. 62-63). In the case of Marx’s works, the texts are separated into their materialist and idealist elements from the viewpoint of developed Marxism. These elements are then compared against each other and the text is evaluated in terms of its distance to Marx’s final works. For example, some commentators point that Marx’s *Critique of Hegel’s ‘Philosophy of Right’*

contain[s] a series of Feuerbachian themes (the subject-predicate inversion, the critique of speculative philosophy, the theory of the species-man, etc.), but also some analyses which are not to be found in Feuerbach (the interrelation of politics, the State and private property, the reality of social classes, etc.). (FM, p. 67)

In a similar way, this comparison can be made between the content and the form of the text, between which, according to this approach, there is no intrinsic relation. So, for some commentators, Althusser says,

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<sup>116</sup> This is reminiscent of the legal metaphors of Kantian philosophy such as “Tribunal of Reason,” which corresponds to an impartial position that is external to the phenomena it judges.

Marx was *already* a materialist, but he was *still* using Feuerbachian concepts, he was borrowing Feuerbachian *terminology* although he was no longer and had never been a pure Feuerbachian: between the *1844 Manuscripts* and the *Mature Works* Marx discovered his definitive terminology; it is merely a question of *language*. (FM, p. 61)

Again, other commentators focus on an opposition between *consciousness* and *tendency*:

Marx's consciousness (of himself) at a particular moment in his development . . . was Feuerbachian. Marx spoke the language of Feuerbach because *he believed himself* to be a Feuerbachian. But this language-consciousness was objectively in contradiction with his '*materialist tendency*'. (FM, p. 61)

Whether using the terminology of consciousness and tendency or form and content, what is at stake here is "a retrospective abstraction of the *result*" and the reading of a text from the lens of this result (FM, p. 62). The result that this reading is supposed to be producing is already given at the beginning; the result, which is exactly what needs explanation, itself. Althusser argues this "finalist perspective" to be ultimately Hegelian at base (FM, p. 62).<sup>117</sup> The explanation with reference to consciousness and tendency, he argues, is a variant of Hegel's distinction "between the in-itself and the for-itself" (FM, p. 62). Tendency refers to a *not-yet*, that is, to "the Hegelian *in-itself* conceived on the basis of its end as its real origin" (FM, p. 62). The passage from the in-itself to the for-itself, from potentiality to actuality, presupposes that this process is continuous in that it contains "its own future *in germ in its own interiority*" (FM, p. 78, n. 40).

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<sup>117</sup> A very striking aspect of Althusser's critique is how it resonates with Hegel's (2004b) critique of natural law/state of nature theorists, which I had earlier mentioned. A theory, which begins with a counterfactual abstraction, needs a justification as to why "some" rather than "other" elements are chosen in order to describe the initial abstraction. Hegel criticizes state of nature theories on the grounds that such criteria are treated as if they are a priori, though, in fact, they are a posteriori, that is, dependent on what the theorist sees as essential or inessential, which is again dependent on a description of the nature of human beings, who are already in a society, the modern bourgeois society. So, the result, which is exactly what demands explanation, is injected into the beginning.

What Althusser offers in order to escape this dogmatic model, in which the end is conceived as the truth of beginning, is to focus on the text itself and ask whether Marx introduces a new theoretical framework, when he introduces new objects such as “social class, the private property/State relation, etc.” (FM, p. 62). The presence of the “new elements” proves nothing about the *novelty* of the meaning they constitute, since the meaning resides in the assemblage of the elements, in “the effective living unity of a text” (FM, p. 59); what is important, as in the “basic question” of the distinction between materialism and idealism, is thus less “the material reflected,” than “the modality of the reflection,” that is, the way in which reflection actually relates to its objects (FM, p. 68). This modality, which not only unifies all elements of thought within a text, but also indicates “the specific difference” of this unity with respect to others, constitutes, what Althusser calls, “the *basic problematic*” of a text (FM, p. 32). As Balibar (1978) remarks, it is not the “isolated concept”’s but their unity, that is, “the system of interdependent concepts” that creates meaning (p. 218).

With the concept of problematic, Althusser addresses not only the problem of the particular unity and the specific difference of a text, but also the more general problem of totality. As he puts it, problematic “is the concept that gives the best *grasp* on the facts without falling into the Hegelian ambiguities of ‘*totality*’” (FM, p. 66-7). The Hegelian model interprets a given historical result, whether it be a text, a theoretical, scientific or a social formation, under the effect of a retrospective illusion, that is, as if the history of its development is a history of the progressive materialization of a reason, which is present in germ in its origins. What is left *unexplained* in this model is the *determinate unitary structure* of the particular totality in question. The concept of problematic is intended to account for “the

*typical systematic structure* unifying all the elements” of a text, in order to understand the *meaning* of the “elements” that constitute it and to relate this text to the concrete historical totality, “*to the problems left or posed to every thinker by the historical period*” of the author (FM, p. 67).

Althusser’s emphasis on concrete historical reality, to “real problems,” challenges the third principle of the analytico-teleological method, that is, the presupposition that “nothing happens [in the history of ideas] which is not a product of the history of ideas” (FM, p. 57). For Althusser, the truth of the history of Marx’s thought lies “neither in its principle (its source) nor in its end (its goal) . . . [but] *in the facts* themselves” (FM, p. 70). This is a new framework, which judges Marx’s development in its “contingency,” that is, its production as a new theory, as developed Marxism, not as an accomplishment of a *goal*, as the realization of a pre-conceived philosophical idea, but as a *surprise*. Again, similar to evaluating a scientific discovery, understanding Marx’s work in its contingency requires both understanding “the *ideological field* in which [his] thought emerges and grows” and “the internal unity of [his] thought: its *problematic*” (FM, p. 70). Hence, “*whether* [and when] *a new meaning has emerged*” can only be decided, according to Althusser, by juxtaposing Marx’s particular problematic against the background of the problematics that this ideological field possesses (FM, p. 70). From the perspective of this new *modality* of thought, the crucial question is, Althusser says, “how can we account for the emergence of a thought and its mutations?” (FM, p. 71).

A materialist approach seeks to understand Marx’s “conditions,” that is, the “*contingent beginnings* . . . that he had to start from” (FM, p. 83), and how, in working out his new theory, which was inevitably prepared in the “old forms,” he put this point of departure behind, or better, transformed it in a way that it is no longer

what it was before Marx's intervention. As Althusser points out, there is a paradox involved in such discoveries: one "*learn[s] the way of saying what he is going to discover in the very way he must forget*" (FM, p. 84-5). Marx's point of departure is a world dominated by Hegelianism, or better, by the decomposition of Hegelian idealism. This beginning is a "nodal constitution" of meanings, themes and objects, or as Althusser would later put it, it is a "conjuncture" of many trajectories. In this sense, Marx is dependent upon history for the possibilities it opened for him, but if he did, as Althusser argues, put his point of departure behind, that is, did not remain a Young Hegelian, then his "beginning" does not explain Marx's theory. The elements that constitute the new whole (Marx) are produced by the previous structure, which, however, did not generate this result necessarily. So, Althusser says, when we read authors such as Marx,

[w]e *scan* the necessity of their lives in our understanding of its nodal points, its reversals and mutations. In this area there is perhaps no greater joy than to be able to witness in an emerging life, once the Gods of Origins and Goals have been dethroned, the birth of necessity. (FM, p. 70)

Hence, if we can ever talk about the "necessity" of the development of Marx's thought, this necessity cannot be made sense remaining within the Hegelian framework of "a logic of supersession," according to which Marx's development would be understood as an uninterrupted sequence of thoughts that are all causally related to one other such that the later moment is the *truth* of the earlier one (FM, p. 82). Althusser's proposal is to replace this approach with "a logic of *discoveries*," which involves "the application of the principles of historical materialism" rather than that of the analytico-teleological method to make sense of Marx's historical trajectory (FM, p. 84). The notion of supersession, which constitutes one of the basic structures of Hegelian dialectic (FM, p.93) presupposes a unified development and

even if there be discontinuities within it, in the form of backwardness, forwardness or survivals, they are thought “within the same *element of continuity* sustained by the *temporality* of history itself” (FM, p. 77). From the viewpoint of a logic of discoveries/emergence, however, what is forgotten here is the many-pathed and tangled nature of the actual processes of production that Marx was a part of. This approach enables Althusser to identify the radical difference of Marx’s thought from that of his predecessors by revealing and renouncing the assumption that there is some continuous pattern of development between the former and the latter.<sup>118</sup> So, calling attention to Marx’s *contingent* beginnings is an attempt to conceive a beginning that is not an “origin.” Althusser also cautions that this beginning is not to be thought, after a Bergsonian fashion, within the framework of a philosophy of invention, for which the irruption [*irruption, surgissement*] of Marx’s thought would be “the manifestation of . . . [an] essence, freedom or choice,” hence the existence of a subject that rationally decides in working out his new theory (FM, p. 82, n. 48). Rather, this emergence “is merely the *effect* [emphasis added] of its own empirical conditions” (FM, p. 83, n. 48). Expressed in Althusser’s later terminology, Marx, the author, may be said to be a “structural effect” of this particular conjuncture, or to put it in his earlier terminology, he obeys a certain *internal* necessity, a necessity of discovery. Hence, the idea of the logic of discoveries suggests that the “becoming” of Marx can be understood neither by a logic of supersession, nor by an analysis of his acts alone (his psychology, his intentions, motivations).

Althusser’s final verdict on the articles in *Recherches Internationales* is that out of fear of destroying Marx’s *integrity*, these interpreters erect “a pseudo-theory of the history of philosophy in the ‘*futur antérieur*’ . . . without realizing that this

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<sup>118</sup> For Althusser, it is crucial that this assumption of “continuity” be made visible. The problem of continuity occupies a central place in his discussion of temporality in *Reading Capital*.

pseudo-theory is quite simply Hegelian” (FM, p. 54). In this framework, any radical break, reversal or vacuity in Marx’s thought are seen as instances that weaken his theoretical rigor and need to be contained,<sup>119</sup> whereas, for Althusser, these are exactly the moments that enable one to understand the real historical development of Marx’s theory. Renouncing the idea of a history of ideas as “*its own principle of intelligibility*,” Althusser points to the material-practical dimension of theory. Such a materialist attitude is the first step to think a “new logic” other than that of “the analytico-teleological method.” It is important to note that Althusser will later criticize his explanation of Marx’s theoretical discovery with reference to notions such as “actual experience” or “real emergence” as empiricist and humanist or, better to say, as a deviation of a “phenomenological” kind for its emphasis on the subject. In his later work, his terminology involves more “structural” concepts in order to describe the logic of this *leap*, this *rupture*, which opens the possibility of the emergence of a new phenomenon, a new problematic, a new horizon of meaning. What Althusser offers here and more insistently in his following works is thus a reconceptualization of the relation between a result (existing conditions) and its conditions of existence in non-geneticist terms.

### 3.2.1.2 “Contradiction and Overdetermination”: Hegelian dialectic revisited

In “Contradiction and Overdetermination” (June-July, 1962), Althusser takes up the concept of totality in the context of the difference between Marx’s and Hegel’s dialectic. Again, the main problem that occupies him is to set forth the specific type

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<sup>119</sup> In his analysis of the Hegelian-Marxist formula of the “general contradiction” as the essential explanatory principle of all the elements present in a situation, Montag (2013a) relates this tendency to totalize to a fear from hyper-empiricism as the only alternative to a rigid determinism:

From such a perspective, the failure to totalize through a reduction or negation of difference would be the failure of theory itself, the failure to ascend beyond the empirically given. (p. 94)

of determination that binds a totality, this time, a historically given society, without falling into empiricism or pluralism, yet also without reducing the infinite diversity, that is, “the economic, social, political and legal institutions, customs, ethics, art, religion, philosophy, and even historical *events*: wars, battles, defeats, and so on,” which make up a society, to “a *simple internal principle*” (FM, p. 103). This problem has been on Althusser’s desk since his 1959 essay on Montesquieu, a central figure for both Hegel and Marx, to whom they owe the category of totality (PH, p. 48).

Hegel says

it was Montesquieu above all who, in his famous work *The Spirit of the Laws*, kept in sight and tried to work out in detail both the thought of the dependence of laws . . . on the specific character of the state, and also the philosophical notion of always *treating the part in its relation to the whole* [emphasis added]. (*Outlines*, p. 236)

Yet, Althusser finds Hegel’s interpretation of the infinite diversity of historically given societies as transitional moments in their “magical movement” towards the constitutional state, which is their *truth* or goal, to be an inadequate interpretation of Montesquieu. As Goshgarian (2013) underlines, what is peculiar to Althusser’s reading of Montesquieu is the “line of demarcation” he draws “between the Hegelian and anti-Hegelian Montesquieu” (p. 98). Although Althusser’s Montesquieu shares Hegel’s “theoretical antihumanism,” that is, the idea that “what is most important in human history . . . is what happens behind the backs of human beings” (Montag, 2013a, p. 31), the new understanding of history he introduces, though not “a narrative of facts,” is not “a narrative of essences, in which all that does not correspond to the norm is declared unintelligible” (p. 26), either. Hegel eliminates the threat of pluralism through the mechanism of the negation of negation. Althusser, on the other hand, opposes not only a pluralist conception of difference posed as a simple diversity of elements, but also the “Hegelian determination of difference as

contradiction” (Smith, 2008, p. 640). In pluralism, the differences, the diversity of which can only be described, are “indifferent to one another,” while in Hegel they are sharpened to a “frontal opposition” (p. 640). The task that Althusser sets for himself is to conceive a “conflictuality” that can account for the “relation” between the diverse elements without recourse to a simple internal contradiction and yet without confining explanation to mere acknowledgment of this diversity. For this purpose, Althusser turns to Lenin’s analysis of the Russian Revolution<sup>120</sup> and his theory of the weakest link, which is one of the best examples of how the Marxist concept of contradiction is employed in a theoretical analysis, for it takes into consideration the blunting effects of various contradictions and the displacements that their interaction creates (FM, p. 94).

### 3.2.1.2.1 Lenin’s theory of the weakest link and overdetermination

Russian revolution is said to have an exceptional character. At a time when the capitalist production was developed and the protests against it were very strong in many parts of Europe, including Germany, Hungary, France and Italy, “*only in Russia*, precisely the ‘*most backward*’ country in Europe, *did it produce a triumphant revolution*” (FM, p. 95). Russia was still an agricultural society, in which one could hardly speak about the existence of proletariat. According to an economic determinist outlook, the revolution should not have taken place in Russia where the class antagonism had not elevated to its highest degree. Lenin’s theory of the weakest link is an attempt to explain “this paradoxical exception” (FM, p. 95). For Lenin, revolution was victorious in Russia, for “in the ‘system of imperialist states’ Russia

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<sup>120</sup> Althusser does not give us the name of the text, but it is Lenin’s *State and Revolution* (Lahtinen, 2009, p. 84). See Smith (2014) for a discussion on why Althusser chooses Lenin’s “texts written during or after 1917,” rather than his philosophical notes on Hegel in order to discuss the notion of “contradiction” (p. vi-viii).

represented the weakest point” (FM, p. 95). Its weakness was “*the accumulation and exacerbation of all the historical contradictions then possible in a State*”<sup>121</sup> (FM, p. 95-6). This rather improper candidate for socialist revolution reveals a very interesting point about the explanatory power of the idea of “the general contradiction” between capital and labor as the sole conditioning force of a “revolutionary situation”: while the general contradiction may be “active” in all the instances and in the “fusion” of these various instances “it cannot be claimed that these contradictions and their fusion are merely the *pure phenomena* of the general contradiction” (FM, p. 100). Lenin’s analysis shows that the basic class contradiction is “*always specified by the historically concrete forms and circumstances in which it is exercised*” (FM, p. 106). Hence, in this approach, while the effect of each factor contributing, either in a negative or positive way, to the revolutionary rupture is affirmed, their essential relation with the general contradiction is not set aside. These diverse factors, Althusser says,

derive from the relations of production, which are, of course, one of the *terms* of the contradiction, but at the same time its *conditions of existence*; from the superstructures, instances which derive from it, but have their own consistency and effectivity, from the international conjuncture itself, which intervenes as a determination with a specific role to play. (FM, p. 100)

Althusser names this complex causal relation between the diverse factors of a situation “overdetermination.” A concept advanced upon Lenin’s theory of the weakest link, overdetermination is employed in psychoanalytic tradition and linguistics in order to designate how otherwise absolutely isolated facts can form a complex unity, a structure. In *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud<sup>122</sup> employs the

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<sup>121</sup> See FM (p. 95-6), for these various elements that defined the Russian case.

<sup>122</sup> Freud is as important a source as Marx, Spinoza and the French epistemological tradition in Althusser’s anti-humanism. As Young (2004) says Althusser is against any philosophical position, especially Sartre’s, which is based on a notion of man that ignores not only Marx’s rejection of the

term to explain how the logic of a dream can be determined by multiple sources each with its own unique explanatory power.<sup>123</sup> Here, the challenge is to make sense of these possibly conflicting interpretations of a dream. With this term, Althusser aims to explain how a prodigious number of contradictions, many of which are “paradoxically foreign to the revolution in origin and sense, or even its ‘direct opponents’” (FM, p. 99) can merge into a ruptural unity. Overdetermination refers not only to the condensation and displacement of contradictions into an explosive unity, but also to the idea that one of the terms of this unity is the structuring principle of this unity. Again, in parallel with Lacan’s reading of Freud, which draws attention to the effectivity of the unconscious over psychic phenomena, Althusser underlines the effectivity of economic instance over the other instances (FM, p. 112). The position of economic relations within the whole, Diefenbach (2016) says, can be summarized through Lacan’s formula: “I have three brothers, Paul, Ernest and me” (p. 27-8). It is such that the economic relations are at the same time the instance and the context of determination, that is, as Althusser puts in terms that are reminiscent of his idea of “dialectical transcendental,” they are “determining, but also determined in one and the same movement” (FM, p. 101).

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anthropocentric account of history, but also “Freud’s [insight] that the subject is not centred in consciousness” (p. 88). According to Vuillerod (2020), however, Althusser did not directly find the concept of overdetermination in Freud, who was criticized by his friend Jacques Martin for adhering to a simple conception of causality as opposed to Hegel’s. Hegel, according to Martin, developed a more complex understanding of causality that considers the multiple elements which contribute to the emergence of phenomena.

<sup>123</sup> See S. B. Smith (1984, p. 520-1) for the employment of this term by Freud and other thinkers. Silverman (2013) traces the concept “further back to Nietzsche,” to his explanation of “punishment” as “informed and created by different impulses and utilities in different social contexts” (p. 314, n.1) in his *On the Genealogy of Morals*.

### 3.2.1.2.2 Hegelian cumulative internalization

There is a *complex* causal relation between the irreducibly diverse elements of the overdetermined unity. This complexity can be made sense through a comparison with “the complexity of a cumulative *internalization*.” In *Phenomenology*, Hegel conceives history as the dialectic of consciousness, which works in a way that the contradictions internal to a particular stage of consciousness result in its destruction and the genesis of a new one while integrating into its body the truth of the earlier stage. Hence, at every stage of this process, “consciousness has a suppressed-conserved (*aufgehoben*) past . . . and . . . the worlds of its superseded essences” (FM, p. 101). *Aufhebung*, the fundamental operator of Hegelian dialectic, embraces contraries, expresses their truth and preserves all that has been negated in the form of a memory (SH, p.48). This structure of “transcendence-preserving-the-transcended-as-the-internalized-transcended” gives Hegelian dialectic its teleological character (PH, p. 182). The relation of the present consciousness to its past is not one of overdetermination despite all its apparent complexity. This is because the “past *images* of consciousness” and the historical forms that these images correspond do not “affect present consciousness as *effective determinations different from itself*” (FM, p. 101). Rather, the determination of these disparate structures relates to the present consciousness only “*as anticipations of or allusions to itself*” (FM, p. 102) and never as a separate being, as a radical difference, as a “*true external determination*” (FM, p. 102). Hegelian dialectic, which proceeds by way of contradiction and its supersession is conditioned upon the identity of a unitary subject, which absorbs what is external to it, hence making it impossible to conceive of a determination other than itself. In this sense, the past, Althusser says, “is the presence to consciousness of consciousness itself” (FM, p. 102). Or, as he puts in a

more explicit way in his dissertation, history in Hegel “is nothing but . . . the development of the forms of self-consciousness in which Spirit grasps itself” (SH, p. 96).

For Althusser, the most refined illustration of this mechanism is in Hegel’s thinking of the movement of Spirit as “the circle that returns into itself, the circle that presupposes its beginning and reaches it only at the end” (*Phenomenology*, p. 488). This metaphor by itself points to the impossibility of an overdetermined relation between the different instances of the development of consciousness:

*A circle of circles, consciousness has only one centre, which solely determines it; it would need, circles with another centre than itself – decentred circles – for it to be affected at its centre by their effectivity. (FM, p. 102)*

The same problem exists, Althusser says, in Hegel’s *The Philosophy of History*, in his account of historical social formations, which he takes to be “constituted of an infinity of concrete determinations” such as “political laws . . . religion . . . customs, habits, financial, commercial and economic regimes, the educational system, the arts, philosophy” (FM, p. 102). None of these elements, the diversity of which points in the direction of the presence of an overdetermined contradiction is “essentially *outside* the others.” This multiplicity is held together by “*a unique internal principle, which is the truth of all those concrete determinations*” (FM, p. 102). This is apparent, according to Althusser in Hegel’s account of the birth and fall of Roman society:

Thus Rome: its mighty history, its institutions, its crises and ventures, are nothing but the temporal manifestation of the internal principle of the *abstract legal personality*, and then its destruction . . . this internal principle contains *as echoes* the principle of each of the historical formations it has superseded, but as echoes of itself . . . it only has one center, the center of all the past worlds conserved in its memory; that is why *it is simple*. (FM, p. 102)

The reduction of the plurality of elements to a simple determining contradiction is possible, Althusser says, on the grounds that “the whole concrete life of a people” is interpreted as “the externalization-alienation (Entäusserung-Entfremdung) of an internal spiritual principle,” which reflects the ideology of that epoch, how it perceives itself (FM, p. 103). He clearly expresses this mechanism of “alienation” in his dissertation:

The emergence of the self-consciousness of Spirit therefore involves converting the form of consciousness into its content and this content into consciousness, so that this ‘education’ ultimately issues in the connaturality of consciousness and its objects, so that consciousness is not only *bei sich* in its object, but also knows it is, discovering that the spiritual totality can be fully accomplished only through this act by which the whole becomes conscious of itself. (SH, p. 96)

Since philosophy is the way in which a particular time understands itself, for Hegel, Althusser argues, “history ultimately boils down to the history of philosophy,” a history of ideologies, “the progressive development of the forms of self-consciousness” (SH, p. 97). Being the same self-consciousness cumulatively internalizing its alienated forms, Hegel’s “Universal History from the Ancient Orient to the present day,” involves no “basic rupture, no actual end to any real history – nor any radical beginning” (FM, p. 103).

#### 3.2.1.2.3 The inversion thesis revisited

It is this Hegelian logic that is imported to Marxism when history, “from the Ancient Orient to the present day” is interpreted with reference to one single determinant: an abstract conception of mode of production.<sup>124</sup> Having demonstrated the intrinsic

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<sup>124</sup> In “What is a mode of production?” a chapter of Althusser’s unpublished project *Book on Imperialism* (1973), some extracts of which were later edited and translated by Goshgarian and published in *History and Imperialism: Writings, 1963–1986*, Althusser (2020) expands on the definitions of “mode of production” as it appears in Marx’s writings. In its first sense, it refers to “the way of producing, in a technical sense” (p. 68). Here, the “production is considered abstractly,” that is,

relation between Hegelian philosophy and the key structures of Hegelian dialectic, Althusser concludes that Marx must have performed more than a simple “inversion” of the dialectic if he can be said to found a new conception of society and history (FM, p. 104, 107). In order to articulate the specific difference of Marxist dialectic and to demonstrate the “*necessary link*” between Marx’s conception of contradiction and social formation, Althusser enters into a discussion of the inversion thesis, which, he claims, better suits Feuerbachian materialism that transforms Hegel’s speculative philosophy into an idealist anthropology.

Althusser argues that if Marx’s intervention to Hegelian dialectic is a mere inversion, then his conception of society should be the reverse of Hegel’s: rather than a dialectic of consciousness explaining real history, the material life of men accounts for their history, which, in turn, reduces their consciousness to a manifestation of their material life (FM, p. 107). Here, Althusser returns to what he discussed in his dissertation from the viewpoint of Marx’s *Critique of Hegel’s ‘Philosophy of Right’*, yet this time there is no reference to this early text, which Althusser has declared to be a work still under the influence of Hegel and Feuerbach (FM, p. 37). In Hegel, he says, society is composed of “*two societies*: the society of needs, or *civil society*, and the political society or State” (FM, p. 107-8). While the various spheres of the state, such as religion, philosophy, which correspond to its “spiritual life,” represent “the epoch’s consciousness of itself,” the sphere of material life (civil society, that is, the economy) is merely a “*Ruse of Reason*” and is subject to the former as “its condition

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only as a labor-process, “abstract[ed] from the relations of production.” So, with this definition, Marx reduces the mode of production to the productive forces, suggesting a technicist or economic conception of it. Yet, Althusser argues, there is a second sense in which Marx talks of mode of production as “*the way of producing*, in the social sense,” therefore referring “to *the whole process of production and reproduction*,” hence, not “just [to] the productive forces, but [to] the unity of the productive forces and the relations of production” (p. 68-9). Here, I use this term in its first, “abstract,” sense.

of possibility” and its goal (FM p. 108). The inversion thesis suggests that the state, “the politico-ideological,” is, in fact a mere “phenomenon” of the economic and not its essence (FM, p. 108). What remains the same in both of these explanations, however, is the idea of a “*simple principle*”: History is the dialectic of successive modes of production rather than the Idea (FM, p. 108). Such an inversion, however, Althusser argues, would be less than an “overcoming” of Hegel, than a return to a pre-Hegelian framework, to an “idealist anthropology” and to the figure of “homo economicus” and its philosophical and political manifestations, which constitute the basis of the Feuerbachian problematic and the eighteenth-century philosophy (FM, p. 89).

According to Althusser, Marx’s break from the Hegelian dialectic is both a transformation in the *terms* of the dialectic and in the *relation* between these terms; a transformation that targets both the content and the form, which, as he argues from his thesis on, cannot be conceived in an external relation. As to the first, he claims that even though Marx makes use of both the civil society and the state, this is in order to indicate his specific difference from the eighteenth-century philosophers (the political philosophy of Locke, Helvetius, etc.) and economists (the political economy of Turgot, Smith, etc.) and also from Hegel, who conceived civil society as “*the world of needs*.” The notion of civil society defines the relation between individuals in terms of their needs and the state as the arbiter of the differing and clashing needs. What is problematic here for Althusser is that this tradition only offers “*a description and foundation of economic behaviour*” and not a true “theory” of economic history (FM, p. 109). Hence, we come once again to the distinction between description and theory, which Althusser employs this time to demarcate Marxist approach to society from that of the eighteenth-century philosophers, which is “a sort of *philosophico-*

*economic Phenomenology*.” This eighteenth century version of the “analysis of essence” presupposes a naïve state of human relations, which refers to the ahistorical foundation of society. Marx, on the other hand, discovers in this “abstract *description* of economic behavior” and “its supposed *foundation* in the mythical *homo economicus*” another reality, which is not “ahistorical”: “*the mode of production* of a determinate social formation” (FM, p. 109). With this discovery, he reorientates his theoretical inquiry from the problem of origin to the problem of the “*conditions of existence*” of a specific object or a relation. This is a radical transformation from a problematic, which takes “individual economic behavior” as a *cause*, a foundation, an explanatory principle to another problematic, which conceives this very behavior as a (mediated) *result*, hence as something that needs explanation.<sup>125</sup> Concerning the state, that is, the second term of the dialectic, Althusser claims, Marx performs a similar operation, which is no mere inversion. Marx’s inquiry concerning the conditions of existence of the state within a social formation leads him to develop a new concept of the state, which brings to the fore “*the concept of social class*.” The state functions, Marx argues, as “the means of action and domination of a social class” (FM, p. 110).

The difference of Marx’s dialectic from Hegel’s, however, consists in more than a simple change in the *terms* of the dialectic. By pointing that both civil society and state are conditioned upon a particular social formation, Marx also targets the *relation* between the terms, which, in Hegel, is articulated in the concept of the “truth of” (FM, p. 111). Althusser argues in his thesis that, for Marx:

Hegel merely reprised the old theological myths of emanation, in which causality concentrated in the divine being radiates outwards in concrete

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<sup>125</sup> Here, I should note that Marx’s critique of *homo economicus* is not a rejection of, but an elaboration on Hegel’s (2004b) critique of social contract theories in his *Natural Law* essay.

attributes: the concept is *causa sui*, like God, and the world derives from it as the modes of substance do. (SH, p. 129)

Marx criticizes Hegel in his *1844 Manuscripts* on the grounds that Hegelian concept is “the pure act of positing,” since this “‘act of positing’ is merely the abstract form, produced in thought, of a ‘real living act’, human labour” (SH, p. 129). Here, in *For Marx*, Althusser argues the “Hegelian theme of *phenomenon-essence-truth-of*” to be a version of the theory of emanation, yet the discussion is no longer about the “purity” of the act of positing. The difference between Marx and Hegel is not about whether they see a historical formation as the emanation of a material or an ideal essence; the problem is the presupposition of something more “real” to which everything can be reduced and the identity relation constituted between this supposed real and its phenomena. Yet, Althusser insists, while rejecting the emanationist paradigm, that is, the relation of “truth of,” Marx does not give up on the idea of effectivity.

#### 3.2.1.2.4 The logic of overdetermination

If we return to where we started, that is, to the Russian Revolution, Althusser argues that it is only from the standpoint of the idea of a “pure and simple” dialectical schema, which is, in fact, the mark of Hegelian and not Marxist thought that the Russian case can be considered an “exception” (FM, p. 104). Actually, the very notion of exception is based on the supposition that there is a normal course of history that can be reduced to “the ‘beautiful’ contradiction between Capital and Labour” (FM, p. 104). The Russian case and the rest of Marxist experience “urge” that this model be radically reconsidered in order to account for the “causality” of a revolution. Yet, Althusser also underlines following Lenin that although the theory of the weakest link is an analysis of a revolutionary moment, such a “‘crisis’ situation”

is chosen for its “*revelatory* role” (FM, p. 100, n.21). Hence, “[w]hat has been said for a revolutionary situation can . . . be referred cautiously to the social formation” (FM, p. 100, n.21). What is at issue here is therefore not only and particularly a theory about revolution, but a more general theory about totality, a different model of the causal relation between the various instances and levels of a social formation other than that suggested by the essence-phenomenon model.

According to this new model, what ignited the Russian revolution was not the surfacing of an existing, yet theretofore unactualized primary contradiction, but the unpredictable fusion of a large number of secondary contradictions. To say that every simple contradiction is always overdetermined comes down to defending not only that contradiction is “[n]ever *found in the ‘pure’ state,*” but also that “purity,” to which Althusser says he can think of no example, is itself the exception (FM, p. 106). Hence, a historical situation is never simply the realization of a general contradiction that is already given, but is an unforeseen coalescence of a variety of contradictions. Once the idea of a pure dialectical schema is rejected, the question of how necessity realizes itself in history is displaced by the question how necessity actually emerges out of contingency.

Althusser’s concept of overdetermination contains two inseparable dimensions: first, the superstructures are relatively autonomous and each has its specific effectivity and second, they are determined “*in the last instance by the (economic) mode of production*” (FM, p. 111). Hence the concept of overdetermination implies both the plurality of contradictions and the *structure* of their condensation and displacement. Althusser summarizes the relation between economy and other elements of the social totality in these famous words below:

in History, these instances, the superstructures, etc. -- are never seen to step respectfully aside when their work is done or, when the Time comes, as his pure phenomena, to scatter before His Majesty the Economy as he strides along the royal road of the Dialectic. From the first moment to the last, the lonely hour of the 'last instance' never comes. (FM, p. 113)

This much debated passage is, according to some, a vain attempt to escape from the determinism that Althusser re-introduces to his system with the statement that economy is determinant in the last instance, while for others the ultimate proof of his pluralist, hyper-empiricist position.<sup>126</sup> I think that neither of these positions does justice to Althusser's attempt to conceive a non-emanationist, non-reductionist, non-geneticist causal relation between economy and superstructure. Here, Althusser objects to a "spiritual" understanding of causality that reduces the superstructure to a "phenomenon" of economy, which is a privileged first cause that remains separate from its effects and outside the order of causation. It is this idea of a cause, which is transcendent to its effects in that it both precedes its effects and manifests itself in them, that he proposes to displace by introducing the concept of overdetermination. As I have mentioned above with reference to the Lacanian formula, which summarizes the effectivity of the unconscious over psychic phenomena: "I have three brothers, Paul, Ernest and me," overdetermination conceives totality to be "unified by a basic instance that exists inside it" (FM, 204 n.43). So, this principle does not operate in isolation, which would be same as to conceive, as Young's (2004)

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<sup>126</sup> See, for example, Derrida's (1993) account of last instance in "Politics and Friendship":

To say 'last instance' instead of infrastructure doesn't make much difference and it destroys or radically relativizes the whole accounting for overdeterminations. Everything interesting and fruitful in the logic of overdetermination becomes compromised, reduced, crushed by this discourse on the 'last instance' which I have always been tempted to interpret as a concession to the economist dogma of Marxism if not that of the Communist Party. (p. 205)

According to Jay (1984), "the last instance" is a preventive measure to confront charges of pluralism that might result from [Althusser's] theory of overdetermination (p. 407). For Resnick and Wolff (1989), Althusser's "remarkable statement" summarizes his anti-essentialism (p. 92), yet they also argue his "commitment to 'last instance' economic determinism" to clash with this anti-essentialist moment (p. 93).

enlightening analogy again with reference to psychoanalysis suggests, of the ego as “operat[ing] without the unconscious” (p. 93). So, the ego, as both the instance and the context of determination, is determining, but also determined by the unconscious at the same time. Furthering this analogy, Young even goes so far as to claim that, for Althusser, “the primacy of the economic (ego) is a delusion, and that the superstructure (unconscious) is the more fundamental determining force, or at the very least that they are equally overdetermined” (p. 93).

I think that this last remark perfectly captures Althusser’s postponement of the arrival of the last instance to an indefinite time. In a similar way with Young, Balibar (2017) argues Althusser to claim here that “not only every totality is structurally ‘decentered,’ but in fact there is no such thing as a ‘center’ that is not an ideological construct” (p. 104). For Montag (2017a), as well, Althusser’s move should be read as eliminating any idea of an original cause, which was not constructed “retroactively.” I think that Montag’s exegesis of the last instance, which also underlines the theological references inherent in it, is not only the most complicated explication of this paragraph so far, it also brilliantly reveals Althusser’s effort to express a new causality. Montag argues that Althusser’s depiction of the last instance scene brings to mind “the messianic concept of Parousia or advent” (p. 180). Yet, as opposed to the messianic understanding, for which “the coming of the king” is imminent, in Althusser’s case the coming of the king is always deferred: “the lonely hour of the ‘last instance’ never comes.” The deferral of the coming of the king also undermines the concept of advent, which relates to the idea of a cause, an originary principle that is supposed to be both the beginning and the end. A king that never comes, a king, which is neither “the first and the last,” creates an effect of “decentering.” As Althusser further explains in “On The Materialist Dialectic,” the

problem with economism is that it “sets up the hierarchy of instances once and for all” so that the determinant contradiction in the last instance is “identifie[d] eternally in advance” independent of the conditions that surrounds it (FM, p. 213). Whereas for Althusser, economy is neither the first nor the last instance; rather it is constituted as a cause “retroactively.” The last instance never arrives, for it is only present in its effects; it is not an external limit, which refers to a point outside the existing distribution of forces, but an internal limit that is a part of this distribution and its articulation. Althusser’s deferral of the last instance is therefore to be seen as one of his efforts to articulate a non-genetic relation between causes and effects.

As a comparison to Althusser’s account of the last instance, Engels’s model of the relation between the superstructures and economy presents a good example of how the effectivity of the elements of the superstructure can be affirmed in a non-overdeterminist way. Engels says:

*There is an interaction of all these elements (the superstructures) in which, amid an endless host of accidents (that is, of things and events, whose inner connexion 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.* (Engels, “Letter to Bloch” cited in FM, p. 117-8)

In Engels’s model the various instances and elements of the superstructure “step respectfully aside . . . when the Time comes . . . to scatter before His Majesty the Economy” (FM, p. 113). Here, the principal contradiction is “completely *external*” to the secondary contradictions. Based on a dualism of *necessity-accidents*, Engels’s model leaves unexplained how and why economic *necessity* determines the superstructure, the *accidents*. The only explanation that he provides as to why the instances other than economy are not taken into account is epistemological: it is impossible to analyze the effect of the infinite accidents. Since the effectivity of the superstructure is so dispersed, that is, since its microscopic effects are “infinite in

number and with an *inner connexion* so remote and therefore so difficult to discover,” the may be considered as “non-existent” (FM, p. 118). Without a theory of causality, Althusser says, Engels, who cannot account for an intelligible relation between the infinity of microscopic effects, reduces them “to a dust of accidents” (FM, p. 119).

#### 3.2.1.2.5 Survivals

In the closing paragraphs of the text, Althusser focuses on the theoretical status of a phenomenon, through which he intends to clarify the new model of causality that his notion of overdetermination introduces. This phenomenon, which is yet undertheorized according to Althusser, is the “survivals,” that is, the existence of the old institutions and pre-revolutionary ideologies in a new regime. From a Hegelian perspective, the presence of these archaic forms could be understood by the mechanism of “supersession”: constituting itself on the negation of the past, the present still preserves it in its very negation. In “On the Young Marx” Althusser has demonstrated how supersession operates: it *anticipates* “its end in the illusion of an immanence of truth” (FM, p. 82). Here, he also adds that the modality of an *anticipation* is the exact inversion of “the modality of a *memory*” (FM, p. 115). Since, for Hegel, the present is a revelation of what was once only a germ in its previous state, the past, the present, and accordingly the future, are levelled down as the successive manifestations of the same spiritual principle (FM, p. 107). Hence, just as:

Rome lived happily in a world impregnated by Greece: Greece ‘superseded’ survived as objective memories: its reproduced temples, its assimilated religion, its rethought philosophy. Without knowing it, as at last it died to bring forth its Roman future, it was already Rome, so it never shackled Rome in Rome. (FM, p. 115)

Rome is the self-reflection of Greece; its “past is never anything more than itself” (FM, p. 115). As Althusser has already demonstrated in his thesis, Hegelian concept is a “pure interiority” that internalizes what is external to it, “the outside is the inside of the Self” (SH, p. 87). So, in Hegel, “*the past is never opaque on an obstacle*”; it has already been appropriated, or as Althusser puts it, it has been “*pre-digested*” (FM, p. 115). The survival of the past “in the form of a memory of what it has been” and also “as the whispered promise of its present” (FM, p. 115) is possible on the condition of this “pure interiority.” From this perspective, survivals exist because Russia “superseded” survives as “objective memories” in Russia after revolution.

If to think the survivals in this way is to commit oneself to the idealism of the Hegelian model, to the unity of the subject, then how can this problem be addressed in a materialist way, how can survivals be evaluated in their specific effectivity, from the perspective of overdetermination? It is important to note here that the primary motive for Althusser’s theoretical analysis of the concept of survival is to provide an account of the Stalin period in order to respond to the “burning” question

how the proud and generous Russian people bore Stalin’s crimes and repression with such resignation; how the Bolshevik Party could tolerate them; not to speak of the final question - how a Communist leader could have ordered them. (FM, p. 116)

So, this is not only a theoretical discussion on causality or temporality per se, but also a discussion concerning the way in which these notions relate to our understanding of real historical phenomena and the effects of these on the present political conjuncture. The Stalin period may be interpreted, as it is done, as the surfacing of a latent violence in Marxism or by referring to the individual Stalin, to his dictatorial force as its cause (Sprinker, 1985, p. 996). The former explanation points to a “core” in Marxism, which is present from the beginning and becomes

fully manifest when the conditions are ripe, while the latter focuses on the subject of repression and his intentions.

Althusser's concept of overdetermination suggests that this particular historical period can be understood in its uniqueness only when it is seen as the unexpected consequence of the interaction of relatively autonomous elements. As a response to why these older elements still "cling tenaciously to life" (FM, p. 114), that is, to account for "the necessity" of such "accidents," Althusser offers two explanations each of which exemplifies the logic of overdetermination. Even if revolutions may effect a change in the economic structure, he says, the existing superstructures of a society have their own effectivity and "consistency *to survive beyond their immediate life context*" (FM, p. 116). Moreover, the new conditions born by the revolution may even *reactivate* and thereby "*ensure the survival . . . of older elements,*" which, according to Althusser, was the case for Soviet Russia (FM, p. 116).

The problem of survivals is important, for it illustrates well a need: "*a rigorous conception of Marxist concepts*" (FM, p. 116), which can be pursued by distinguishing these concepts "*from their phantoms.*" On this point, Althusser's formulation of his project is only slightly different from his initial motivation to disclose the place the Hegelian truth occupies in Marxism, or to give a Marxist interpretation of Hegel:

To drive this phantom back into the night we need *a little more light on Marx*, or what is the same thing, *a little more Marxist light on Hegel himself*. We can then escape from the ambiguities and confusions of the 'inversion'. (FM, p. 116)

3.2.1.3 “On the Materialist Dialectic”: The universal exists only in the particular “Contradiction and Overdetermination” was met with severe criticism. Althusser was condemned for “underestim[ing] the Hegelian heritage in Marx” (Garaudy, cited in FM, p. 163 n.1) and his concept of overdetermination led to the charges of “pluralism” and “hyperempiricism.”<sup>127</sup> Althusser responded with an article, first published in the communist journal *La Pensée* in 1963 and later included in *For Marx*: “On the Materialist Dialectic: On the Unevenness of Origins.”<sup>128</sup> The article consists in a further elaboration of Marxist conception of totality through an introduction of new concepts, such as structure in dominance, conjuncture, unevenness, complex whole and the ever-pre-givenness of a structure. Another important aspect of the article relates to what is known to be Althusser’s theoreticism. But before discussing the article, I would like to begin with how this article is received in Althusserian circles.

According to Balibar (1994), there is a noticeable tension between “Contradiction and Overdetermination” and “On the Materialist Dialectic,” which relates to two different directions of Althusser’s thought, one questioning “the determinism of the ‘meaning of history’” for the sake of “the concrete analysis of concrete situations,” and the other aiming at “the idea of the simple and expressive ‘totality’” for the sake of “the complexity of the structure” (p. 165). These two approaches, one of which reflects Althusser’s Leninist and Machiavellian and the other his structuralist disposition, has led, according to Balibar, to two different interpretations of Althusser’s work: “There are Althusserians of the Conjuncture and

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<sup>127</sup> See FM (p. 163 n.1,2), for a summary of Gilbert Mury’s and Roger Garaudy’s criticisms.

<sup>128</sup> The subtitle of the text is an inversion of Jean Jacques Rousseau’s *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality* (*Discours sur l’origine et les fondements de l’inégalité parmi les hommes*). The original French version of Althusser’s text is “Sur la dialectique matérialiste: De l’inégalité des origines”. Yet, the reference to Rousseau’s work is unfortunately lost in the English translation of “inégalité” as unevenness, which contrasts the idea of origin with the idea of a non-originary origin.

Althusserians of the Structure” (p. 165). For some commentators, on the other hand, Althusser’s privileging of the concept of structure should be interpreted not as an adherence to structuralism, but as an attempt to emphasize the centrality of relations over elements. According to Panagiotis Sotiris (2013), for example, “the structure/conjuncture tension” is “a dialectical contradiction inherent to Marxism,” hence, the question is “how to deal with” this tension rather than, as Balibar suggests, “what side to choose”<sup>129</sup> (p. 35). Again, Giorgos Fourtounis’s (2005) interpretation of Althusser’s theory as a “radical holism,” which “allows only for wholes or structures, and not of parts” undermines any sharp distinction between structure and conjuncture by reminding that conjuncture is a structured unity as well (p. 112). For some readers, Althusser’s later text is a development of his conception of totality and for some, like Montag (2013a), Althusser seeks in this text, not only to provide a response to his critics, but also to correct the inadequate theorization, in his previous work, of how the singular entities form larger, yet still temporary, unities. By clarifying that what is implied in the concept of overdetermination is not only the complexity and multiplicity of contradictions, but also how they are displaced and condensed so that they form a “structure,” Althusser seeks to change, Montag argues, the weight he attributes to “event over the conjunction” to the benefit of the latter (p. 95). There are also interpreters that view the text, not as an expansion upon his earlier work, but as a definitive and a negative turning-point in his theoretical trajectory. Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe (2001), for example, argue that beginning from “On the Materialist Dialectic,” Althusser gradually abandoned the concept of overdetermination and developed “a new variant of essentialism,” which is after all understandable, since, from the very beginning, Althusserian discourse is

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<sup>129</sup> Balibar (2017) clarifies his position about this tension in a later article, in which he offers a more radical reading of the notion of “overdetermination” (p. 105). I come back to this in the last sections.

divided by an idea totally incompatible with the idea of overdetermined contradiction, that is, determination in the last instance by the economy (p. 98).<sup>130</sup> In direct contrast with Laclau and Mouffe, however, Bosteels (2017) sees the text as a radical move through the threshold of the Marxian dialectics (p. 126). Althusser's conception of contradiction based not on an external, but an internal and necessary unevenness, Bosteels argues, may even be seen as a gradual distancing from dialectic, which resonates with the "turn against dialectic in the name of difference" in the French scene (p. 127).

One of the reasons that led to the accusations of essentialism against Althusser is the distinction between theory and Theory ("with a capital T") that is introduced in this essay (FM, p. 162, 167-68). This distinction, which he will later renounce as a "theoreticist deviation" (ESC, p. 105), emerges from Althusser's theory of the epistemological break, that contrasts between scientific and ideological knowledge.<sup>131</sup> In *Essays in Self-Criticism*, Althusser criticizes himself for the weight he attributed to theory in *For Marx* and *Reading Capital* to the point of excluding the moment of politics from his philosophy (ESC, p. 106). Badiou (2008) affirms Althusser as he interprets his texts of 1965 as basically consisting in "a suture of philosophy to science," which was then replaced by "a suture of philosophy to politics" (p. 160). Bosteels (2001), on the other hand, points to "an unarticulated

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<sup>130</sup> Unlike Laclau and Mouffe, Resnick and Wolff (1989) think that it is in a later essay, in "Is it Simple to Be a Marxist in Philosophy?" (1974) that Althusser totally commits himself "to 'last instance' economic determinism," which was present as a tendency in his previous works (p. 93).

<sup>131</sup> The problematic nature of the difference between science and ideology and the primacy that Althusser attributes to theoretical practice have affected the reception of Althusser in a negative way. To give an example, for Gerrata (1977), Althusser's Stalinism and theoreticism are linked and point to a deficiency in his theory:

Althusser realized the weakness of this machinery (*For Marx* and *Reading Capital* a complex machinery of theses and formulae that would have allowed any decent traditional philosopher to live quietly on the proceeds)—which Althusser later attributed to a 'theoreticist deviation'—emerged with particular clarity in its effective avoidance of the confrontation with Stalinism. (p. 112)

tension” between politics and science in Althusser saying that while the former is “the fundamental practice conditioning philosophy from the outside,” the latter is taken to be “the only safeguard, within philosophy, against the ideological reinscription of this political invention” (p. 206). For Paul Resch (1992), however, this tension is “between conventionalist and realist tendencies in Althusser’s thought” (p. 161). A rationalist view of philosophy articulated in the distinction between Theory and theories, Resch says, “obviously conflicted with Althusser’s conventionalist position that each historically constituted science possesses its own specific and individual criteria of scientific validity” (p. 162).

For some commentators, Althusser’s later self-criticism is insubstantial in that it does not really target the primacy of theory over practice (Hardt, 1993, p. 105). I agree with Hardt on the point that Althusser does not modify but reinforces his previous position, but I do not see his emphasis on theory as a privileging of thought over practice. Rather, it is the other way: Althusser is against the privileging of practice without any concern for theory. In this vein, I agree with commentators such as Peden (2014), Lewis (2016), Nesbitt (2017), Young (2004), and Montag (2013a), who defend that Althusser never abandoned the effort to find a method that would clearly distinguish the plane of scientific practice from the plane of subjective experience. I argue that his much-debated scientism resonates with his effort to think a logic different from that of genesis. Besides arguing against those, who reduce his thought to a variant of essentialism, one of the aims of this section is to understand the reason for his suture of philosophy to science and the relation of this gesture to his materialism and his conception of practice. In this undertaking, I follow Peden’s (2014) insight that “what gets lost in the condemnations of Althusser’s failure to succeed in his own project . . . is the countervailing success with which Althusser

redeemed science as a concept, shorn of its positivist naïveté, that philosophy and politics both could ignore only to their common peril” (p. 143).<sup>132</sup> Without a scientific approach, both politics and philosophy can collapse into ideology. Here, it is important to keep in mind that for Althusser ideology and science are not terms totally excluding each other and the relation between them is not one of “epistemological hierarchy” that distinguishes between them once for all. Rather, they form a couple, in which ideology represents the concern with “the origin and end of things,” and science is distinguished by its effort to construct “a causal order which is indifferent to meaning and ends” (Read, 2005, para. 21). For Althusser, the questions of meaning and end are religious at base:

religion raised the question of the *End of the world* (in both senses of the word ‘end’: death and its beyond; the destination of the world). Why, after all, is man on earth? What is his destination, what is the meaning of his existence and his history, what is that history’s ultimate purpose [*finalité*]? (PFNP, p. 29-30)<sup>133</sup>

The difference between science and ideology is more of a difference between *logics*, or as Jason Read (2005) puts it, it is “a matter of practice . . . a manner of producing objects for investigation and concepts” (para. 21). The complexity of this difference gets more articulated as I clarify Althusser’s theory of knowledge.

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<sup>132</sup> In his very striking interpretation, in *Arguments within English Marxism*, of the conditions that led to Althusser’s stigmatization as “theoretician” by E.P. Thompson, Anderson (1980) argues that Althusser is condemned not because of the incorrectness of his theory, but because he sees “experience” as ideological, hence does not take human agency seriously:

Althusser’s unilateral and remorseless stress on the overpowering weight of structural necessity in history corresponds more faithfully to the central tenets of historical materialism, and to the actual lessons of scientific study of the past—but at the price of obscuring the novelty of the modern labor movement and attenuating the vocation of revolutionary socialism. (Anderson, cited in Nesbitt, 2017, p. 11)

<sup>133</sup> See also PSPS (p. 81-2) for Althusser’s account of the relation between philosophy and religion with reference to these questions of origin and destiny.

### 3.2.1.3.1 Conjuncture

In order to respond to the critiques of his theory of overdetermination, Althusser revisits Lenin's political analyses of the "conditions" that led to the revolutionary explosion of 1917. Althusser once again remarks that this concept is in no way "a statement about what exists," but "a *theoretical* concept" that refers both to "the existing conditions and the conditions of existence of the phenomenon under consideration" (FM, p. 207). The peculiarity of Lenin's text lies, according to Althusser, in his analysis of the *structure* of the actual moment,<sup>134</sup> that is, the paradoxical *unity* of the irreducibly diverse instances that make up a particular moment in history, which he calls "conjuncture." Conjuncture, which refers to the very "existence" of a given situation encapsulates, he argues, the logic of Marxist dialectic.<sup>135</sup> He demonstrates how this concept operates by making a comparison between two modes of thought, which he exemplifies through Lenin's political practice and the theoretical practice of a historian. This comparison is one of Althusser's attempts to theorize a mode of reflection, a logic, as he did in "On the Young Marx," and in "Contradiction and Overdetermination" and, which he will later model into different fields, e. g. history in *Reading Capital*, paleontology in "The Humanist Controversy" and psychology in his letter to Diatkine, etc.

According to Althusser, the historian and the politician differ in terms of their particular objects and, accordingly, in terms of their modalities of reflection. While Lenin, the politician, "meets imperialism in his political practice in the modality of a current existence: in a concrete present" with a view to transforming it, the historian

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<sup>134</sup> Montag (2013a) prefers to use "the actual moment" instead of the standard translation of "*moment actuel*" as the "current situation" (p. 95).

<sup>135</sup> The concept of conjuncture, which only appears three times in this article and six times in the whole *For Marx*, is defined in the glossary prepared by Ben Brewster and which was later edited by Althusser as "the central concept of the Marxist science of politics" (RC, p. 311).

meets it in “the modality of non-currency and abstraction” with a view to interpreting it (FM, p. 178). Hence, Lenin is thinking in, what we may call, the modality of *contingency* as opposed to the historian, who necessarily thinks, after the fact, in the modality of *necessity*. He “necessarily reflects on necessity’s *fait accompli*” (FM, p. 179). Unlike history, however, politics can never be an analysis *post-festum*; it concerns seeing the opportunities, which present themselves in the form of overdetermined contradictions in the actual moment. The difference between the historian and the politician is similar to Althusser’s later distinction between thinking *on* the conjuncture and *in* the conjuncture. Lenin’s analysis makes a case for the latter, for his theory of the weakest link, as in the case of a Machiavellian analysis of a situation, has a “practical” aspect, which provides an analysis of “how to intervene in this situation.” The historian, however, does not think *in* the history, but *on* the history; the currency of the situation does not pose itself as a *problem* that requires immediate action.

For Althusser, to think *in* the conjuncture is to avoid the already existing philosophical problems (MU, p. 174). In *Machiavelli and Us*, Althusser counterposes Machiavelli’s “*dispositif theorique*,” which is the formulation of a concrete political problem, against that of the classical theory, which is grounded upon the idea of a universal concept or law, under which the particular cases can be subsumed (MU, p. 15-6).<sup>136</sup> Machiavelli’s revolution consists in theorizing a political problem from the perspective of “*political practice*,” hence posing this problem not “as a particular theoretical problem (among others in general),” but as a “*singular conjuncture*” (MU, p. 17). The Russia of 1917 is a *singular conjuncture*, as opposed to society in

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<sup>136</sup> Again, when Althusser claims Montesquieu to be “*the first to propose a positive principle of universal explanation for history*,” he immediately adds that this is not a generality into which the specificity of societies or governments would be resolved (PH, p. 50). Montesquieu does not propose to produce the science of society in general, but of all the concrete societies in history.

its feudalist/capitalist phase in general. This is to say that Lenin was not fighting, as might be said to be the case *post festum*, with Imperialism per se. Although the concrete present the politician seeks to transform may be the result of “imperialism in general” -and for a Marxist it certainly is a product of imperialism- what orientates his political practice is the structure of the real historical present, in which imperialism is the principal, yet not the only contradiction that determines this complex moment. To view the current situation as the product of the development of imperialism is a true, but a futile analysis, since it would not, by itself, provide a basis for political action. The politician’s interest in imperialism as an explanatory principle is not for the sake of gaining historical knowledge, but to diagnose the political moves available in this particular situation from his position. The problem, as suggested in the theory of the weakest link, is to discover the points which “render the whole system vulnerable” in order to take advantage of them (FM, p. 94). In this sense, political action is always strategic. In the case of the historian, on the other hand, imperialism is the object of a theoretical practice; it is treated in its generality and not in its singularity. The historian analyses the conjuncture *after* the fact, after all the possibilities have been exploited, after the opportunities and the threats are actualized; he speaks from the standpoint of the irrevocable past of theory. The politician is interested “in the essential articulations, the interconnexions, the strategic nodes” (FM, p. 178). His analyses of the present situation always bear a strategic value, since he approaches it with the purpose of transforming the existing conditions. He “reflects on the present in the present, on the necessity to be achieved, on the means to produce it, on the strategic application points for these means” (FM, P. 179). Although, Althusser’s reference to “the necessity to be achieved” may sound Hegelian, as if political action is meant to realize a pre-determined goal, the

necessity here directly relates to the notion of conjuncture; it is *what needs to be done* in order to exploit the political opportunities that this singular situation, “the sole concrete world in existence,” makes available. What is evoked is again an “internal necessity” that depends solely on the conditions of that specific situation. Accordingly, the current situation is not thought as a moment absorbed in a process, which began long before and unfolding a future that is already anticipated; it is a unique instance, the internal contradictions of which induce political action. As Althusser puts in a later text, the concept of conjuncture allows “a genuine conceptualization . . . of the possibility of political action, detached at last from the false antinomies of ‘freedom’ and ‘necessity’” (PSPS, p. 64). What is at stake here is therefore an attempt to think on the basis neither of the subjective intentions of the politician, his genius, nor of an external necessity that determines from without, but to theorize a unique practice, Lenin’s, that is, how he responds to the internal contradictions of a given situation, to the necessity it poses, and accordingly how he theorizes “the possibility of political action.”

The Russia of 1917, as Lenin depicts it, is a unique present, which cannot be understood as the manifestation of a general rule. In parallel with his discussion of the nature of exception, here Althusser invokes the Maoist principle that “the universal only exists in the particular” (FM, p. 183). With the concept of overdetermination, Althusser had already endorsed the thesis that the primary contradiction is “[n]ever found in the ‘pure’ state” (FM, p. 106), and now with this principle he clearly states that “contradiction is always specific and specificity universally appertains to its essence” (FM, p. 183). This principle is active in his work throughout.<sup>137</sup> As Althusser is to put plainly in “On Theoretical Work:

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<sup>137</sup> Goshgarian (2013) remarks that this principle, which is actually Spinozist, constitutes “the fundamental premise of the theory of the encounter” (p. 102).

Difficulties and Resources” (1967), “only particular real and concrete objects exist” and not “abstract history or history in general” (PSPS, p. 46). “[T]he accumulated experience of humanity” can only be observed, he argues, in these “particular concrete social formations” (PSPS, p. 46). The concrete knowledge of these concrete objects is not to be thought as “the pure and simple immediate reading, of reality,” and it should not be thought after an Aristotelian fashion, where the knowledge is only of the “general,” either (PSPS, p. 47)<sup>138</sup>. So, with the Spinozist/Maoist principle that “the universal only exists in the particular,” Althusser attempts to think the concrete neither in empiricist terms and nor with reference to the Aristotelian/Hegelian idea that the genus has no existence apart from its species. Referring to the examples Althusser constantly makes use of, such as “the individual sessions of a psychoanalytic cure or concrete historical conjunctures,” Goshgarian (2013) terms this conception of knowledge “a ‘case logic’” (p. 102). I think this term accurately describes Althusser’s nominalist position, since, as he says in an interview with Fernanda Navarro: “there exists only cases - that is to say, singular individuals wholly distinct from one another”<sup>139</sup> (PE, p. 265). In another text from the same period Althusser elaborates upon the meaning of the case, which comes from the Latin “casus” and refers both to “occurrence and chance,” that is, “that which comes about in the mode of the unforeseeable, and yet of being”<sup>140</sup> (PE, p. 190). The

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<sup>138</sup> Here, Althusser makes a distinction between “theoretical concepts,” which relate to “abstract-formal determinations or objects” and “empirical concepts,” which relate to “the determinations of the singularity of concrete objects” (PSPS, p. 47). In Marx, the relation of the former to the latter, Althusser says, is neither “a relation of exteriority,” nor “a relation of deduction,” where the empirical is deduced from the theoretical, nor “a relation of subsumption,” in which the empirical is one of the “specific cases of the *generality*” of the theoretical (PSPS, p. 49).

<sup>139</sup> This is actually Althusser’s translation of Wittgenstein’s statement that “*die Welt ist alles, was der Fall ist*,” the opening sentence of *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, which he uses to explain his nominalist position and his materialism.

<sup>140</sup> In “The Only Materialist Tradition,” Althusser refers to Marx’s claim about capitalism being “born from the encounter between the man with money and the free laborers” and argues that the encounter here is a case, “a factual accident without origin, cause or end” (OMT, p. 13).

concrete knowledge of a singular object, a singular conjuncture, for Althusser, is not the result of the “labour of the universal,” but the product of the “labour *on* a pre-existing universal” (FM, p. 183). This is related with his definition of materialism as being on the side of science, since the labor on the universal consists in “refus[ing] this universal the abstractions or the temptations of ‘philosophy’ (ideology), and . . . bring[ing] it back . . . to the condition of a scientifically specified universality” (FM, p. 183). In order to explain how this labor produces the knowledge of a “case” he formulates a typology of generalities. This typology grounds his seemingly un-Marxist and anti-materialist argument that every science, every process of knowledge always proceeds from the abstract to the concrete.

#### 3.2.1.3.2 Knowledge of a “case”

The model of knowledge that Althusser proposes with his typology of generalities is a continuation of his effort to combat empiricism and its “materialist” forms. Before discussing it, however, I would like to draw attention to two important sources that lies at the basis of this typology and plays a central role in Althusser’s critique of empiricism. The first is a passage from *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy* (*Grundrisse*), which Althusser claims to encapsulate Marx’s theoretical approach to the problem of knowledge. The second source, which he does not directly cite- except a brief reference to Bachelard (FM, p. 185)- but which, as we have seen in the first chapter, is formative in his critique of empiricism and phenomenology, is the French epistemological tradition. I begin with Marx and then continue with the latter.

### 3.2.1.3.2.1 Concrete and thought concrete

In the 1857 *Introduction to the Critique of Political Economy* (part of *Grundrisse*)<sup>141</sup>

we find this famous passage from Marx:

The concrete totality as a totality of thought [*Gedankentotalitat*], as a thought concretum [*Gedankenkonkretum*], is in fact a product of thought [*Denkens*] and conception [*Begreifens*]; but in no sense a product of the concept [*Begriffs*] thinking and engendering itself outside or over intuitions [*Anschaung*]<sup>142</sup> or representations [*Vorstellung*]<sup>143</sup>, but on the contrary, a product of the elaboration [*Verarbeitung*]<sup>144</sup> of intuitions [*Anschaung*] and representations [*Vorstellung*] into concepts [*Begriff*]. (Marx, 1857 *Introduction*<sup>145</sup> cited in FM, p. 182-3)

In this section of *Grundrisse*, Marx discusses the scientificity of the method of political economy, which begins with a “real” and “concrete” category such as population as the foundation of production. Marx claims, as did Hegel in his critique of empiricism, what is presumed to be the concrete by these economists is in fact a mediated result, an abstraction. This is an important point of convergence between Hegel and Marx: “The concrete is concrete because it is the concentration of many determinations, hence unity of the diverse” (*Grundrisse*, p. 101). Being a “unity of

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<sup>141</sup> According to Chambers (2014), 1857 *Introduction* is of central importance in shaping Althusser’s reading of Marx even though he does not explicitly refer to its significance for him in *For Marx* and *Reading Capital* (pp. 83-118). Althusser makes explicit his commitment to this work in his later writings: “In the whole of this affair I based myself as closely as possible on Marx’s 1857 *Introduction*, and if I used it to produce some necessary effects of theoretical provocation, I think that I did nevertheless remain faithful to it” (ESC, p. 189).

<sup>142</sup> Chambers (2014) is particularly attentive to the term *Anschaung*, the meaning of which he argues to be better captured by the term “perception” (Terrel Carver’s translation), and even better by “intuition” (Rohrhuber), rather than Martin Nicolaus’s translation of this term as “observation,” which does not remind the reader of the term’s relation to German philosophy (p. 119). Again, if we bear in mind Althusser’s discussion of Marx’s relation to Kant and Hegel in his dissertation, it is important to underline the Kantian and Hegelian connotations of this term, an effect which Ben Brewster’s translation of the term as intuition achieves.

<sup>143</sup> With similar reasons discussed in the previous footnote, it would be better to translate *Vorstellung* as “representation” instead of “conception,” which is Brewster’s choice, yet I find confusing, since he translates *Begreifen*, which needs to be distinguished from a representation, also as “conception” in this text.

<sup>144</sup> *Verarbeitung* has an active connotation that “elaborate,” which contains the sense “produce by effort of labor” (Oxford Dictionary), conveys.

<sup>145</sup> Here, Althusser mis-cites the 1857 *Introduction* as the *Introduction to the Critique of Political Economy*, 1859 (Althusser 1969, p. 182, 183). See David J. Romagnolo’s correction in the 2002 internet version of *For Marx*.

the diverse,” it needs to be transformed through an active process (*Verarbeitung*) in thinking to a concept. It is the “unity” what makes this thing alive according to Hegel. The approach of the political economists relates to Hegel’s definition of analytical reduction in *The Encyclopaedia Logic* whereby the concrete disappears into an abstract determination that Althusser has discussed in his thesis concerning the failure of empiricism. The second approach, which begins with the abstract in order to arrive at the richness of the concrete totality is, according to Marx, “the scientifically correct” one. The concrete “appears,” Marx continues, “in the process of thinking, therefore, as a process of concentration, as a result, not as a point of departure, even though it is the point of departure for intuition [*Anschauung*] and representation [*Vorstellung*] (*Grundrisse*, p. 101). So, even if the concrete is the point of departure in reality; it is not in thought. Thought ascends from the simple to the complex and reproduces this complex whole, the concrete, as “the concrete in mind.” Yet, in Marx, as opposed to Hegel, thought and reality remain two different domains, which can never be reduced to each other. Hegel was mistaken, Marx argues, in interpreting the appropriation of the concrete by thought as the coming into being of the concrete itself as if the concrete is produced by thought. So, although Marx agrees with Hegel that we cannot begin with the concrete, which needs to be transformed through the productive activity of thought, he departs from him when Hegel identifies the concept with the real. Thought *appropriates* the real; it does not produce it.

Praising the accuracy of Althusser’s reading of this passage, Samuel Chambers (2014) brings Kant (rather than Hegel) to reader’s focus. Here, Marx is following, Chambers says, the Kantian dictum that “thoughts without content are

empty; intuitions without concepts are blind”<sup>146</sup> (CPR A51/B76). Distinguishing what is given in intuition (*Anschauung*) from the spontaneous, form giving activity of the concepts (*Begriffe*), Kant conceives the relation between the two as the condition of knowledge. It is the concepts of understanding that determine the rules of subjective unification of the empirical sense perceptions as objective experience. Yet, in this passage, Chambers (2014) argues, Marx “twists” the Kantian dictum: while he agrees with Kant on the point that “humans cannot have knowledge of material things without prior concepts,” he concludes that “material things have no reality for humans apart from conceptualisations” (p. 119). What Chambers points here is very much related to Althusser’s discussion of transcendentalism in his thesis. Hegel has shown, Althusser says, that the categories of transcendental logic are not, as Kant argues, *deduced*, but *discovered*, that is, they are not a priori, but historical, or better to say, the structure of this a priori is such that it is at the same time a posteriori. However, Marx’s solution to the problem of knowledge differs from Hegel’s. Unlike Hegel, who attributes the reality of material things to the “dialectical” movement of the abstract universal producing itself as concrete (FM, p. 187), Marx maintains a gap between thought and the real, a gap, which allows for a reciprocal determination. So, he says:

The totality as it appears in the head, as a totality of thoughts, is a product of a thinking head, which appropriates the world in the only way it can, a way different from the artistic, religious, practico-mental appropriation of this world. The real subject retains its autonomous existence outside the head just as before; namely as long as the head’s conduct is merely speculative, merely theoretical. Hence, in the theoretical method, too, the subject, society, must always be kept in mind as the presupposition of the representation. (*Grundrisse*, p. 101-2)

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<sup>146</sup> I had already pointed to Althusser’s reference to the same line in his thesis, which, for Hegel, is where Kant comes “closest” to conceiving the relation between the concept and the content, yet still unable to comprehend them in their unity (SH, p. 54).

For Marx, as Althusser's analysis shows, "a thought concretum" is a "production" insofar as it involves human activity, which is embedded within a society. This means that thinking, theoretical practice, cannot be thought apart from a particular social formation. Society, stated in Kantian terminology, is the a priori condition of all representations. Or to use Chambers's (2014) expression, thinking, as Althusser conceives it with reference to Marx, is always based upon the thinkers' perception and conception *of* and *in* their social context and therefore is in a fundamental relation to the real (p. 119). So, the idea that thought *appropriates* the real gains more solidity. Althusser's project is to clarify this "relation" so as to distinguish it from an "empiricist" conception of the real – and its phenomenological variant, which sneaks into Marxism – which assumes the gap between thought and the real to be bridgeable.

#### 3.2.1.3.2.2 French epistemological tradition

It is worth noting the importance of the French epistemological tradition as a source that inspires Althusser's typology of generalities. We have seen that this tradition sees science not as a passive reflection that undertakes to grasp reality directly or to mirror it, but as an active engagement that *produces* knowledges. Defending the idea that science is autonomous in its own movement, scientific development is understood as a process that is dependent upon the relations internal to the scientific field. Yet, the rules that regulate the creation of concepts and objects are not transcendental, as is supposed in a subject-centered conception of science. For Cavallès (1970) the problem with the phenomenological method, for example, is its focusing on "the entanglement of motivations and elementary actions" (p. 407). So, in a mathematical operation, "[t]he foundation of all necessity is this "I cannot do

otherwise” of the eidetic variation,”<sup>147</sup> which, Cavaillès thinks, “however legitimate it may be, is an abdication of thought” (p. 408). For Cavaillès, as expressed by Peden (2014), “[i]t is not *you*, as a set of fixed structures and categories, that can do no other; it is the necessary sequence of the rational itself that *does* no other” (p. 59). So, science, in this view, is both independent both of the human mind and the empirical world in that it obeys the rules that is dictated by its conceptual development. As Cavaillès (1970) puts in the concluding sentences of his text:

It is not a philosophy of consciousness but a philosophy of the concept which can provide a theory of science. The generating necessity is not the necessity of an activity, but the necessity of a dialectic. (p. 409)

Therefore, a scientist’s act can be made sense not with reference to the *psychology* of the scientist, but to science. On this view, subjective experience is considered even an obstacle for scientific activity. For Bachelard, there is a “real break” between scientific perception and everyday experience.<sup>148</sup> Scientific knowledge is possible, as Althusser totally agrees, only on the condition that it detaches itself from common-sense forms of thinking, which he views as “epistemological obstacles” that need to be cleared away in order to arrive at truths (HC, p. 272). For Bachelard, “the commonsense mind is a breeding ground for obstacles of this kind because of its reliance on images” (van Zyl, 1994, p. 112). In trying to “incorporate the ‘new’ into [one’s] understanding,” one may be always seduced by “earlier conceptions of

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<sup>147</sup> Eidetic variation is a procedure based on the assumption that it is possible “to distinguish empirical associations and contingent conjunctions from essential structures that cannot conceivably be different from the way they are” (Nenon, 2010, p. 159-60). So, it basically targets to discover the “necessities that underlie any such possibilities” (p. 160).

<sup>148</sup> For Bachelard, “the world in which we think is not the world in which we live” (Bachelard, *The Philosophy of No*, cited in Brown, 2011, p. 160). So,

The break between ordinary and scientific knowledge seems to us so clear that these two types of knowledge could not have the same philosophy. Empiricism is the philosophy which corresponds to ordinary knowledge. There empiricism finds its origin, its evidence, its development. By contrast, scientific knowledge is bound up with rationalism and, whether one wishes it or not, rationalism is allied to science, and demands scientific goals. (Bachelard, *Le Matérialisme rationnel*. cited in Young, 2004, p. 86)

reality,” which may “creep . . . in to the scientific process” (Pfeifer, 2015, p. 17). For Althusser, although these images need to “be eliminated from scientific thought,” they still have “heuristic value”.<sup>149</sup> So, ignorance, according to this approach is not “a lack of knowledge,” but “a particular kind of knowledge, a fully positive web of beliefs that make up the scientist’s pre-scientific worldview (and self-understanding)” (Pfeifer, 2015, p.18). In this sense, science is conditioned upon “an epistemological break with the subject-centered experience of things” (Resch, 1992, p. 199). Yet, as Althusser puts it in clear terms in *Philosophy for Non-Philosophers* (1978-80), he does not argue that science is done with observation,<sup>150</sup> but rather that science’s given is not an unmediated given:

science’s concrete is the experimental concrete, the ‘purified’ concrete, defined and produced as a function of the problem to be posed, and inserted into an array of instruments that are merely, as Bachelard puts it, ‘realized theories’. (PFNP, p. 65)

### 3.2.1.3.2.3 Typology of generalities

As Althusser has argued time and again, the raw material of theory is never simply *given* to experience. Rather, it is “mediated,” or, as he puts it in this article, “a

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<sup>149</sup> As I have noted above, Althusser does not see an epistemological obstacle only in its negativity as something to be overcome. Just like the functioning of an ideological notion, it “corresponds to some extent [*possède quelque affinité*] to the real problems it recognizes in misrecognizing them” (HC, p. 272). This everyday experience, this web of beliefs, constitutes *Lebenswelt*. This concept, which Althusser claims to have borrowed from “Uexküll, the extraordinary philosopher-biologist much admired by Canguilhem, who reinterpreted Feuerbach’s concept of *Welt* as *Lebenswelt*” (*Future*, p. 207) is of critical importance for Althusser’s theory of ideology. As he further explains in “The Only Materialist Tradition,” *Lebenswelt* is “the *apparatus* of the reversal of causes into ends, those of the illusion of subjectivity, of the man who believes himself to be the center of the world. . . although he is entirely submitted to the determinations of the world” (OMT, p. 5). So, the concept of *Lebenswelt* does not imply an epistemological inferiority with respect to science. The distinction is again due to its concern with meanings, ends and origins, rather than causes, which are indifferent to the former. This also clarifies why Althusser, as Montag (2013a) points out, was not convinced, unlike some Marxists, that “the shift in Husserl’s thought toward the primacy of the *Lebenswelt*” toward an “analysis of lived experience” is a materialist turn (p. 114).

<sup>150</sup> Actually, this idea is also one the founding bases of the image of Althusser as a theoretician. Jay (1984), for example, claims that for Althusser science “operates on the level of conceptual production in which experimental verification plays no role” (p. 401). Yet, following Althusser’s philosophical journey and the currents that affected this trajectory, we can see that his position is more complicated than what Jay suggests.

science never works on an existence whose essence is pure immediacy and singularity ('sensations' or 'individuals')," but "on something 'general', even if this has the form of a 'fact'" (FM, p. 183-4). Facts, which empiricists treat as the *given* of experience are actually the products of existing theoretical practices; they are established abstract generalities, *Vorstellungen*, "themselves the results of a very long elaboration of the different social practices" (FM, p. 183-4, PFNP, p. 100). Opposing the idea that science proceeds from the concrete to the abstract, or from empirically given objects to concepts, Althusser defends that the starting-point, the raw material of scientific knowledge is an "abstract," which he calls Generalities I.<sup>151</sup> Scientific practice involves the transformation of these abstract generalities into concrete knowledges, which Althusser calls Generalities III (FM, p. 183).<sup>152</sup> Labor *on* the universal refers to this transformation process from one generality to that other "concrete" generality.

Generalities I constitute the "prior condition" of scientific activity, through a critique of which a particular science "elaborate[s] its own specific 'facts'" and "simultaneously its own 'theory'" (FM, p. 184). The process of theoretical practice is very much akin to a production process, which involves the transformation of a raw material into finished products utilizing the determinate means of production: existing concepts and knowledges (Generality I, which is nothing but "an ex-Generality III") are transformed into new concrete conceptual knowledge (Generalities III) by mobilizing the theoretical mode of production, the scientific

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<sup>151</sup> Althusser later notes that the plural use of the term Generality is deliberate in that it serves "to indicate the complexity of the abstractions condensed in the seemingly unmediated 'facts' with which scientists supposedly deal" (PFNP, p. 100).

<sup>152</sup> In a later text, Althusser states that Generality I corresponds to Spinoza's "first kind of knowledge," which, is "the immediate truth of the very meaning of the given and lived world," that is, "the immediate world such as we perceive it, that is, as we live" (OMT, p. 5). Being the work of imagination, this "immediate World" is "*Lebenswelt* lived in" (OMT, p. 5). Hence, as I have noted above, ignorance, in this framework, is not a "lack," but a particular knowledge.

practices available at the time (Generalities II) (FM, p. 184). In order to differentiate Marxist scientific model both from the Hegelian and the empiricist model, according to Althusser, these three generalities, and especially the status of Generality II, must be clearly specified. It is noteworthy here that Althusser is concerned less with the Hegelian theoretical model than with the empiricist model, which he claims to be presupposed by those, who conceive Marx's materialism as an inversion of Hegelian idealism (FM, p. 185, 187, 191).

According to the empiricist model, an empirical concept, say fruit, is "the product of an 'operation of abstraction' performed by a 'subject'" (FM, p. 191). This subject may be thought in very traditional philosophical terms like "consciousness," or it may be that new "mythological subject, 'practice'" (FM, p. 191). So, the concept of "fruit" is the result of the activity of the subject, who grasps reality by observing real fruits and extricates their essence by "abstracting from their individuality" (FM, p. 190). In contrast with this subject-centered model, for Marx, the concept of fruit is a product of the "distinct practices, dietary, agricultural or even magical, religious and ideological practices" (FM, p. 191). Since an empirical concept is always already embedded within a social formation, its relation to the real can in no way be unmediated. Accordingly, the process of knowledge begins from a "generality," from a specific relation between thought and the real.

In the manual *Philosophy for Non-Philosophers* when talking about the process of abstraction involved in language and particularly in the language of law Althusser reminds the saying that Engels uses: "The proof of the pudding is in the eating." He agrees that "[w]hen a man eats a pudding, he makes no mistake about what he's eating: he knows it's this pudding and no other" (PFNP, p. 54). However, he adds, "this is precisely the point, he doesn't speak." So, in the case of the pudding,

“there is no mistaking the concrete object involved, and the person appropriates the concrete without a word” (PFNP, p. 55). The problem begins when this becomes a matter of social communication and thereby “public recognition of the act of appropriation of the concrete” (PFNP, p. 55). Without such a recognition that “makes the detour through . . . language,” that is, through “an abstract system of relations,” it is not “publicly affirm[ed], before all men that this [pudding] is well and truly his (not some other man’s)” (PFNP, p. 55). When “eating the pudding” is not inscribed within the abstract, within social/legal recognition, then it can always be “qualified as theft or crime,” as taking not one’s but some other man’s property. So, Althusser concludes,

Abstraction is not detachment of a part belonging to the concrete whole. Abstraction is bound to the concrete and derives from the concrete in ways that can vary (language is not ‘abstracted’ from the concrete the way law is, or the way the abstract gestures of every practice are). Yet the peculiarity of abstraction is to be something other than part of the concrete, since abstraction adds something to the concrete. What does it add? The generality of a relation (linguistic, legal, social, ideological) that concerns the concrete. Better: this relation dominates the concrete without the latter’s knowledge, and it is this relation that constitutes the concrete as concrete. (PFNP, p. 57)

By denying an immediate relation with the real Althusser renounces a widespread form of materialism, which finds expression in the inversion thesis. The inversion thesis suggests not the triumph of materialism, but a return to an empiricism, which Hegel attempted to break from. As we have seen, Marx’s reconstruction of the concept of materialism builds upon Hegel’s critique of empiricism. However, Althusser argues, Marx goes even further by renouncing a presupposition that is shared by both Hegel and Feuerbach. He breaks with this model when he rejects not only the Hegelian idealism, which conceives “the auto-genesis of the concept as ‘the genesis of the (real) concrete’ itself,” but also its Feuerbachian inversion, namely “the auto-genesis of the real as the genesis of the concept” (FM, p. 192). The

problem is not that Hegel uses the *good abstraction* in a bad way as has been argued by Feuerbach in his analysis of the Hegelian concrete universal, so it cannot be solved by an inversion of the kind that Feuerbach attempted. The problem is not solved, as some materialists believe, by beginning from “the (concrete) fruits” in order to arrive at “the (abstract) concept of fruit,” or by substituting a materialist essence such as the contradiction between the forces and relations of production for an idealist essence, say man’s nature. The problem is not in the *way* that abstraction is used, in whether one uses it in a speculative or a materialist way; it is in the process of “autogenesis” itself.

For Althusser, Marx departs from Hegel for he acknowledges the discontinuity, the rupture between the generality that figures at the beginning of the process of knowledge and the generality arrived at the end of the process. Also, it is not the initial generality that is the “motor” of this process, which is the case with Hegel’s “self-engendering concept.” The passage from the initial generality (Generality I) to the specific generality (Generality III) set into motion by the scientific labor is not a movement whereby a genetic totality alienates itself in order to be reconciled with itself; it is not a simple development; it is not a passage “from the in-itself to the for-itself.” There is another instance, the role of which is rarely appreciated; this is what “works” on the raw material (Generality I) to transform it into a specific knowledge, to a “concrete-in-thought” (Generality III).<sup>153</sup> It is “the

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<sup>153</sup> Althusser problematizes this terminology in a later text:

In my language I have called that very roughly the passage from Generalities I to Generalities III by means of Generalities II; I deceived myself in that the reality envisaged by knowledge . . . is not that of a generality but of a universal singularity. But I was indeed on Spinoza’s ‘line’ by insisting with Marx and Hegel on the distinction between the ‘real concrete’, therefore the universal singular (all the ‘cases’ that constitute the world from the beginning of knowledge of the first kind) and the concrete-in-thought that constitutes knowledge of the third kind. (OMT, p. 9)

Yet, this is only a change in words, and not a categorical difference. As Wal Suchting (2004) remarks, “this account is similar to Althusser’s earlier account of the cognitive appropriation of objects in terms

‘theory’ of the science,” Generality II, which is itself “the result of a whole process (the history of the science from its foundation)” (FM, p. 188). Without the existence of rules that condition the way in which a certain raw material is to be interpreted, Generality I and III lose their meaning. This gives Generality II, which is “neither the raw material nor the product,” but “the *labour of transformation* itself,” a precedence over the two other generalities as their “*determinant* moment” (FM, p. 166). The model of autogenesis, however, effectively effaces the real differences, transformations, discontinuities that constitute the essence of the scientific practice, that is the role of Generality II. Hegel takes “the abstract generality at the beginning (Generality I)” to be the same “generality that does the work (Generality II) and . . . the specific generality (Generality III) produced by this labour” (FM, p. 188).

So, if we return for a moment to Althusser’s account of Marx’s contingent beginning, we see this Cavaillèsian approach at work in his attempt to conceive the emergence of Marx’s thought in non-geneticist terms. As I have discussed above, for Cavaillès a new theory is determined by the open problems in existing theories so that each new theory can be made sense with reference to these problems. Although Marx was trained in the old problematic, he “*learn[t] the way of saying what he is going to discover in the very way he [forgot]*” (FM, p. 85-6). So, this determination works in both ways: the existing problematic determines the following step, yet this new step is not a direct result of the previous one as it totally transforms its *prehistory*. Again, the scientific process is not only conditioned, but in each step it conditions that which is to come and also revises whatever precedes it. It is not a development of the kind that the anterior subsists within the new and we come closer and closer to truth. Rather, it involves an element of unpredictability, of surprise, in

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of three ‘generalities’, except that now the final stage is now called, as it should have been all along, not a generality but a universal singularity” (p. 42).

that its necessity can only be discovered *after the fact*, after this particular science has developed in such and such a way (Cavaillès p. 374, p. 406). This unpredictability, however does not mean neither for Althusser nor for Cavaillès that the process is purely indeterminate, since no matter how unexpected a result may be, one can discern a “structure.” Hence, the relation between an effect and its cause should be conceived as becoming necessary of a contingency; a necessity, which can only be retrospectively assigned; it could have been otherwise depending on the encounter and non-encounter of the elements in the process.

To think that science proceeds from the concrete to the abstract is to suppose that empirically existing objects contain in themselves a truth “from all eternity,” and all that is needed is to extract this truth. This would be, however, “to reduce what is possible to what is given” (Chambers, p. 106). For Althusser, on the other hand, what is possible in thought is conditioned by the social formation, or by the particular configuration of a problematic at a particular historical moment, or by the unity of the movement by which a science develops as a whole. Rather than treating scientific concepts and theories as mere “instruments” at the disposal of the scientist, through a reversal, the scientist is now taken to be the instrument of the concept. So, if we use the terms of “On the Young Marx,” Generalities II correspond to the *problématique* of a science. It is

constituted by the corpus of concepts whose more or less contradictory unity constitutes the ‘theory’ of the science at the (historical) moment under consideration, the ‘theory’ that defines the field in which all the problems of the science must necessarily be posed’ (that is, where the ‘difficulties’ met by the science in its object, in the confrontation of its ‘facts’ and its ‘theory’, of its previous ‘knowledges’ and its ‘theory’, or of its ‘theory’ and its new knowledges, will be posed in the form of a problem by and in this field). (FM, p. 184-5)

Generalities II, these “historical structure[s] of meaning,” operate “within and through the consciousness of a social subject” (Resch, 1992, p. 199). Scientific study is always conditioned by the concrete historical existence: the degree of development of a science, the conceptual framework, the scientific community. Understanding scientific development as a dialectic of concept therefore undermines the requirement of a transcendental or empirical subjectivity to account for knowledge processes. But neither Cavaillès’s nor Marx’s dialectic is that of absolute idealism, either. I think this is very well expressed in Althusser’s remark that there can be “*no dialectic of consciousness*”: “it is impossible for any form of ideological consciousness to contain in itself, through its own internal dialectic, an escape from itself,” that is, “no dialectic of consciousness which could reach reality itself by virtue of its own contradictions” (FM, p. 143). In Hegel, the Self can discover nothing other than itself, so for Althusser, Hegel was wrong to assume that consciousness can “accede to the real through its own internal development”<sup>154</sup> (FM, p. 143).

### 3.2.1.3.3 Hegelian totality vs. Marxist totality

Althusser’s typology of generalities underlines that the raw material of a science, even the simplest category, is the product “of a long process and under exceptional conditions” (FM, p. 196). As he has already argued in his account of exception,

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<sup>154</sup> In the thesis Althusser describes the dialectic of consciousness as follows:

The conversion of the content into its truth - freedom - explains why Hegel simultaneously defines the concept as the *kingdom of subjectivity* and the truth as the *substance become subject*. For the Self never has to do with anything other than itself in the guise of the other. Not only is I another, but, in the element of the concept, the other is I: the Self recognizes itself in the other. (SH, p. 90)

So, according to this description, it is impossible for the self to discover anything other than itself in the dialectical process.

“simplicity is not original” rather, it is a product; it “presupposes the existence of the structured whole of society” (FM, p 196). Hence, for Marx

it is impossible to delve down to the birth or origin of the simple universal, ‘production’, since ‘when we talk of production we always mean production at a determinate stage in social development of the production of individuals living in *society*’, that is, in a structured social whole. (FM, p. 195)

For Marx, the concept of labor, even this simple economic category, “is as modern a category as the relations which engender this simple abstraction” (*Grundrisse*, p. 103 cited in FM, p. 196); it “can only ever exist as the unilateral and abstract relation of a pre-given, living, concrete whole” (*Grundrisse*, p. 101 cited in FM, p. 196, n. 34).

Hence, this abstract category cannot be understood before the emergence of forms of capitalist labor. Again, the category of “the individual producer,” the “economic ‘cogito’,” which eighteenth-century philosophers took to be the origin of society “appeared” in a particular social formation, in which “the social character of production” was at its supreme form (FM, p. 196). So, Althusser concludes,

we are never dealing with the pure existence of simplicity, be it essence or category, but with the existence of ‘concretes’ of complex and structured beings and processes. (FM, p. 196-7)

Marx rejects, Althusser argues, the idea of “a ‘root origin’,” which may take several forms as “the *tabula rasa*; the zero point in a process; the state of nature” (FM, p. 198). And not only these -for these are easy targets as they have already been severely criticized by Hegel- but also a concept of beginning, which totally negates the idea of an origin and is “immediately identical with nothingness” (FM, p. 198). Here, Althusser is referring to the opening of Hegel’s *Science of Logic*, where Hegel identifies being with non-being. In Hegel, all diversity emerges from a primary

nothingness, which develops into totality by negating what is external to it only to find out that it negates itself:

nothingness has to do only with itself in the form of externality, and, accordingly, unveils externality as such in unveiling itself, before going on to discover in this externality the fundamental identity it presupposes. Of course, this revelation is only possible at the end; only at the end does nothingness discover that the given it negates is connatural with itself. (SH, p. 162, n. 95)

For Althusser, this “simple process with two opposites” is the mark of Hegelian model, which, despite beginning with nothingness, is still based on “the radical presupposition of a simple original unity” (FM, p. 197). Through “the negation of the abstraction which negated their previous unity,” these opposites will “restor[e] their original unity . . . enriched by its fragmentation, by its alienation” (FM, p. 197).

#### 3.2.1.3.3.1 Ever-pre-givenness

Instead of the ideological myth of a philosophy of origins and its organic concepts, Marxism establishes in principle the recognition of the givenness of the ‘complex’ structure of any concrete ‘object’, a structure which governs both the development of the object and the development of the theoretical practice which produces the knowledge of it. There is no longer any original essence, only an ever-pre-givenness, however far knowledge delves into its past. There is no longer any simple unity, only a structured, complex unity. There is no longer any original simple unity (in any form whatsoever), but instead, *the ever-pre-givenness of a structured complex unity*. (FM, p. 198-9)

The concept of ever-pre-givenness is mostly associated with Althusser’s Spinozism. So, rather than nothingness, the world is always already populated with things. In his dissertation, Althusser had criticized Spinoza for beginning with God (SH, p. 65), with a notion of the in-itself, which Althusser defines as “the posing, in thought, of a constituted totality or original world which comprehended the whole of reality” (SH, p. 71). Meanwhile, he had praised Hegel for renouncing this notion of the in-itself

“posited . . . as a constituted totality which contains its own necessity within itself, but is unmarked by internal development, so that the substance is always *already present*, is itself the origin, and always precedes itself in its modes” (SH, p. 71).

However, Althusser now maintains a difference between an immanent and transcendent causality in which a totality containing “its own necessity within itself” and “is always *already present*” does not need to be thought as an “origin” preceding its effects. In Spinoza, God is not transcendent to its effects and what Althusser refers by “ever-pre-giveness” is this immanent relation of the cause to its effects.<sup>155</sup>

In Marx we find “only an ever-pre-giveness” (FM, p. 198) in spite of the category of an original essence, even if it may be in the form of its negation. Marx’s “complex whole” is an irreducible diversity, each element of which has its own history, its own genealogy that cannot be reduced to a simple unity. But this complexity is different from an original chaos in that these elements are always already part of a structured unity. Further, it is not simply a plurality of origins, either. Ever-pre-giveness does not serve as a concept of origin, but as a suspension of the “genetic demand”<sup>156</sup> so that the search for an origin is forever deferred. So, “however far knowledge delves into its past,” it can never reach an original simple

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<sup>155</sup> Althusser is to make clear in a later text why beginning from God is a materialist gesture:

we only need notice how Spinoza begins. He confesses in a letter that ‘some begin with the world and others with the mind of man; I begin with God’. (PE, p. 176)

While those, who begin with something other than God – such as Descartes who begins with thought – ends up with God, Spinoza, Althusser argues, “occupies, in advance, the common fortress, the ultimate guarantee and last recourse of all his adversaries, by starting with this beyond-which- there-is-nothing, which, because it thus exists in the absolute, in the absence of all relation, is itself nothing” (PE, p. 176). The Spinozist notion of immanence suggests that God does not pre-exist nature; it cannot be conceived as determined independently of its actualizations. If there is no transcendence, if there is nothing outside the whole, then the distinction between totality and nothing disappears.

<sup>156</sup> I borrow this phrase from Derrida (2001), who uses it to describe one of the two dynamics of Husserlian thought:

Husserl, thus, ceaselessly attempts to reconcile the structuralist demand (which leads to the comprehensive description of a totality, of a form or a function organized according to an internal legality in which elements have meaning only in the solidarity of their correlation or their opposition), with the genetic demand (that is the search for the origin and foundation of the structure). One could show, perhaps, that the phenomenological project itself is born of an initial failure of this attempt. (p. 197)

unity, but to “the ever-pregivenness of a structured complex unity” (FM, p. 198-9).

The idea of “ever-pregivenness” also relates to Althusser’s loyalty to the philosophies of the concept according to which there can never be a direct relation to the real. We see in his later writings (1982) how he relates his conception of totality as ever-pre-givenness with an “active,” rather than a “passive” relation to truth implied in the notion of “concept” (*Begriff*) when explaining the difference of materialism from a philosophy of origin:

the materialism of the encounter turns on a certain interpretation of the single proposition there is (es gibt, Heidegger) and its developments or implications, namely: ‘there is’ = ‘there is nothing’; ‘there is’ = ‘there has always-already been nothing’, that is to say, ‘something’, the ‘always-already’, of which I have made abundant use in my essays until now, although–this has not always been noticed – since the always-already is the grip (Grefien: grasp [prise] in German; Begriff: grasp or concept) of this antecedence of each thing over itself, hence over every kind of origin. (PE, p. 189)

So, the notion of concept requires that we affirm the “givenness” of the complex structure of anything, any concrete object. Again, as Althusser puts in PFNP concerning the relation between language and the concrete:

social appropriation of the concrete proceeds by way of the domination of abstract relations. . . . This means that, without language and law, without the relations of production and ideological relations, nothing in the world is concrete for man. (PFNP, p. 57)

The notion of “ever-pre-givenness” is the rejection of any idea of origin. But, Hegel had already dismissed the notion of origin by beginning with nothingness and Althusser had praised him for his rejection of all ontological postulates. This difficulty requires us to reconsider Althusser’s interpretation of the problem of nothingness in Hegel’s *Science of Logic* that Althusser seems to think differently in different periods. We have seen that it is judged positively in his dissertation and also later in “Marx’s Relation to Hegel” (1968) published in *Philosophy and History*, and

“Lenin before Hegel” (1969) published in *Lenin and Philosophy*. In both these texts from the ‘60s, Althusser (1971) praises Hegel’s beginning from nothingness in *Logic* as “the origin negated as an origin” (p. 123), and acknowledges that Marx “owes him [Hegel] the concept of a process *without a subject*” (PH, p. 182). He says

[f]rom the point of view of human history, the process of alienation has always already begun. That means, if these terms are to be taken seriously, that, in Hegel, History is thought as a process of alienation without a subject. (PH, p. 182)

Yet, this is immediately supplied by a warning: “I well know that, finally, there is in Hegel a *subject* for this process of alienation without a subject” (PH, p. 183). But this subject cannot be one of the moments or the end of process, for otherwise the idea of a process without a subject would be annulled. The subject of this process, Althusser says, “is the very *teleology* of the *process*, it is the *Idea*, in the process of self-alienation which constitutes it as the *Idea*” (PH, p. 183). Having claimed this, Althusser can plainly differentiate his position from Hegel’s:

the Hegelian ‘erasure’ constituted by the *Logic* from its first words, is the negation of the negation, dialectical and hence teleological. It is in teleology that there lies the true Hegelian Subject. Take away the teleology, there remains the philosophical category that Marx inherited: the category of a *process without a subject*. (PH, p. 184-5)

The problem for Althusser is then the possibility of “taking away” the teleology, which he had already pointed in the passage that I have quoted from his dissertation in the previous section. Concerning this problem, Matheron (1998) claims that “if such an operation is possible, Hegel could be . . . enrolled in the camp of materialist philosophers” (p. 27). So, for Althusser, the historical development of totality can be thought neither with reference to a beginning (origin, essence), as Hegel has rightly thought, nor teleologically, as Hegel has wrongly thought. In this sense, Althusser is

always loyal to his very early defense of the Hegelian dictum that “there can be no result without its becoming.” Yet, this claim needs to be supplemented with the idea that the only determination, which we can assign to a phenomenon -to that which has become- is by working from the result of its becoming. So, Althusser says in “The Underground Current of the Materialism of the Encounter”

no determination of these elements [that constitute a unity, a result] can be assigned except by working backwards from the result to its becoming, in its retroaction. If we must therefore say that there can be no result without its becoming (Hegel), we must also affirm that there is nothing which has become except as determined by the result of this becoming – this retroaction itself (Canguilhem). That is, instead of thinking contingency as a modality of necessity, or an exception to it, we must think necessity as the becoming-necessary of the encounter of contingencies. (PE, p. 193-4)<sup>157</sup>

Here, retroaction that Althusser attributes to Canguilhem is the same mechanism that Althusser refers with the psychoanalytic term *après coup*, which he borrows from Freud and corresponds to the process by which a phenomenon only retroactively acquires a meaning in light of the following events. Therefore, what seems to be a unified, structured body of a narrative, a text, a historical epoch is, in fact, the result of a retroactive consolidation. This mechanism is brilliantly expressed in the passage below:

Every encounter is aleatory, not only in its origins (nothing ever guarantees an encounter), but also in its effects. In other words, every encounter might not have taken place, although it did take place; but its possible nonexistence sheds light on the meaning of its aleatory being. And every encounter is aleatory in its effects, in that nothing in the elements of the encounter

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<sup>157</sup> Johnston (2016) refers to the passage above in order to point to the association between late Althusser’s aleatory materialism and “the Hegelian dialectical dynamic of the becoming-necessary of the originally contingent” (p. 223). Johnston points to the parallel between Žižek’s and Althusser’s readings of Hegel both underlining the fact that in Hegel, “there can be no result without its becoming,” that is, “that such paradigmatically Hegelian terms as the Absolute, the Concept, the Idea, and the like designate, for Hegel, results, namely, outcomes rather than origins” (p. 223-4). One important difference between these two authors is Althusser’s supplementing Hegel with Canguilhem in order “to arrive at the conception of ‘necessity as the becoming-necessary of the encounter of contingencies’,” as opposed to Žižek, who sees no such requirement in order to arrive at a conception of contingency in Hegel “according to which . . . the distinction between the categories of contingency and necessity is a distinction internal to the category of contingency itself” (p. 224).

prefigures, before the actual encounter, the contours and determinations of the being that will emerge from it. (PE, p. 193)

On this point, Althusser may be said to refine Hegel's philosophy of the concept, by adding that "grasping" the concrete (either with or without a word, that is, bodily) is always embedded within dynamic social practices and relations, which are themselves overdetermined and always open to change. Hence, the concepts always relate to structures that have "taken place," "taken hold" and hence have an internal necessity, yet nothing ever guarantees that these structures that have "taken hold" could have been otherwise.<sup>158</sup>

#### 3.2.1.3.3.2 Structure in dominance

Besides ever-pre-givenness, Marxist totality is endowed with another characteristic that distinguishes it from Hegelian totality: "structure in dominance." This idea is a re-conceptualization of Althusser's idea of the last instance. In Hegel, every regional structure (economic, political, ideological) (civil society, the State, religion, philosophy, etc.) is a 'moment' in the linear development of a simple internal principle that generates the totality "by negating the alienated difference that it posed" (FM, p. 203). Being the alienated manifestations of the said principle, all spheres are all equally *indifferent* to one another, that is, neither of them exists independently and neither of them is above the other (FM, p. 204). Furthermore, the internal principle that animates these spheres is not itself a sphere of society, either; rather, "it resides in all places and all bodies" (FM, p. 204, n. 43). The unifying principle in Hegel, which is therefore at the same time "immanent to" and

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<sup>158</sup> According to Lahtinen (2009), Althusser's use of the term "prendre," which is translated in *Philosophy of the Encounter* as "take hold," in order to depict the "structuring" effect of an encounter is not without purpose (p. 99). It is directly connected with *Begriff*, concept, which relates to *begreifen*, to grasp. So, without taking hold, the atoms cannot be grasped; they must have "formed," they must have been constructed in their concept.

“transcendent of” totality, “never coincides in itself with any determinate reality of society itself” be it the political, the philosophical, or the religious instance that exists inside the totality (FM, p. 204 n.43). On the other hand, in Marx, Althusser argues, the multiplicity of uneven processes that form the totality are subject to a relationship of domination. Hence, the “structure” of a totality pertains to the domination-subordination relations between different instances. For Althusser, such relations are the precondition for politics. That Hegelian totality lacks “a structure in dominance,” and hence is not a complex whole, is best revealed, according to Althusser, from the perspective of the political sphere. Without the possibility of a hegemonic interplay between the spheres, political *practice* that would propose to transform this structure becomes unthinkable.<sup>159</sup>

The idea of a spiritual totality -which is assumed by any ideal of an organic society freed from antagonism- is at odds with politics. Hence, for Althusser, without the idea of a complex unity, it is impossible to conceive political sphere as having an effective determination on other spheres, that is, a transformative intervention in the existing state of things.<sup>160</sup> Therefore, he says, “the Hegelian theory of the social totality has never provided the basis for a *policy*, . . . [and] there is not and cannot be a Hegelian politics” (FM, p. 204). So, for Althusser, the impossibility to think politics in Hegelian totality is not a result of the idealist nature of Hegel’s thought, or better to put, the idealism does not lie in thinking in terms of abstract essences. It is the “structure” of the Hegelian dialectic and totality, which renders political action

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<sup>159</sup> It goes without saying that as Althusser’s notion of practice involves a process of transformation, he conceives political practice also as a transformative process as opposed to simple administration of things, of existing institutional politics.

<sup>160</sup> In his latest writings, Althusser still takes the autonomy of the political as an important symptom for evaluating a theory. So, what makes Spinoza and Machiavelli philosophical allies according to Althusser is the space they leave for politics. Politics is made possible, he argues, by their “rejection of all the presuppositions of traditional philosophy . . . all finality, all religion and all transcendence” (PE, p. 179).

ineffective. Those Marxists, who replace Hegelian dialectic of consciousness with a materialist principle such as the contradiction between the modes and relations of production, are, for Althusser, equally incapable of thinking political action. In this Hegelian framework, politics loses its autonomy for it is reduced to a matter of “recognizing” a simple principle, whether it be the determinations of the logical concept or the determinations of the mode of production, which can be treated as a “master-code” (Thomas, 2008, p. 115) that explains and organizes everything else accordingly.

As discussed earlier, Althusser explains the regulation of the interplay of the different instances in a Marxist whole with the notion of determination in the last instance. He now claims that Hegelian totality lacks the principle of the determination in the last instance in the form of an inverse principle such as determination by the State, or by Philosophy that would correspond to the role of the economy in Marx. The consequence of the absence of an asymmetry between the spheres of a social formation is I think best presented in an earlier essay figuratively as “a rolling ball” (PH, p. 52). Althusser uses this figure to illustrate the radical difference of Montesquieu’s account of history based on a dialectic between two irreducible instances, the nature and the principle of a government, from that of his contemporaries. Each point on the rolling ball, he says,

can move from top to bottom and return from there to the top, go back down again, and so on to infinity. But all its points do the same. There is neither top nor bottom in a sphere, entirely contained as it is in each of its points. (PH, p. 52)

So, there is actually no movement, no play here, or if one can speak about a movement, it “is no more than its displacement onto itself” (PH, p. 52). Yet, there seems to be a discrepancy between Althusser’s analogy of the rolling ball and his

reading of the role of contradiction in Hegelian dialectic, which, he says, is tasked with “the magical movement of the concrete contents of a historical epoch towards their ideological Goal” (FM, p.104). Such a teleology implies a *vector*, a direction of the movement. Yet, since this goal is already there in the beginning in order to be rediscovered as a result, Althusser defends, we are back in a circle again. Althusser later compares this figure of the circle with that of topography,<sup>161</sup> which, he thinks, is Marx’s safeguard “from the illusion of a dialectic capable of producing its own material content in the spontaneous movement of its self-development” (ESC, p. 177). In his 1859 Preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* Marx explains his conception of society, Althusser says, through “a spatial apparatus which assigns positions in space to given realities,” that is, economy as the base and legal-political and ideological superstructure as the upper floor; “a logic of edifice” (ESC, p. 176). Althusser sees this architectural figure to be perfectly compatible with his notion of “the last instance,” for it conceives society as an overdetermined combination of irreducibly different spheres. Topography is “an articulated system of positions” (ESC, p. 184), each of which is “the effect of the contingent combination of their distinct, separately evolving histories” (Goshgarian, 2006, p. xxxix). For Althusser, it is only within this complex whole can the determination of the economy be made sense as that which “fixes the real difference of the other instances, their relative autonomy and their own mode of reacting on the base itself” (ESC, p. 177). Hence, the idea of topography provides a political orientation: Unlike a circle, which has nowhere to get a hold on, topography points out to a determinant instance and accordingly to the place one occupies and to where one “must move in order to change things” (ESC, p. 183).

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<sup>161</sup> Topography [topique] is, Althusser says, the form in which “Marx’s theory and Freud’s theory present themselves” (Lettres à Franca, cited in Sotiris, 2020, p. 227).

### 3.2.1.3.3.3 The criterion of practice revisited

Let me now return to the beginning of the article where Althusser discusses Lenin's theoretical analyses of his political practice, and try to relate what I have discussed so far to Althusser's conception of practice. In this respect, Althusser's choice of Marx's "Eighth Thesis on Feuerbach" as the epigraph of his article is worth considering:

All mysteries which lead theory to mysticism find their rational solution in human practice and in the comprehension of this practice [*Begreifen dieser Praxis*]. (Karl Marx, *Eighth Thesis on Feuerbach*) (Marx, 1992, p. 423)

According to Derrida (2019), this "seemingly very practicist" thesis is placed as the epigraph of this article for a reason: "to draw attention as much to the practicism as to its limits and conditions" (p. 22).<sup>162</sup> The first of these limitations relates to treating practice as a remedy to the possible "mystical perversion" of theory in order to bring theory back to "rationality." Hence, Derrida argues, what is at stake in the Eighth Thesis is "a matter of correcting the theoretical rather than abandoning it," and this is what Althusser wants to emphasize (p. 37). The second limitation is the emphasis on "Begreifen dieser Praxis," that is, not only practice, but its conceptual comprehension can "provide a rational solution to theoretical mysticism" (p. 37). According to Derrida, it is "this theoretician [théoricienne] insistence," in Marx's call to practice that Althusser underscored (p. 37). If mysticism is a degenerate effect of "theory speculating outside of practice," pragmatism is likewise a degenerate effect of "practice without theoretical" (p. 43). Another important point for Derrida is Althusser's choice of the Eighth Thesis, rather than the famous Eleventh Thesis as

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<sup>162</sup> Derrida held a seminar with the title "Theory and Practice" at the École Normale Supérieure during the 1976–77 academic year discussing particularly the Marxist notion of practice. In these seminars, which were recently published, Derrida (2019) devotes several sessions to Althusser and specifically to his articles in *For Marx*.

the epigraph of the text, which is less “ambiguous” compared to the latter (p. 40). The Eleventh Thesis, which Althusser mentions only once in passing as that which inspires those who “celebrate . . . the death of philosophy in action” (FM, p. 28), Derrida (2019) claims, lacks “the rational, theoretical and conceptual safeguards” that Althusser endeavors to “place around the value of ‘practice’” (p. 40). Pointing to the conjunctural aspect of Althusser’s elaboration of practice in this article, Derrida says, “Althusser puts on trial . . . of all those Marxists who, or Marxisms that faced the temptation of the ‘end of philosophy’” (p. 39).

One of these Marxists is Roger Garaudy,<sup>163</sup> who criticizes Althusser’s conception of practice:

Whatever the complexity of the mediations, human practice is one, and it is the dialectic of human practice that constitutes the motor of history. To blur this with the (real) multiplicity of “overdeterminations” is to obscure the essence of Marx’s *Capital* which is above all a study of this major contradiction, this basic law of the development of bourgeois society. Once this is obscured, how is it possible to conceive the objective existence of a basic law of development of our own epoch, the epoch of the transition to socialism? (Garaudy, cited in FM, p. 153 n.2)

Garaudy’s concern here is Althusser’s blurring of the very fundamental “criterion of practice,” which leads to a blurring of Marx’s conception of history as determined by a basic animating law and accordingly the Marxist politics that proceeds from this conception. According to Althusser, however, the real mystification is performed not by him, but by those who treat practice as a “mythological subject.” Although Althusser does not mention any name here, he seems to be responding not only to Garaudy, but also to Sartre and his phenomenological conception of praxis, which Althusser sees as a new replacement for the more traditional subject, consciousness.

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<sup>163</sup> Together with Louis Aragon, Garaudy was an important figure that was influential in the meeting at Argenteuil (1966) that determined PCF’s final statement on the ‘Humanist Controversy’ opting for humanist versus anti-humanist philosophies. See Lewis (2007) and also Pfeifer (2015, p. 20-2).

Sartre is a crucial figure for Althusser, since he is at the juncture of both a certain variant of Marxism and phenomenological tradition, which elevates practice to a general philosophical category, a new ontological essence that acts as a guarantee of truth. The problem with this view is the turning of practice to an omnipotent criterion to the extent that the recourse to human practice by itself guarantees a rescue from all forms of idealism and mysticism. Against those who think the primacy of practice to be the specific difference of Marxist philosophy, Althusser argues on two grounds: firstly that Marx rejects any originary essence, including the essence of man even if it be expressed in the most “materialist” way as “human practice,” and secondly that the specific difference of Marxism lies in its conception of the relation between theory and practice, in which practice becomes essential to theory without invalidating the latter.

Concerning the first point, Althusser describes Marx’s “new conception of ‘philosophy’” as a “theory of the different specific *levels of human practice* (economic practice, political practice, ideological practice, scientific practice) in their characteristic articulations, based on the specific articulations of the unity of human society” (FM, p. 229). Here, Althusser once again attempts to clarify that human practice as Marx understands it is not a new ontological essence, an “original real object,” to which everything else can be traced back. So, Marx’s idea that there is no practice that is not human, does not refer to a “humanity” in the abstract, but always to a specific social formation: “men, means and a technical method of utilizing the means” (FM, p. 167).<sup>164</sup> Althusser also cautions against such phrases as “social

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<sup>164</sup> Althusser articulates what kind of an agency practice involves in more explicit terms in his manual addressed to the non-philosophers:

The word ‘practice’ points, then, to an *active relationship to the real*. . . . we say that someone has no *pratique* of farm machines when he knows them only from books, from theory, but has never actually used them hands-on and does not know how to run them. The idea of practice thus implies the notion of active contact with the real, while the idea of

practice,” which seems to be a rather materialist replacement for “human” practice that does not readily express the social embeddedness of practices and refers to an “ahistorical” subject. In his *Philosophy for Non-Philosophers* Althusser argues that the only valid use of “social practice” is when we want to convey with it “the interdependency of the different practices,” yet it still carries the risk of melting these different practices a general concept of social practice, which does not, in fact, exist (PFNP, p. 81). This also constitutes the point of divergence between Marx and Feuerbach:

In a word, Marx substituted for the ‘ideological’ and universal concept of Feuerbachian ‘practice’ a concrete conception of the specific differences that enables us to situate each particular practice in the specific differences of the social structure. (FM, p. 229)

As he is to repeat in *Reading Capital*: “there is no practice in general, but only distinct practices which are not related in any Manichaeian way with a theory which is opposed to them in every respect” (RC, p. 58). Althusser’s position becomes clearer if we compare it to Sartre’s, who defends Marxist philosophy to be founded on “the priority of action, on (work and social *praxis*) over knowledge” (Sartre, *Search for a Method*, cited in Sprinker, 1985, p. 995). For Althusser, Sartre’s notion of praxis is the “paradigm case” (Sprinker, 1985, p. 990) of how a generic “practice” is placed in a direct opposition to thinking as the original level of meaning, which may lead to subordinating other levels of practices such as scientific or philosophical practice to political practice.<sup>165</sup> What is at stake here is a critique of the idea of an

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activity inherent in it implies the notion of a *human agent* (or subject). Since a human subject or agent is, unlike an animal, a being capable of ‘forming a plan of action in his mind’, at least in theory, we shall agree to use the word ‘practice’ to designate only the kind of *active contact with the real that is peculiarly human*. (PFNP, p. 79)

<sup>165</sup> Sprinker (1985) points out that Althusser accuses Sartre with both pragmatism, which is to forsake philosophy for politics, and also with Hegelianism, which implies a “continued commitment to the traditional problematic of philosophy” (p. 991). These two accusations, which are antithetical to each other, are perfectly compatible from Althusser’s viewpoint. To this I will come back later.

unmediated relation to the real, which those who return “back to things themselves” hope to find in Marx. So, rather than “practice,” which risks attributing a philosophical anthropology to Marx, Althusser prefers to speak of “practices,” which simply refer to the different ways in which human agents engage with the real. As Balibar (1992) remarks, this is “the Marx transformed by Althusser into a theoretician of the articulation of practices” (p. 47).

Secondly, for Althusser, Marx’s critique involves not only a critique of pre-Kantian metaphysics and of Kantian transcendentalism, but also a critique of Hegelian process of auto-genesis and its Feuerbachian inversion, both of which identifies thought and being (FM, p. 189). These are all in contradiction with the two important criteria of Marxist materialism: the real and its knowledge has to be distinguished and the real is prior to its knowledge. This is to say that “the ideological distinction” between “abstraction (which constitutes the essence of thought, science and theory) . . . [and] the concrete (which constitutes the essence of the real)” is totally different from “the real distinction between the abstract and the concrete, which affects theoretical practice only” (FM, p. 186). So, for Althusser, the attempt to achieve or recover the “concrete,” which is supposed to be more “real” than any theoretical concept is no less ideological than any idealist account of knowledge:

The critique which, in the last instance, counterposes the abstraction it attributes to theory and to science and the concrete it regards as the real itself, remains an ideological critique, since it denies the reality of scientific practice, the validity of its abstractions and ultimately the reality of that theoretical “concrete” which is a knowledge. Hoping to be ‘concrete’ and hoping for the ‘concrete’, this conception hopes to be ‘true’ *qua* conception, so it hopes to be knowledge, but it starts by denying the reality of precisely the practice that produces knowledge! It remains in the very ideology that it claims to ‘invert’, that is, not in abstraction in general, but in a determinate ideological abstraction. (FM, p. 187)

According to Peden (2014), in these lines we see why Althusser is critical of the phenomenological method of Husserl, who “lamented mathematics’ abandonment of its roots in the lifeworld and sought a return in order to recover a truth obscured by centuries of arithmetization” (p. 152). The Husserlian “reactivation” of “the original act, which remains always present beneath its sedimentations” (Lawlor, 2002, p. 52) does not require a historical, but a phenomenological analysis, since mathematical concepts are supposed to carry in themselves their past, their original meaning. It is possible to trace mathematics back to pre-predicative experience, since even in its most abstract forms mathematics retains “the founding acts of transcendental subjectivity which have been forgotten” (p. 79). Against the subjectivism involved in this hope to return to the concrete Althusser defends science, hence “the reality of precisely the practice that produces knowledge.”

If we once more pay a visit to the epigraph, we see that despite Derrida’s meticulous and persuasive reading of Althusser’s choice of the Eighth rather than the Eleventh Thesis as the epigraph of his essay, Althusser seems not to have any such preference. In “On Marxist Thought” (1982), calling the Eighth Thesis a “proposition of a fabulous idealism” (Althusser, 2012), he argues the *Theses on Feuerbach* to be an “apologia of praxis.” All mysticism finding their rational solution in human practice is perfectly compatible with the framework of Feuerbach’s hermeneutics:

The world thus becomes a complete compendium, full of mysteries hiding their secrets within themselves, or close by. Since it holds all its meaning in itself and in the man who is its essence, only a good hermeneutics is needed to decipher it in order to explain it. (Althusser, 2012)

Concerning the distinction between science and ideology, which Althusser relates with a return to the concrete, that I have discussed above, we find in this passage the

ultimate characteristic of hermeneutics and phenomenology: “a process of *recognition*” as opposed to a process of production and discovery, which is the mark of science. In the next section, I will come back again to the Eighth Thesis and Althusser’s account of how ideological projection works.

Then, how does all this relate to Althusser’s discussion of Lenin? In differentiating between the politician and the historian, Althusser attempts to problematize the geneticist approach. The historian observes, recognizes the “persistence” of a simple explanatory principle, say imperialism, which ultimately culminates in the Russian Revolution; from the point he stands, the becoming of this phenomenon appears to him in all its inevitability and not in its novelty. Thinking on the basis of *fait accompli*, the historian misses the “accomplishment” of the accomplished fact, that is, the process, which produced this result; he projects the result retrospectively onto the process of becoming of a phenomenon, as if the result was already contained in the actual process from the beginning. The politician’s relation to the conjuncture, on the other hand, bears a dimension oriented towards the future; he has a task *to be accomplished*. The conjuncture, which he is also a part of, presents a direct challenge to him in the form of a threat or an opportunity:

this one man (Lenin) standing there in the plain of History and of our lives, in the eternal ‘current situation’. He talks about what makes it possible to act on History from within the sole history present, about what is specific in the contradiction and in the dialectic, about the specific difference of the contradiction which quite simply allows us, not to demonstrate or explain the ‘inevitable’ revolutions *post festum*, but to ‘make’ them in our unique present, or, as Marx profoundly formulated it, to make the dialectic into a revolutionary method, rather than the theory of the *fait accompli*. (FM, p. 180)

If Lenin is to make politics, that is, transform the current situation, then he should not see it as the linear development of a certain originary essence, but in its contingency. As Althusser states in his letter to Diatkine, the meaning of the various elements and

his political intervention “will appear only later, according to the place assumed by the effect . . . in the structure once constituted” (WOP, p. 74). However, “if the effect were the effect of a filiation, an identifiable and assignable cause,” then “it would not allow for any ‘play’” (WOP, p. 73). Here, in this text, Althusser takes politics and history as two separate domains that naturally demand different ways of thinking. He sees as almost inevitable for the historian to reason on the basis of *fait accompli*, so he makes no distinction between different approaches to history, say between that of a Hegelian and a Marxist historian, which he will sharply discriminate in *Reading Capital*. In this later text, not only the politician, but also the historian who thinks only “after the fact” can approach history in a conjunctural way. Accordingly, as I clarify in the following sections, thinking in a non-conjunctural way, according to Althusser, does not exclusively belong to the historian, but to anybody, who has not trained himself in thinking in the modality of contingency, historians included.

### 3.2.2 *Reading Capital*

[T]he path these investigations are taking and will take leads us to a revolution in the traditional concept of the history of the sciences, which today (1968) is still profoundly steeped in the philosophy of the Enlightenment, i.e., in a teleologist and therefore idealist rationalism. . . . 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 origin, and which its history merely reveals to the light of day. (RC, p. 44)

In his contribution to the seminar “Lire le Capital,”<sup>166</sup> Althusser advances his inquiry as to the specificity of Marxist conceptions of dialectic, totality, historical

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<sup>166</sup> The seminar on Marx’s *Capital* was collectively organized by Althusser, Balibar, Yves Duroux, Rancière, and Jean-Claude Milner and took place between January and April 1965. It culminated in a two-volume book by Althusser, Balibar, Roger Establet, Rancière, and Pierre Macherey, the last two of which were omitted from the subsequent editions of the text. The first English translation of the text by Ben Brewster in 1970 was also based on this abridged edition. The complete edition of the text

temporality and causality. Particularly in “The Errors of Classical Economics: An Outline for a Concept of Historical Time” and “Marxism is not a Historicism” which correspond respectively to the fourth and the fifth chapters of *Reading Capital*, he undertakes a long inquiry into a specific conception of time, through a discussion of the difference between Hegel’s and Marx’s methods. He restates, this time with a focus on the domain of history, the need to reject “every teleology of reason” and to reconceptualize “the historical relation between a result and its conditions of existence” in radically new terms that would inevitably “clash . . . with the classical system of categories and demand . . . the[ir] replacement” (RC, p.45). Althusser thinks this “classical system of categories,” which underlies the linear, continuous and progressive conception of history, to have received its ultimate form with Hegel. In this section, I discuss Althusser’s critique of Hegel’s conception of time as a fundamental component of his comprehensive project of defining a logic other than that of genesis.

### 3.2.2.1 An error revealed

The chapter four of the *Reading Capital* is devoted to elaborating Marx’s reading of the classical economists. Here, Althusser reconstructs Marx’s critique of Smith and Ricardo concerning the notion of surplus value:

Smith and Ricardo always analyse ‘surplus value’ in the form of profit, rent and interest . . . it is never called by its name, but always disguised beneath other names . . . it is not conceived in its ‘generality’ as distinct from its ‘forms of existence’: profit, rent and interest. (RC, p. 91)

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-prepared by Balibar with the collaboration of Pierre Bravo Gala and Duroux- is published in 2015 in English.

What is noteworthy in this critique, according to Althusser, is Marx's interpretation of the absence of the word "surplus value" "as a mere inadequacy of language" (RC, p. 91). However, Althusser says, "surplus value," which Marx treats here as an ordinary word, is as Marx himself openly puts it, is one of his fundamental discoveries (RC, p. 79-80); a concept, which delineates his peculiar difference from Smith and Ricardo "with respect to problematic and object" (RC, p. 91). Althusser's question is why Marx, as well as his most important commentators, such as Antonio Gramsci, Lukács fail to see the novelty of this term and treat it as a mere improvement over classical theory. This failure has a symptomatic value for Althusser and calls for a reconsideration of Marx-Hegel relation and their conceptions of time and totality.

Analyzing Marx's own assessment of his debt to his predecessors, Althusser discovers something that "emerges silently again and again" in Marx's and then Marxists' discourse. Strangely, not only Marx's readers (those who follow or renounce Marx alike), but also Marx himself conceive his discoveries to be an advance over classical economy through the application of Hegelian dialectical method to it: Marx historicized the metaphysical categories of classical economy by demonstrating that they are not timeless entities, but "products" of a specific history. Althusser objects to this thesis by addressing two interrelated assumptions that underlie this statement: the "hypothetical *continuity* [emphasis added] of object" (RC, p.86) and the exteriority of method to its object (RC, p. 112). Althusser objects to the first assumption on the grounds that a Marxist category such as "surplus value" is not an empirical object, which can simply be applied to classical economy without effecting the theoretical status of the other objects that relate to it such as rent, profit, etc. It cannot be treated as "an unexpected guest at a family reunion," a new object

among other “familiar” objects, but as something that demands the “transformation of the entire terrain and its entire horizon,” hence a “break” from the background against which a new problem that this particular new object is a “symptomatic” effect of is produced (RC, p. 25).

The second assumption, on the other hand, is unacceptable for it is based on a “pre-dialectical” notion of method, which defines it irrespective of its object. Althusser had already discussed the problem of the externality of the method to its content in his dissertation in the context of the formalist readings of Hegel and Hegel’s critique of formalism (SH, p. 112-3), and later in *For Marx* both in the context of the critique of analytico-teleological method (FM, p. 62-63) and of the inversion thesis, which is discussed in almost all articles in *For Marx*. Here, he repeats his objections about thinking the relation between the method and the content within a formalist framework, which is completely at odds with the idea of dialectic that claims “to provide both the principles of knowledge and the objective laws” of its object (RC, p. 93). Yet, this is not only a simple repetition of his previous critiques of formalism, for, this time, his discussion of the relation between form and content aims to reveal a certain understanding of time that derives spontaneously from ordinary, everyday experience, from “the empiricism of the false obviousness of everyday practice” (RC, p. 96).

From *The Poverty of Philosophy* (1847) to *Capital* (1867), Marx insists that the primary problem with the classical economists is that they treat the economic categories of capitalism as if they are eternal and fixed, though, in fact, they are historically determined.<sup>167</sup> Having identified the problem thus, what needs to be done

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<sup>167</sup> In *The Poverty of Philosophy*, for example, Marx writes: “Economists express the relations of bourgeois production, the division of labour, credit, money, etc., as fixed, immutable, eternal categories” (cited in RC, p. 92).

in order to revolutionize classical economy, according to Marx, is to *historicize* its absolute categories, that is, to reveal the temporary and historical character of everything, which is thought to be eternal and necessary. Marx's presentation of the difference between him and the classical economists is symptomatic in that it successfully veils and at the same time reveals a problem in Marxist theory. Marx's emphasis on historicization and "the so-called radical historicism of Marxism" (RC, p. 92), which is primarily based on his presentation of his own project and has come to dominate not only the interpretation of *Capital* and the theory of Marxist economy in particular, but also of Marxist philosophy and politics in general, arise from a confusion about the concept of history (RC, p. 93). According to Althusser, it is exactly the revolutionary character of Marx's invention that produces this symptom. Marx does not think "in an adequate and advanced form, either the concept or the theoretical implications of the theoretically revolutionary step he had taken" (RC, p. 121). He either thinks "in borrowed concepts," or speaks in metaphors, that is, only "partially" or "indicative"ly, yet he does not "formulat[e] the original and strict sense of what he [is] producing in the adequacy of a concept" (RC, p. 121). So, whenever Marx lacks the adequate terms to theorize the philosophy he practices, he uses concepts that he has ready at hand; concepts which, however, belong to an ideological framework that is totally inconsistent with the scientific, philosophical and political claim of Marxism (RC, p. 123, 145).

As Althusser likes to repeat, "nature abhors a vacuum" and wherever Marx has not clearly articulated his philosophy, these lacunae are immediately occupied "by the 'natural' discourse of ideology" (RC, p. 88). Althusser is particularly attentive to those fragile moments where Marx's theoretical rigor flounders, a fragility which is "common to every scientific founding moment and to all scientific

production generally” (RC, p. 121, n. 14). He aims to show the “necessity” of the silences, the material absences or excesses, the slips of tongue, the weaknesses in Marx’s discourse. These symptoms hint at the possibilities, indicate the existence of the as yet unnamed (*qui n’a pas de nom*), as yet undertheorized ideas or concepts that are still-in the process-of-theorization:

old concepts desperately play the part of something absent which is *nameless*, in order to call it onto the stage in person - whereas they only ‘produce’ its presence in their failures, in the dislocation between the characters and their roles. (RC, p. 29)

Through a symptomatic reading of *Capital*, Althusser seeks to make these failures, dislocations and lacunae perceptible in order to identify those concepts and thoughts that produce a seemingly full discourse in the manner of a psycho-analyst<sup>168</sup>:

In an epistemological and critical reading . . . we cannot but hear behind the proffered word the silence it conceals, see the blank of suspended rigour, scarcely the time of a lightning-flash in the darkness of the text: correlatively, we cannot but hear behind this discourse which seems continuous but is really interrupted and governed by the threatened irruption of a repressive discourse, the silent voice of the real discourse, we cannot but restore its text, in order to re-establish its profound continuity. It is here that the identification of the precise points of weakness in Marx’s rigour is the same thing as the recognition of that rigour: it is his rigour that shows us its weaknesses; and in the brief moment of his temporary silence we are simply returning to him the speech that is his own. (RC, p. 143-4)

According to Althusser, Marx’s discourse is under the “repressive action of another discourse, which takes the place of the first discourse in favour of this repression, and speaks in its silence: the empiricist discourse” (RC, p. 90). The failure to identify

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<sup>168</sup> Althusser refers, besides Marx, to two figures, Freud and Spinoza, who have problematized and revolutionized “reading.” Althusser’s symptomatic reading relates to the model of the Freudian analyst, who is attentive, as he describes, to “the culpable depth of a second, quite different discourse, the discourse of the unconscious” (RC, p. 16). So, the seeming continuity of the discourse does not tempt the reader, who dares to ask what makes this discourse seamless, what fills in the cracks. But we should note that the aim is not to supply the discourse what it lacks in order to reconstruct its coherence, but to address the problems it hides.

the new problematic introduced by Marx, or better put, the “necessary” invisibility of his groundbreaking new objects, is grounded in a notion of history that is taken to be “obvious.” And “like all ‘obvious’ concepts” that are left undefined, they have the potential to assume “the function that the existing or dominant ideology defines for [them]” (RC, p. 93). And if it is this commonsense understanding of history, which serves to reduce Marx to an historicized Ricardo, then the only way to articulate the concept of the difference between Marx and the classical economists is to reconstruct the latent assumptions generating the historicization thesis and to bring to light the concept of history introduced by Marx’s theoretical problematic (RC, p. 93). So, if Marx, or others after him, cannot clearly and distinctly articulate his theoretical novelty, then one should investigate the concepts that “gather naturally in the hollow left by this silence,” which is none other than the concepts of the “empiricist discourse” (RC, p. 88, 90).

### 3.2.2.2 Althusser’s critique of empiricism

We need to dwell on Althusser’s peculiar use of the term “empiricism,” for it has a broader coverage than the one its usual sense implies. In *Reading Capital*, empiricism does not refer to a period in the history of philosophy, but defines a theoretical problematic that incorporates not only the members of the empiricist school, but also those, who criticize empiricism or, at least, do not consider themselves to be empiricist, such as Descartes, Kant, Fichte, Hegel, and Husserl (RC, p. 35, 38, 102). Althusser’s definition of this term is analogous to his description of “philosophies of intuition,” with the very important exception of the displacement not only of Kant and, but also of Hegel from the ranks of the “philosophers of the concept”:

I use this term in its widest sense, since it can embrace a rationalist empiricism as well as a sensualist empiricism, and it is even found at work in Hegelian thought itself, which, in principle, and with Hegel's own approval, can be regarded in this respect as the reconciliation of religion and its secular 'truth'. (RC, p. 35)

For Althusser, modern philosophy, except for a few names such as Spinoza, Nietzsche and Marx, has failed to resist the irresistible temptation of empiricism.<sup>169</sup> Empiricism as an ideology, whose "length of . . . range . . . is often suspected" and whose "real profundity is rarely appreciated" (RC, p. 102) is active in the mindset of the philosophers, the historians and the scientists. In this respect, Althusser's critique of empiricism may be compared to Kant's critique of transcendental realism as a "common prejudice" (CPR, A740/B768). This "common but fallacious presupposition," Kant says, views the objects in space and time as "things in themselves" (CPR, A536/B564). Similarly, Althusser claims the "empiricist temptation" to be "enormous," yet on the other hand, "as lightly borne by the ordinary man . . . as the inhabitants of this planet bear the weight of the enormous layer of air that crushes them" (RC, p. 105). Empiricism is so integrated into our everyday "consciousness" in that its influence, no matter how immense it may be, goes unnoticed. Althusser expresses the influence of empiricist problematic in very much the same terms he expresses the influence of the decomposition of Hegel: "we are still largely held prisoner by it" (RC, p. 102). Once again, Althusser is assured, and even more assured than before, that one needs to follow Marx in order to break free from this captivity, yet always keeping in mind that Marx may have also been the victim of the empiricist trap.

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<sup>169</sup> Even Marx's colleagues and his closest followers are not exempt from it. Althusser condemns Engels, who says that "the law of value is economically valid 'from the beginning of exchange . . . until the fifteenth century A.D.'" for being totally negligent of the fact that the law of value is one of the discoveries of Marx, hence a new object. (RC, p. 82)

For Althusser, the preliminary characteristic of empiricism is the confusion of the object of knowledge with the real object. Hegel attacks the empiricists for conceiving the given as a mere aggregation of properties and “forgetting” the essential role of “synthesis” in cognition. In grasping the concrete, it is destroyed into its properties; it is “peel[ed] off one by one, like the skins of an onion” (*EL*, §38). So, at the end of this process, being reduced to a mere aggregation of properties -such as Locke’s simple ideas- “the living thing is killed” (*EL*, §38). As discussed earlier, Althusser totally agrees with Hegel’s critique of empiricism’s pretension to avoid metaphysics and its incapability to account for the “unity” of its object. His main interest, however, lies in how the “subject” of empiricism carries out the mental operation of “abstraction,”<sup>170</sup> which is “the specific index of empiricism” (*RC*, p. 36).

The real, according to the empiricist model, Althusser says, is structured as “a dross of earth,” from which the subject extracts the “pure gold” through a process of “sortings, sievings, scrapings, and rubbings” (*RC*, p. 36). This special procedure, by which the knowledge of the given is attained, is called abstraction. At this point, Althusser’s critique of empiricism builds upon Hegel’s, who also acknowledges -at least as the initial point of the dialectical process- the radical difference between

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<sup>170</sup> For Locke, abstraction is one of the actions performed by the mind, which corresponds to the production of general ideas from particulars. This process is crucial and fundamental to human knowledge, for it involves the use of words, which are mostly general, hence the possibility of language. So, Locke says, concerning the relation of abstraction to language

When children have, by repeated sensations, got ideas fixed in their memories, they begin by degrees to learn the use of signs . . . [and] to make use of words, to signify their ideas to others . . . The use of words then being to stand as outward marks of our internal ideas, and those ideas being taken from particular things, if every particular idea that we take in should have a distinct name, names must be endless. To prevent this, the mind makes the particular ideas received from particular objects to become general; which is done by considering them as they are in the mind such appearances, separate from all other existences, and the circumstances of real existence . . . This is called *abstraction*, whereby ideas taken from particular beings become general representatives of all of the same kind. (*An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, II:XI:8, 9, cited in Schacht, 2003, p. 87-8)

thought and the real.<sup>171</sup> The problem with empiricism is its *exclusion* of the processes, of “sortings, sievings, scrapings, and rubbings” from the end-product, from knowledge; it is as if they “leave no trace in the extracted part, every trace of their operation is eliminated along with the part of the real they were intended to eliminate” (RC, p. 36). In order to operate, abstraction necessitates “a very special representation both of the real and of the knowledge of it” (RC, p. 36). First it imposes a duality in the object itself, *two* essences, as the essential and the inessential. The essential essence can only be “achieved” by extracting it from the real thing through the elimination of the inessential. What is problematic here for Althusser is the absence of a “trace” in the extracted part not only of the inessential, but also of any operation performed for the elimination of the inessential (RC, p. 36). After all, as the essence only emerges after a process of abstraction, it is curious that the “whole series of sortings, sievings, scrapings and rubbings” leave no mark behind. For Althusser, however, there is a trace: it is the separation of the two constitutive parts of the real as visible surface (the dross of earth) and the invisible kernel (the gold). This duality ascertains that the object is only knowable through the operation of real abstraction, but this is also to acknowledge that knowledge is essentially different from the real. Hence, according to Althusser, the possibility of a different conception of knowledge, is already embedded within the empiricist conception of knowledge, which at the same time makes *visible* and yet also *obliterates* the difference between the real object and the object of knowledge. It admits the difference by saying that knowledge corresponds to “only a part of the real object” and it renounces it “by reducing this difference . . . to a mere distinction between the parts of a single object: the real object” (RC, p. 40).

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<sup>171</sup> As Althusser argues from his dissertation on, this difference exists only from the point of the given. There is actually no difference in Hegel from the point of view of absolute knowledge.

Another problematic aspect of empiricism for Althusser is its definition of the knowledge process by appeal to the experience of the subject. In empiricism, the cognitive process involves the confrontation of a given subject with a given object and knowledge is conceived to be the possession of the subject, who extracts it of the essence of the object (RC, p. 38). Since the empiricist conceives reality as comprising of two parts, the “visible surface” and the essential “invisible kernel,” which can be discovered by “removing the covering,” then knowledge depends on the perceptive capability of the subject, on the keenness of his vision that reaches what is underneath the surface. So, if we go back to our initial problem concerning Marx’s novelty, within this framework, Marx is no more than a perceptive reader, who sees what was potentially visible, yet unnoticed by Smith and Ricardo. Since the object to be seen is already given, since it exists “prior to the activity of reading,” from an empiricist point of view, the reason for its temporary concealedness can only be explained “as a failure of vision” and the difference between Marx and his predecessors pertains to the one between an occluded and a clear vision.

This idea of the essence as “not immediately visible . . . because it is concealed . . . entirely covered and enveloped by the dross of the inessential,” which is common to all “philosophies of vision,” is nothing other than “the problematic of the religious vision of the essence in the transparency of existence” (RC, p. 37). The relation that Althusser sees between the empiricist understanding of knowledge and religion is reminiscent of his previous account of the relation between philosophies of intuition and religion, which take man as passive before its object.<sup>172</sup> The empiricist model, Althusser maintains, is a secular variant of the “religious myth of reading,” which posits a complete overlap between Logos and being. The scripture is

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<sup>172</sup> Again, this link between the intuitive forms of cognition and the Myth of the Fall was a theme held up by Hegel in his *The Encyclopaedia Logic*.

the expression of a Truth, which reveals itself to the perceptive reader. This reader is then tasked with clarifying this content, with interpreting any inconsistency or gap that appears within the text in order to restore to it the coherence it essentially has, but may not be obvious to an ordinary person. Against this approach, Althusser places Spinoza's reading of the Scripture in *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*, which, instead of viewing the Scripture as a representation or expression of the true word of God, interprets it from a materialist perspective by seeing the text as the product of a specific social structure (Peden, 2014, p. 157). Spinoza does not act with a view to restore to the text the unity and the consistency that is expected of it. This enables him to break free, Peden notes, from the hermeneutic method, the proper method of the institutionalized reading of the Scripture, which approaches the text either "in terms of [its] potential true reference—for example, did the Red Sea really part? — or in terms of [its] metaphorical or allegorical value," that is, in terms of its being a representation of a hidden Truth (p. 157). Instead, Peden says, Spinoza evaluates the Scripture in terms of its "functional role in the presentation of a certain coherent world," which is "the indispensable ideological prerequisite for the Hebrew state" (p. 157). So, for him, the "coherence" of the Scripture demonstrates the way in which it successfully fills in the gaps in order to fulfill this historical task and not its completeness as the word of God. So, for Althusser, Spinoza is not only "the first man ever" to have performed a materialist historical study of the Scripture, taking it as a singular "case" -of the Jewish people- but also the first man who "posed the problem of reading" (RC, p. 16), that is, problematized the procedure of extracting a meaning which is assumed to be buried in a text. Spinoza's reading reveals the way in which the conventional practice of reading operates: it searches for a "hidden presence" beneath or beyond the appearance of the immediate. This *hermeneutic*

reading presumes that the contingent or even chaotic appearance of the surface is only the “veil” of a pre-existing or a promised order, an organic unity, which endows every single element with a meaning that defines its contribution to the functioning of the whole. What Althusser finds in Spinoza, Montag (1993) says, is a new, materialist way of reading that rejects the distinction between appearance and essence and shows that “a text is entirely coincident with its actual existence; it is a surface without depth, without a reservoir of hermeneutic potential” (p. 53).

In a very similar way with the hermeneutic and religious way of reading, Althusser points, the empiricist epistemology considers knowledge as “a phenomenon of recognition” (RC, p. 52). In this context, reading corresponds to “the recognition of objects that were already knowable as such” (Solomon, 2012, p. 17). Just as the meaning of the Scripture is there even before it is written, knowledge in empiricism exists “as a relation inside its real object between the really distinct parts of that real object” (RC, p. 39). So, in both paradigms, reading corresponds to the process in which the objects that were already knowable as such are *recognized*.<sup>173</sup> Thought and object “pre-date” the moment of knowledge and “all the work of knowledge is reduced in principle to the recognition of the mere relation of *vision*; in which the whole nature of its object is reduced to the mere condition of a *given*” (RC, p. 19). The only difference between religious reading and empiricism is about whether “transparency is . . . given from the beginning [or] . . . is separated from itself . . . by the veil, the dross of impurities, of the inessential which steal the essence from us” (RC, p. 37). The central concern for the empiricist model is to

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<sup>173</sup> In “International of Decent Feelings” Althusser criticizes the tendency to see every phenomenon as the sign of apocalypse, of the final reconciliation (SH, p. 126). This geneticist logic can also be seen at work in emancipatory politics. The theme of a lost original unity, which has to be achieved again in order for the realization of a pure community of freedom and equality grants politics with a function to clearly identify and revive what is lost (SH, p. 47).

reduce the gap between the real object and its mental representation. The theological model, on the other hand, conceives the world as a text in which the Logos speaks. “The religious fantasies of epiphany and parousia, and the fascinating myth of the Scriptures, in which the body of truth, dressed in its words, is the Book: the Bible” (RC, p. 16) are all instantiations of this idea of immediate transparency. From this perspective, Hegelian philosophy, Husserlian phenomenology, Feuerbachian materialism are all religious, for they are all structured by the ideal of a direct relation between the “object of knowledge” and the “real object.” Whether it be immediately transparent or requiring techniques of separation, they all presume “an original unity undivided between subject and object, between the real and its knowledge” (RC, p. 63). In Christian theology, we find the idea of original sin as the lost unity of Being and Logos, in Husserlian phenomenology the “harmony” between the “object of knowledge” and the “real object” is guaranteed by recourse to “a pre-reflexive world of ‘life’” (RC, p. 62), to a world of immediate experience from which knowledge originally emerges; in behaviorist psychology by recourse to “the concrete of elementary behaviour and gestures”<sup>174</sup> and in Marxism with reference to ‘real’ history as the truth bearer of theory (RC, p. 52–57, 62–63, 127–138). Subject and object, which have fallen apart, await their unification (RC, p. 63). “[A] primitive real object,” absolves all these theories from the “responsibility to think the difference between the object of knowledge and the real object” (RC, p. 64).

#### 3.2.2.2.1 Empiricism and the logic of genesis

Althusser talks about “three theoretical elements” that the empiricist uses “to fill in the emptiness between ‘abstract’ categories and the ‘concrete’”: origin, genesis and

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<sup>174</sup> Jean Piaget calls his approach “‘a genetic epistemology’, which fundamentally relates cognitive structures or stages to variations of biological regulations” (Choi, 2012, p. 143, n.3).

mediation (RC, p. 63).<sup>175</sup> These concepts fulfill different functions: the concept of origin “as in original sin . . . summarize[s] in one word what has not to be thought in order to be able to think what one wants to think”; the concept of genesis conceals “a production or mutation whose recognition would threaten the vital continuity of the empiricist schema of history”; the concept of mediation, on the hand, supplies “the empty space between theoretical principles and the ‘concrete’” with “post-stations” (RC, p. 63). This conceptual society is at work whenever Marxists turn to “concrete,” “practice,” “praxis” (Sartre) as the original ground of theory. Only by challenging this conceptual society, which constantly promotes the ideology that has produced it and acts as the “nomads” that carry this ideology, Althusser claims, one can break from empiricism and the religious logic that underlies it.

In “On Feuerbach” -notes from a lecture that Althusser gave in 1967 and post-humously published in 2003 as part of the compilation *The Humanist Controversy*,<sup>176</sup> Althusser provides a detailed account of this conceptual family. In his discussion of the specific difference between Marx’s and Feuerbach’s method, Althusser compares between the scientific methods of “research and production,” which he claims to involve “a labour of theoretical transformation” and the methods of disclosure and confession, which he claims Marx to have inherited from Feuerbach and employed in his early writings (HC, p. 123). A confession, Althusser says, “is a discourse that rectifies a previous discourse by disclosing its true signification” (HC, p. 124). So, confession and disclosure do not add “something

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<sup>175</sup> Here, Althusser -suddenly- refers to Sartre as one of those “who feel a need to fill in the emptiness between ‘abstract’ categories and the ‘concrete’” (RC, p. 63).

<sup>176</sup> *The Humanist Controversy* (*Le Querrelle de L’Humanisme*), is actually the title which Althusser had intended to use for a compilation, which would reflect the differing views of those who joined the humanist controversy that was ignited by his systematic critique of humanism in “Marxism and Humanism” (1963). He later abandoned the project (Goshgarian, 2003, p. xlviii). Matheron posthumously compiled Althusser’s responses to the critiques and the lectures that he gave in the most heated period of this debate under the same title.

new” to the previous discourse, but unveil “*not a lack, but a mask*” (HC, p. 94).

Althusser says

everything hinges on the disclosure of that essence - to be very precise, on bringing self-consciousness into full correspondence [*adequation*] with consciousness. This, of course, has implications not only for the nature of ideologies, philosophy, and the sciences, but also for politics, which is reduced to a critique of the illusions of consciousness about itself, with the whole resting on *the thesis of the practical and theoretical primacy of consciousness*. (HC, p. 94)

Very similar to the role that “recognition” plays in religion and empiricism, the methods of disclosure and confession presuppose a “basic specular relation between subject and object” (HC, p. 123). According to this approach, there is a “privileged object,” which encapsulates the essence of the subject. Whether this specific object is religion (Feuerbach), politics (Marx, *On the Jewish Question*) or economics (Marx, *1844 Manuscripts*), the human essence can be directly read off from it. According to Althusser, this profoundly Feuerbachian approach, which he calls the “specular theory of the object,” is the predecessor of “the phenomenological reduction and hermeneutics” (HC, p. 124).

For Feuerbach, all divine attributes are nothing but humanity’s alienation of its own essence in the form of religion. One can also see this mirror-relation at work in Marxism. Althusser argues that the Feuerbachian formula, which explains the secret behind a religious practice such as Baptism with reference to an empirical fact such as the importance of water for man, is directly imported into Marxist theory of ideology (HC, p. 125). Here, Althusser revisits the “Eighth Thesis on Feuerbach” as a perfect example of this mirror-relation in the form of a correspondence between human practice and the essence of mysticism. The Eighth Thesis, which, for “a massively dominant” understanding of Marxism, constitutes the “*Marxist theory of the ideological*,” Althusser says, is not a Marxist, but a Feuerbachian critique of

Hegelian idealism based on “the recognition/misrecognition of fact.” This ideological projection works by presenting that such and such a fact “in travestied form” is “the essence of speculation” (HC, p. 125). The goal is to reveal as the origin of an enigma (a religious ritual, a social norm, an institution, a concept) an empirical fact by stripping off from this enigma all ideological mediations. According to Althusser, this thesis that correlates, by way of an equation, an empirical fact with an ideological formation assumes the three theoretical elements that I have mentioned above: origin, genesis and mediations (HC, p. 125). So, we have “*an originary fact*, or a practice, or empirical conditions” as the origin, to which there is a “corresponding ideological formation” as “the *phenomenon* of this essence,” and in between these two elements there is also a mechanism, which accounts for the relation between them; the *genesis* of the phenomenon (HC, p. 126). The last element, that is, the concept of genesis is strategically important. Genesis corresponds to “the conceptual translation of the equals sign”: such and such a ritual=a real, concrete fact. This sign correlates the beginning and the end “by way of an equation,” as if nothing happened in between. The void between the initial point and the end, which would indicate in the direction of a mutation is filled. So, if we remember Althusser’s typology of generalities, genesis is the mechanism through which we understand the relation between the Generalities I and III; it corresponds to the mode of theoretical production, to the Generalities II, that is, the problematique that commands the field of theory. Within this problematique the originary essence persists “through the long line (*filiation*) of *mediations*” and “ultimately culminate[s] in the phenomenon of this essence” (HC, p. 126). Again, as is the case with empiricism, the problem with the concept of genesis for Althusser is its “obviousness,” its being “constantly ‘practised’ in the spontaneity of scientific

ideology” without any sense of urgency to question its validity. In order to lift this “epistemological obstacle,” what needs to be done according to Althusser, is “a radical critique of the ideology of genesis,” which involves “elaborat[ing] a non-genetic theory of historical irruption” (HC, p. 126).

#### 3.2.2.2 Hegel, the empiricist

For Althusser, both Hegelian historicism and economic eternalism has a “common ideological background”; they share the same notion of history. It is this common ground, which enables, without any problem, to bring together “a pre-existing and exoteric method” and “a pre-determined object,” that is, the object of classical economy and the Hegelian method (RC, p. 112). So, it is important to note that Althusser does not point to Hegel as the originator of this specific conception of time, but as the one who gives the ultimate theoretical expression to our “everyday,” most “immediate” understanding of time (RC, p. 17, 96), as the most profound “representative of the crude ideological illusions of everyday practice” (RC, p. 97).<sup>177</sup> Hegel’s conception of time, in this sense, differs only in sophistication from the idea of time found in “the most vulgar empiricism” or in the spontaneous philosophy of the historians and social scientists (RC, p. 96). Hence, as Read (2005) puts it, what Althusser emphasizes here is less “Hegel’s lingering influence on all

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<sup>177</sup> A similar point is made by Heidegger in *Being and Time* concerning Hegel’s concept of time: “Hegel’s concept of time presents the most radical way in which the vulgar understanding of time has been given form conceptually, and one which has received too little attention” (Heidegger, cited in Malabou, 2000, p. 216). That Althusser should be aware of Heidegger’s interpretation of Hegel is also evidenced by the fact that he refers to Heidegger in the beginning of *Reading Capital*. Malabou claims that it was basically Hegel’s conception of time that led to “the divorce between Hegel and contemporary philosophy” and that it was Heidegger’s account of Hegel, which “articulated most powerfully” the verdict against Hegel (p. 197). Yet, Heidegger’s influence on Althusser’s reflections on vulgar conception of time is only mentioned -without any further explanation- by Balibar (2017, p. 104). Peter Osborne (2011) points to the similarity between Althusser’s account of Hegel’s conception of time with that of Heidegger’s and concludes that “the Heideggerian roots of Althusser’s critique of the temporality of Hegelianism, nourished by the soil of a common anti-humanism, have yet to be examined in any detail” (p. 216, n. 121).

that comes after him than . . . his implication within an understanding of time that appears to be self-evident” (para. 6). The real problem for Althusser is “empiricism,” which he thinks Hegel has “only sublimated in his systematic conception of history” (RC, p. 97). Historicism, on this account, is a version of empiricism, which treats history as a real-concrete object exterior and superior to abstract theory (RC, p. 116).

For Althusser, the radical discontinuity between thought and the real can never be “resolved.” It is in this context that Althusser views Hegelian idealism as an empiricism in its sublimated or idealist form (RC, p. 97, 184). Although, Althusser is still committed to Hegel’s critique of empiricism, he now claims Hegel to be repeating the same mistake. Hegelian philosophy, like any other empiricism, is structured by the ideal of a direct relation between the object of knowledge and the real object. The biggest challenge that Hegel poses is his displacement of the substance with process, so that the harmony is neither thought as something to be *achieved* through the techniques of extraction, nor something to be *recovered* through a reactivation of a forgotten original meaning/act. Rather, the harmony is to be *fulfilled* -for it has already been fulfilled- over the course of a dialectical process in which the Spirit unfolds. The End of History in Hegelian dialectics is the privileged moment when truth becomes fully transparent; the moment,

in which the concept at last becomes fully visible, present among us in person, tangible in its sensory existence -- in which this bread, this body, this face and this man are the Spirit itself. (RC, p. 16)

As Althusser implies here, Hegelian philosophy, which is constructed from the viewpoint of a finality towards which history inevitably advances, that is, from the viewpoint of absolute knowledge, is religious just as any other empiricism (RC, p. 44).

According to Althusser, the philosophical rigor of Marx's theory -this very famous double movement, in which he claims Marx to have founded "both the theory of history and a philosophy of the historical distinction between ideology and science"- is dependent upon his "break with the religious myth of reading," which also comes to mean a break with "the Hegelian conception of the whole as a 'spiritual' totality," that is, "an expressive totality" (RC, p. 17). Althusser claims that

[Hegel's] theory of the expressive totality (in which each part is *pars totalis*, immediately expressing the whole that it inhabits in person) to be the theory which, in Hegel, for the last time and on the terrain of history itself, assembled all the complementary religious myths of the voice (the Logos) speaking in the sequences of a discourse; of the Truth that inhabits its Scripture; -- and of the ear that hears or the eye that reads this discourse, in order to discover in it (if they are pure) the speech of the Truth which inhabits each of its Words in person" (RC, p. 17).

However, for Marx, Althusser says, "the truth of history cannot be read in its manifest discourse, because the text of history is not a text in which a voice (the Logos) speaks, but the inaudible and illegible notation of the effects of a structure of structures" (RC, p. 17). So, it is essential to understand not only the difference between Marx's and Hegel's different conceptions of totality, but also the relation between such conception of totality to history and also to reading. The content of the next section consists in an elaboration of these issues.

### 3.2.2.3 Hegelian conception of historical time

Althusser's account of Hegelian conception of historical time is essentially based on his explication of Hegel's definition of time as "der daseiende Begriff," that is, as "the concept in its immediate empirical existence" (RC, p. 93).<sup>178</sup> According to

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<sup>178</sup> The interpretation of this statement is important concerning its effect on the general interpretation of Hegelian philosophy. Kojève (1980b) also comments on this passage in his lecture "A Note on Eternity, Time, and the Concept."

Althusser, Hegel's definition of time points to an essential relation between time and totality:

the structure of the social whole must be strictly interrogated in order to find in it the secret of the conception of history in which the 'development' of this social whole is thought; once we know the structure of the social whole we can understand the apparently 'problemless' relationship between it and the conception of historical time in which this conception is reflected. (RC, p. 97)

Emphasizing the importance of this relation, Althusser reformulates Hegel's definition of time: "historical time is merely the reflection in the continuity of time of the internal essence of the historical totality" (RC, p. 93). From this formulation, Althusser derives two essential characteristics of Hegelian understanding of time: homogeneous continuity and contemporaneity. Continuity is the manifestation of the development of the Idea whereas contemporaneity stands for the centrality of the present (RC, p. 94). As we have seen, historical time in Hegel corresponds to the dialectical, linear development of the Idea. The forward march of the Spirit takes place in a homogeneous continuum that is marked by different periods, each of which corresponds to a definite stage in its development. This dialectical journey, however, is based upon the prior condition of contemporaneity (RC, p. 94). Since all different levels of the social whole are reducible to a single temporal axis, that is, the present, all these levels are co-existent with one another in one and the same present. Therefore, Althusser argues, a vertical cut at a particular moment in the historical continuum will show each element to be "in an immediate relationship with one another, a relationship that immediately expresses their internal essence" (RC, p. 94). Althusser calls this "intellectual operation" of imagining a vertical cut in time "the essential section." This operation is possible, provided that the structure of the whole is an expressive one, in which the same essence is in action in all the parts that constitute the whole.

Althusser conceives this expressive or spiritual unity, which is manifest in all its elements, in direct contrast with a mechanistic unity, in which the whole is a composite entity made up of pre-existing, pre-given, simple elements. This latter model, which is Cartesian in origin is inadequate in its effort to formulate “the *effectivity* of a whole on its elements, except at the cost of extra-ordinary distortions,” such as the duality between the body and the mind in Descartes (RC, p. 186). By the term effectivity, Althusser refers to the determination of the elements of a totality, the relations between those elements and all the effects of those relations (RC, 186), that is, to a causal relationship between the elements of the whole and the whole itself. In the case of Cartesian totality, the relations between elements of the whole are exterior to the whole. The only relation of the whole to its parts is that of an aggregation, a coexistence of independently constituted elements. Althusser calls this specific relation transitive or linear causality (RC, p. 186).

Althusser’s statement as to the inadequacy of the mechanistic model places him within a long line of thinkers, who reject atomism: Plato, Aristotle, Spinoza, Leibniz, Hegel and Marx.<sup>179</sup> However, although Althusser is a holist and rejects the priority of the elements to the whole, he is likewise critical of an understanding of a totality that prefigures and determines the parts, which he thinks is the case with the Hegelian totality that he claims to be “a ‘spiritual whole’ in the Leibnizian sense” (RC, p. 96). Hegelian totality is

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<sup>179</sup> See Fourtounis (2005), for a detailed discussion on Althusser’s place within the atomism vs. holism debate. Again, Cullenberg (1996) argues that in *Reading Capital* Althusser distinguishes between three approaches to totality, which, also correspond to three different approaches to totality in Marxism: analytical Marxism, Hegelian Marxism and Althusser’s structural Marxism. Cullenberg claims the Cartesian notion of totality to be common in analytical Marxism (p. 131). This notion, which asserts the independency and the priority of the elements to the whole, inspire theories that are compiled under the heading of “methodological individualism” (Cullenberg, 1999, p. 803-5). Assuming that society corresponds to “the patterns that emerge from the interaction of independently constituted individuals,” this model attempts to explain all social practices and institutions in terms of the behaviors, dispositions and beliefs of individuals (p. 803).

a totality all of whose parts are so many “total parts” each expressing the others, and each expressing the social totality that contains them, because each in itself contains in the immediate form of its expression the essence of the totality itself. (RC, p. 94).

It is this Leibnizian understanding of totality that grounds the “continuity of presence” of the concept “in all the determinations of its existence” (RC, p. 95). So, “in the co-existence of the Hegelian *present*, . . . temporal presence coincides with the presence of the essence with its phenomena” (RC, p. 99). Yet, unlike the Leibnizian monad, the Hegelian idea is not a substance, but a process. Since there is nothing apart from its becoming, for Hegel, the Spirit, which is its own principle of becoming, is both the founding unity and the final destination of history. The unfolding of history consists, therefore, in the realization of what is predetermined, but not yet accessible to consciousness. Accordingly, the constituent elements of the whole can be conceived in a “pseudo-independence,” only because “the totality has not yet been revealed” to them.

Within this framework, the two aspects of historical time, continuity and contemporaneity, complement each other. The continuity of time in Hegel is based on the continuous succession of the contemporaneous elements of the whole, whose unity is guaranteed by the omnipresence of the concept in its successive transformations (RC, p. 95). Every social whole is the incarnation of a *moment* of the development of the Idea (RC, p. 93). Hence, the concept of moment in Hegel, Althusser remarks, has a double meaning:

the moment as a moment of a development (which invokes the continuity of time and gives rise to the theoretical problem of periodization); and the moment as a moment of time, as the present, which is never anything but the phenomenon of the presence of the concept with itself in all its concrete determinations. (RC, p. 95)

According to Althusser, such a conception of time has significant consequences in the fields of history, politics and philosophy. Here, I should remind that Althusser's main concern is not the concept of time per se, hence not a mere "philosophical" critique of Hegelian conception of time, but the particular logic that a certain conception of time assumes and operates in.<sup>180</sup> As for history, Althusser argues that the conception of time as a linear homogeneous continuum reduces history to a succession of events, which in turn, assigns the historian with the fundamental task of periodization, the task of dividing the continuous succession of totalities into separate periods, the task of discovering the particular Idea that defines each period and issues a meaning to it (RC, p. 44, 103). It is thanks to this particular conception of time, the problem of periodization remains the central problem of modern historiography (RC, p. 94), while the historian is reduced to a chronicler who records the sequence of events. In Marxist tradition, the same mechanism operates in the reduction of the historical dialectic to a progressive sequence of modes of production generated by the development of productive forces. Doing history in a "materialist" way, in this context, cannot go beyond the simple observation of the manifestations of the development of forces of production. The only difference between an idealist and materialist approach is therefore reduced to whether taking history as the "emanation" of an ideal, or a material essence. As Althusser has already elaborated in *For Marx*, since history can only be viewed retrospectively and since a historian works backwards, from where he stands, he can "spontaneously" view history as a complete whole. It is not easy, on the part of the historian, to resist the ideological

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<sup>180</sup> Chambers (2014) also points out that in contemporary debate on temporality, "a crucial dimension of the relationship between time and politics" is overlooked (p. 136). Chambers lauds Althusser not only for his critique of teleology and linear time long before the appearance of radical conceptions of temporality, but also for "relat[ing] temporality to questions of history and of the social formation" and thereby intervening –very early- in the "existential, phenomenological, and human-centered contexts," in which temporality is conceived as "*as the experience of a subject*" (p. 136, 137).

temptation of the logic of genesis. Beginning from the end of the historical process, the historian projects an identity into the past and *tails* its linear development up to the present; the present is the unfolding of the past, which carries the germ of its future.

Besides this linearity, Althusser says, for Hegel “the present constitutes the absolute horizon of all knowing” (RC, p. 95). Althusser’s statement can be better understood if we turn to Hegel for a moment:

To comprehend *what is*, this is the task of philosophy, because *what is*, is reason. Whatever happens, every individual is a *child of his time*; so, philosophy too is *its own time apprehended in thoughts*. It is just as absurd to fancy that a philosophy can transcend its contemporary world as it is to fancy that an individual can overleap his own age, jump over Rhodes. If his theory really goes beyond the world as it is and builds a world *as it ought to be*, that world exists indeed, but only in his opinions, a supple element in which anything you please may be constructed by the imagination. (*Outlines*, p. 15)

Here, we find a clear statement of how Hegel conceives the relation of philosophy and history. For Hegel, philosophy must have as its basis the actuality of the present as opposed to ideal and abstract models. As Althusser claimed in his dissertation, Hegel truly understands and advances upon the Kantian insight that there can be no knowledge of things that transcends experience and time. The task of philosophy is to apprehend *what is*. If it “looks upon the present as something vacuous and looks beyond it with the eyes of superior wisdom,” Hegel warns, “it finds itself in a vacuum, and because it has actuality in the present alone, it is itself mere vacuity” (*Outlines*, p. 15).

Yet, this passage and Hegel’s reference to “*what is*” and “the present” must be understood in relation to what Hegel has stated only a page before: “*What is rational is actual; and what is actual is rational*” (*Outlines*, p. 14). In apprehending *what is* in its factuality, philosophy reveals why the present must be this way and not

the other. The actual taken in the sense that Hegel indicates here does not therefore refer to the simple factual existence of what is, but involves necessity and rationality. What *is* is reason realizing itself in history with all its contingencies, deviances and deformities and philosophy is tasked with understanding the rational structure of the actual. As previously discussed in Althusser's dissertation, for Hegel, knowledge is not only temporal, but also historical. Hence, to the extent that philosophy is tasked with understanding reason as it unfolds in historical time, it is bound by history. For this reason, "the absolute horizon of all knowing" is the present (RC, p. 95).

In Althusser's reading, Hegel's dictum that "every individual is a *child of his time*," which we come across several times (SH, p. 101, 116) and articulated in different forms as "nothing can run ahead of its time" or "no one can run ahead of his time" (RC, p. 95, 123, 136, 142, 197), is the best formulation of the Hegelian understanding of time with respect to its attitude towards the future. At first reading, it may not be obvious why Althusser finds Hegel's position unacceptable. After all, Althusser also objects to the utopian-idealist political theories or the natural law theories that resort to an "ought to be," prescribing how a good political order should be or to a subjectivist individualism, which assumes that it can detach itself from the historical context and judge it critically from a neutral viewpoint. Yet, there is an important point that he would not be at one with Hegel: Althusser does not think that there is a reason concealed in reality needing to be deciphered by the philosopher. For Hegel, he argues, even the most extraordinary thoughts can be understood as the products of a whole in and through which a particular time understands itself. In his interview with Navarro (1984), Althusser returns to this issue pointing to the affinity between religion and philosophy:

Again, philosophy may be likened to a laboratory in which the ensemble of ideological elements is unified. In the past, religion played this unifying role . . . Religion contented itself with grand (ideological) Ideas such as the existence of God or the creation of the world; it used them to order all human activities and the corresponding ideologies, with a view to constituting the unified ideology that the classes in power needed to ensure their domination. There is, however, a limit: the dominant philosophy goes as far as it can in its role of unifier of the elements of ideology and the diverse ideologies, but it cannot “leap over its time,” as Hegel said, or “transcend its class condition,” as Marx said’ (PE, p. 279).

From this passage, we can conclude that, for Althusser, it is philosophy in its classical, pre-Marxist sense, which is unable to “leap over its time,”<sup>181</sup> which Althusser thinks as synonymous with the capability to “transcend its class condition.” Philosophy, Althusser reminds in this interview, has inherited religion’s questions about “the origin, end or destiny of man, of history, and of the world” (PE, p. 266). Yet, Althusser argues, “philosophy, in the strict sense, was constituted with the constitution of the first science: mathematics . . . From this moment on people began to reason in a different way about different objects: abstract objects” (PE, p. 266). Again, philosophy owes its rigor to science, which “is always out of sync with ideology” (Read, 2005, para. 21). Without such an intervention that disturbs the “unity,” into which philosophy reduces “all human activities and the corresponding ideologies” in the name of bestowing a meaning upon the world -in the same manner as religion has done before- philosophy cannot break from the religious, from everyday common sense, from ideology. It is this traditional role of idealist philosophy that Althusser problematizes in the context of historical temporality.

Nothing can run ahead of its time in Hegel, for the relation between philosophy and history is considered as a relation of expressive unity (RC, p. 134).

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<sup>181</sup> Johnston (2016) reads this remark as an example for Althusser’s affirmation of Hegel’s “denial of predictive power to the philosopher/theorist” (p. 222). Although Althusser would object to such a capacity for prediction on the part of the theorist, what he is referring here is the relation of dominant philosophy to ideology.

Philosophy, in Hegel, is the expression of its own historical present, a product of its own time “since it is merely that time caught in the trap of a mirror reflection” (RC, p. 142). Hegel’s owl of Minerva takes wing at dusk, so philosophy understood as such can give “an adequate expression of a previously misrecognized essence, in the production of a philosophy that would be able to master its time, ‘expressing’ it in conceptual form and thereby completing it” (Thomas, 2017, p. 199). On one hand, the historical process is the realization of what is not yet evident to consciousness and on the other, this knowing consists in consciousness becoming transparent to itself. Nothing in its time can be alien to it for all knowing is ultimately the self-consciousness of the essence of the stage of the development the consciousness has attained. For Althusser, therefore, this limit is only valid for one form of philosophical practice, which finds its ultimate expression in Hegel’s account of time. Philosophy in Hegel can only express the contradictions of its time, since these contradictions are, in the end, nothing but the contradictions of reason unfolding itself as such in time. So, Hegel’s dictum is ultimately dependent upon the idea of the unity of the real object and the object of knowledge.

Althusser goes on to argue that “the ontological category of the present prevents any anticipation of historical time . . . any knowledge of the future” (RC, p. 95). At this point one may be surprised, since Althusser seems to be defending a theory that can predict the future, which brings to mind the idea that the past must somehow be pregnant with the future in a way that eliminates unforeseeability, an idea definitely at odds with his anti-determinist, anti-geneticist approach.<sup>182</sup> For

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<sup>182</sup> In his *The Politics of Time*, Osborne (2011) reads Althusser’s remark in this way: The inability of Althusser’s Marxism to think historical change is notorious . . . Althusser’s main objection to the temporality of Hegelianism is that its ontologization of the present ‘prevents any anticipation of historical time, any conscious anticipation of the future . . . any knowledge of the future’. Consequently, he argued, there can be for it no ‘science of politics’: ‘no Hegelian politics is possible strictly speaking’ (*Reading Capital*, p. 95; d. *For*

Althusser, one cannot anticipate the future on the basis of the present or the past, since “nothing guarantees that the existing ‘laws’ or ‘rules’ would with certainty prevail also in the future” (Lahtinen, p. 108). However, here, Althusser is not criticizing Hegelian theory for the absence of an ability to anticipate the future, rather he simply reiterates his critique of empiricism concerning the confusion of the relation between knowledge and being.

The present constitutes the absolute horizon of all knowing . . . However far philosophy goes it can never escape the bounds of this absolute horizon: even if it takes wing at dusk, it still belongs to the day, to the today, it is still merely the present reflecting on itself, reflecting on the presence of the concept with itself -- tomorrow is in essence forbidden it. (RC, p. 95)

The primacy of the present undermines not the ability to predict future, but the category of the future itself by abolishing historical time. Yet, as we have seen, for Althusser, not only the Hegelian category of the future, but also the category of the past is problematic. For Hegel, the present contains, as echoes, each historical formation it has superseded, so once a historical formation, e.g. Greece, “has embodied the determinate principle of a moment of the Idea,” it adds “it to that Self-Memory which is History” (FM, p. 103). The consecutive historical formation, e.g. Rome, will find in this history the promise of its own determinate principle, that is, “the logically consecutive moment of the Idea” (FM, p. 103). Hence, in claiming that in Hegel the modality of memory is just the inverse of the modality of anticipation (FM, p. 115), Althusser is pointing to the two components of Hegelian temporality: continuity and contemporaneity. In Hegel’s *Universal History*, which is the process

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*Marx*, p. 204). In fact, of course, there are at least two types of Hegelian politics: the notorious ‘left’ and ‘right’ Hegelianisms. Their error is actually the reverse of that attributed to Hegel by Althusser: namely, their over-anticipation of the future, closing it off from what we might call ‘unconscious anticipations’. In seeking *knowledge* of the future, Althusser was more of a Hegelian than he realized. (p. 208, n. 80)

of the externalization-alienation of an internal spiritual principle, the past can only be understood “as the “original” of a familiar present” (Schöttler, 1993, p. 91); it can never be apprehended in its alterity. As Althusser says in his dissertation regarding Hegel’s depiction of the relation of Christianity to Greek religion which it has superseded: “its past is no stranger to it” (SH, p. 48). Since time is understood as an uninterrupted sequence of “now”s which preserve in themselves the previous moment they have superseded and contain their future in germ, Hegelian *presentism*<sup>183</sup> seems to lack a true idea of past and future. The past and the future do not appear as authentic tenses, which are meaningful in themselves.<sup>184</sup> Hence, for Althusser, Hegelian model of time is ahistorical:

the model of a continuous and homogeneous time which takes the place of immediate existence, which is the place of the immediate existence of this continuing presence, can no longer be regarded as the time of history. (RC, p. 99)

For Althusser, the absence of future as an authentic tense in Hegel, also undermines the possibility of political practice. It is not possible to affect the course of history, the development of which can be constructed from the end of the process. Since the future in Hegel is the unfolding of a process, the outcomes of which can be retroactively projected into the past, nothing that happens can truly come

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<sup>183</sup> I use this term in order to describe the superiority of the present with respect to the past. See Jurist (1992, p. 176) and Chambers (2014, p. 206). Yet, Emmanuel Renault (2017) uses the notion of presentism in a very similar way to that of Althusser’s understanding of thinking in the conjuncture: Brechtian “intervening thought” (p. 19). Presentism, according to Renault, is rooted in “Hegelian definition of philosophy as a reflection on its own time” (p. 19). This idea is also perfectly compatible, Renault remarks, with Marx’s definition of communism as “the *actual* movement which abolishes the present state of things” or “Foucauldian definition of philosophy as an ontology of the present” (p. 20). Yet, for Althusser, both of these definitions are incompatible with a Hegelian conception of history.

<sup>184</sup> Malabou (2000) objects to this interpretation of Hegelian temporality, which claims Hegel to understand “the past and future . . . as either a present time which is just past, or a present which is to come (“a not yet now”)” (p. 198). She does not mention Althusser in her critique, but points to Heidegger as the source of such reading. For Heidegger, “Hegel stands out from the other philosophers because he takes to its logical conclusion [the] traditional privileging of the present” (p. 198).

unexpectedly. Hegelian dialectic converts every difference into identity (RC, p. 102), which in turn makes it impossible, according to Althusser, to account for an event or a fact of historical scope that can cause a radical change by breaking with the existing political or social structure or a theoretical or scientific problematic. In Hegelian totality “each seemingly distinct sphere of society, economy, politics, philosophy, religion, art, “fulfills itself by negating the alienated difference that it posed” (FM, p. 203). The differences, which are manifestations of the “simple internal principle alienated in them, do not exist for themselves (FM, p. 204). It is precisely this resolution of every concrete difference into an expression of the Spirit’s inner principle that, for Althusser, leads to an “ontologization of the present”<sup>185</sup> in Hegel and renders political and historical change impossible. In the face of this perfect unity, political intervention is devoid of influence.

This teleological approach is adopted by those Marxists, who, through a “materialist” reversal of Hegel’s theory of time, see communism as the “end of politics.”<sup>186</sup> One cannot, therefore, in this genetic approach, theoretically justify the possibility of politics:

The fact that there is no knowing the future prevents there being any science of politics, any knowing that deals with the future effects of present phenomena. That is why no Hegelian politics is possible strictly speaking, and in fact there has never been a Hegelian politician. (RC, p. 95)

Although, Althusser says, Hegel insists on the role of the great men - historical individuals such as Socrates, Luther, Caesar and Napoleon - he cannot but formulate their role as mere “paradoxical witnesses to an impossible conscious historical

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<sup>185</sup> I borrow this term from Osborne (2011, p. 208, n. 80).

<sup>186</sup> In contrast with the rejection of Hegelian teleology on the grounds that it inspires the interpretation of communism as the “end of politics,” Balibar (1993) says, a very important element of Hegelian thought, that is, “process without an Origin or an End” is endorsed by Althusser for the reason that “it appeared as a prerequisite to understanding communism as an infinite political struggle” (p.15, n.5).

forecast” (RC, p. 95). Hegel’s great man can only be a “child of his time,” an expression of the historical moment he is a part of, a partial realization of Spirit’s inner principle. In Hegel’s own words:

The great man of the age is the one who can put into words the will of his age, tell his age what its will is, and accomplish it. What he does is the heart and the essence of his age, he actualizes his age. (Hegel, 2008, p. 301)

#### 3.2.2.4 Althusser’s conception of time

Then, how are we to think temporality so that the past and the future are not reduced to the present and the present ceases to be a moment of a process that began and even came to an end long ago? How can these tenses preserve their authenticity? Is there a specific temporality of politics, history, philosophy, a temporality appropriate to each of these fields? In order to be able to answer these questions, or for these questions to be possible at all, Althusser claims, we need to resist the empiricist temptation (RC, p. 96). So, as I have tried to present, Althusser begins by identifying the theoretical presuppositions that underlie “a conception of history, which seem[s] to ‘stand by itself’,” which seems obvious, “but which is, in fact, organically linked to a precise conception of the social whole” (RC, p. 97). A new concept of historical time, then can only be based upon a new conception of social totality, which Althusser argues Marx to have provided.

##### 3.2.2.4.1 Theory of conjuncture and Marxist conception of time

If Marx does not adopt a readily given, Hegelian or empiricist, concept of temporality what is the concept of historical time peculiar to Marx’s theoretical problematic? If time is an effect of the social whole, then in what ways does Marx’s account of totality, hence his concept of time differ from Hegel’s? And, what are the political implications of this difference?

In his analysis of Lenin in “On the Materialist Dialectic,” Althusser employs a concept, which is of crucial importance to his reading of Marx. According to Althusser, Lenin’s text, which is a practical response that “a Marxist leader in 1917” gives to a very fundamental theoretical question, i.e. “what is political action?” presents a direct contrast to the Hegelian conception of “the concrete of a political situation as ‘the contingency, in which ‘necessity is realized’” (FM, p. 178). In a Hegelian framework, according to Althusser, the situation in Russia would be seen as one of those successive contingent presents in the time continuum each of which is an incarnation of the development of the concept (RC, p. 93). Accordingly, the politician can only be conceived as a “child of his time,” a *servant* that acts in accordance with the demands of a Universal history. The concept of conjuncture, on the other hand, is an attempt to understand the Russian case neither with reference to subjective decisions and intentions of a politician, nor as the unfolding of a single, determinant essence. So, here we have a concept, which both relates the theory of politics and the theory of history. We can pose the question that Althusser problematizes through the concept of conjuncture as follows: How can we formulate the *present*, if not as “an instant absorbed in a process which began long before it and which will supersede it in the realization of its own future” (FM, p. 179), but as a present that allows political intervention? Or, to put it briefly, what is the form of temporality that belongs to the conjuncture, what is the temporality of the present moment?<sup>187</sup>

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<sup>187</sup> Althusser uses conjuncture and present moment interchangeably: “Lenin’s political texts (analyses of the situation and its variations, decisions taken and analyses of their effects, etc.) give us, with dazzling insistence, in the practical state, a theoretical concept of capital importance: the concept of the ‘present moment’ or ‘conjuncture’” (PSPS, p. 64). Again, the “current situation,” which is another name for conjuncture, is the standard translation of the French “*moment actuel*.” See also Morfino (2014, p. 160), Osborne (2011, p. 28).

For Althusser, the question of the temporality of the present is precisely the question of the existence of the social whole in a specific situation (FM, p. 207). This relates to two dimensions of a Marxist whole. On the one hand, Marx views an existing society or a particular conjuncture as a historical result and, in this respect, is in line with Hegel, who conceives a result as “inseparable from its genesis, to the point where it is necessary to conceive it as ‘the result of its becoming’” (RC, p. 64). This constitutes the basis of the historicist interpretations of Marx (RC, p. 56-7). However, Althusser says, though a society is definitely a historical result, a “theory of the *genesis* [emphasis added] of this result” (RC, p. 65) does not explain how this result “exists as a society, and not as a heap of sand, an ant-hill, a workshop or a mere collection of men” (RC, p. 65). Althusser introduces a new term in order to capture this second dimension, which is often neglected by Marx’s interpreters: “the society effect.”

Society effect, just like its relative “knowledge effect,” is an anti-empiricist concept in that it views history as a structure that is accessible not as a thing-in-itself, but only through its effects. Here, the relation between the cause and the effect is such that the cause only exists in and through its effects. This notion is therefore congruent with Spinozist conception of causality, which takes God to be *immanent* in its effects (RC, p. 189). Spinoza rejects the notion of a privileged first cause outside the order of causation; a cause which remains separate from its effects. Althusser, who renounces to understand society as a “transitive-analytical *effect*” that “follows” its elements or as a “transcendent-expressive *cause*” that “pre-exists” its elements (Fourtounis, 2013, p. 44), relies on Spinoza’s notion of “immanent” causality. This idea of causality resonates with Althusser’s idea of “the ever-pregiveness,” which, as we have seen, is an attempt to suspend the genetic demand in favor of thinking the

society as a structured complex unity. This means that society is not a mere combination of pre-existing elements, but rather these elements are always-already dependent upon the historical articulation of the social formation. Accordingly, society, “as an immanent cause . . . cannot be thought of as determined and fixed independently of its actualisations . . . [it] is always-already actualised” (Fourtounis, 2013, p. 45). This is how Althusser thinks the “present moment” as a conjuncture, as a specific *conjuncture* of overdetermined relations, of multiple lines of causality; having already taken place, having already taken hold as such, it points back to its prior causes, of which it is the result.

For Althusser, Marx’s theory of history lies in this shift of theoretical focus from the question of the “genesis” to the “body” of a social formation. In *Capital*, Althusser claims, Marx “focus[es] his theoretical attention on the task of explaining . . . the mechanism producing the ‘society effect’ peculiar to the capitalist mode of production” (RC, p. 65-6). So, the question of historical transition, that is, how a particular historical situation/society/concept/theory originated and developed into what it is, becomes secondary to the question of how the previously independent elements can function as this particular unity (RC, p. 64). With this move, Althusser dethrones the capital Marxist problem of the historical succession of the modes of production, which risks being simply a version of the problematic of periodization. He replaces it with the problem of “Gliederung,” “the articulated, hierarchized, systematic combination” of the elements that form a particular society (RC, p. 65). He bases his argument on a passage in *Grundrisse*, in which Marx clearly expresses his project to be more than a simple historicization of political economy:

It is not a matter of the connexion established historically between the economic relations in the succession of different forms of society. Still less of

their order of succession ‘in the Idea’ (Proudhon) . . . but of their articulated-hierarchy (*Gliederung*) within modern bourgeois society (*Grundrisse*, p. 28).

So, Marx’s object of inquiry is the *Gliederung*, that is, the mechanism which makes a specific result of history’s production, say capitalist society, function as a society. In this sense, Althusser may be said to repeat the same gesture that he had made concerning the interpretation of Marx’s texts in “On the Young Marx,” which suggests that Marx’s texts should be taken in their particular *unity*, rather than comparing the *elements* that constitute it, since it is not the “isolated concept”’s but the *system* of their interdependence, that is, the *problematic* of the text that enables to see these texts not as the progressive materialization of Marx’s thought, but in their *contingency*.

However, for some commentators, Althusser’s formulation of Marx’s break from Hegelian conception of history in this way is a clear sign of his structuralism and his sacrificing of history by privileging structure.<sup>188</sup> Althusser objects to this critique in 1967:

I do not think that one loses history in this business. One certainly does lose genesis, but that is a good loss. One also loses all the things that are obvious for historical empiricism, but that is an excellent loss. One gains, quite simply, the possibility of understanding History. (HC, p. 297)

This paragraph belongs to a text that Althusser has written in the same year with “On Feuerbach,” which, as I have previously presented, involves a detailed account of how the “empiricist” concepts of origin, mediation and genesis operate, a theme already outlined in *Reading Capital*. Here, in “The Humanist Controversy” as well Althusser continues to deal with these themes, this time elaborating upon what he has

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<sup>188</sup> Young (2004) argues that the critique of the neglect, or dismissal of history is closely related with the debate on humanism in the British context (p. 57). That Althusser’s critique of historicism is in no way a repudiation of history is underlined by many Althusser scholars. Rather, as Chambers (2014) puts it, it is “an intervention against the humanist misunderstanding of history” (p. 216).

briefly referred to in *Reading Capital*, that is, Marx's remark that "the anatomy of man is the key to the anatomy of the ape" (Marx, *Grundrisse*, p. 105 cited in RC, p. 64, 125 and in HC, p. 295). A geneticist interpretation of the relation between man and the ape, would "see in man," Althusser says, "the development of what is *in embryo* in the ape - of what was already, even in the ape's day, the Man" (HC, p. 295). The history of man is this eventual realization of what is in embryo in the ape. Yet, Marx conceives the relation between the past and the present in a totally different way, which can only be understood, Althusser claims, when it is interpreted in "a non-historicist, and therefore non-geneticist" way (HC, p. 295). According to Althusser, by a reversal of historical sequence, in which the higher forms of life (man) or society (bourgeois economy) become the key to the lower forms (ape or feudal economy), Marx abstains from thinking by recourse to a simple, primitive original that realizes itself. He defends

that knowledge only ever sets out from a *result*, and that the knowledge of the result (the knowledge of the mechanisms of capitalist society), to the extent that it plainly has to begin as the knowledge of a result, and a highly complex one, provides, for this reason, the keys needed to acquire knowledge of other, earlier, 'simpler' results (pre-capitalist societies). (HC, p. 295)

With this move, Marx distinguishes the order of history from the order of knowledge. From the viewpoint of the order of history, capitalist mode of production is a result, which means that "like any result, it is the result of a *historical process*" (HC, p. 296). The problem begins when the mediation, and in the case of history "retroaction," that "knowledge" inevitably performs is ignored and capitalism is understood as the result *of a process* in the form "of a *genesis* that can be traced back to the feudal mode of production as if to its origin, its 'in-itself', its 'embryonic form'" (HC, p. 296). Althusser relates Marx's problematization of the relation

between the ape and the man with the mechanism of retroaction articulated by Freud and Canguilhem in his memoir *The Future Lasts Forever* written in 1985:

I came across the following striking phrase: The anatomy of the ape does not explain that of man, rather human anatomy contains a key to the anatomy of the ape.' This remark is astonishing for two reasons: first, it precludes in advance any teleological interpretation of an evolutionist conception of history. In the second place, it literally anticipates, though clearly in different circumstances, Freud's theory of deferred action [*après coup*] whereby the significance of an earlier affect is recognised only in and via a subsequent one which simultaneously establishes its existence in retrospect and lends it meaning. I later came across the same idea in Canguilhem's powerful critique of the *precursor*. (*Future*, p. 208)

For Marx, capitalism is not the "natural" outcome of an immanent dialectical development from one production process to another, more advanced one. It is a *Gliederung*, a combination of various elements, which are, not in themselves, capitalist, but function as such *after* the irruption of the capitalist society. I had earlier pointed to the concept of labor, the meaning of which can only appear with the development of capitalist forms of production, that is, when it is conceived as something abstractable (FM, p. 196).

For Althusser, what is at stake here is not a simple contrast between different understandings of history, but a contrast between "the good old religion of genesis" and the science of history, which rejects understanding the relation between things in terms of identity, filiation, or alienation. Hence, only a non-geneticist approach can explain "why so many examples of social formations governed by the feudal mode of production failed to 'give birth' to the capitalist mode of production" (HC, p. 296). Only a historical, that is, scientific approach can look at this process not as the eventual development of an originary principle, but in terms of its "it might not have been." Once the element of contingency in the "birth" of a new social-formation, in the combination of the various elements that leads to the emergence of a particular

society is forgotten, once the result is taken to indicate a germ found already within the previous form of society, we are in the ideological domain of genesis. For the science of history, capitalism is a result

of the process of an *encounter* of several distinct, definite, indispensable elements, engendered in the previous historical process by different *genealogies* that are independent of other and can, moreover, be traced back to several possible ‘origins’: accumulation of money capital, ‘free’ labour-power, technical inventions, and so forth . . . it is the result of a complex process that produces, at a given moment, the *encounter* of a number of elements susceptible of [*propre à*] constituting it in their very encounter. (HC, p. 296)

So, as Althusser clearly puts in his account of the emergence of a science from the ideology that constitutes its “prehistory,” capitalism emerges as the “surprise” and not as the “goal” of its prehistory (RC, p. 45). Scientific knowledge does not advance cumulatively or progressively. Rather, this process, as in the case of all historical processes, involves an element of discontinuity and unpredictability, an element of surprise. However, “tracking [things] back through time,” this “succession” can be mistakenly taken for “a *filiation*,” as if the former stage carries “‘potentially’ ‘in embryo’, or ‘in itself’ the successive stage” (HC, p. 296). Yet, this is only a “retrospective illusion,” which takes the order of knowledge for the order of history. By revealing the nature of this illusion, he claims to have done not with “history,” but with “genesis,” which in fact constitutes an ahistorical relation between the beginning and the end (HC, p. 297). And, if we can talk about Althusser’s structuralism, it does not lie in the denial of history, but in privileging the structure of the whole over temporal sequence (RC, p. 98).

So, if we go back to where we started, that is, to the question of the temporality of the present that would make possible the political intervention, Althusser’s preference for the term “society effect,” rather than “society” becomes

more meaningful. The former underlines all the contingencies involved in the emergence of a specific whole. The concept of conjuncture, which is Althusser's way of problematizing the temporality of the present moment, thus ultimately relates to his theorization of the social whole. As Morfino (2005) puts it, conjuncture "is an encounter that has its 'ground' in the double abyss of not having had to take place and of not having to be any longer" (par. 52). This is the reason why Marx proposes to begin with the man rather than the ape, neither of which he treats as "the result of a *genesis*, that is, of a filiation that begins with a Subject who is identified with the origin, and *whose authentic origin is guaranteed*" (HC, p. 297). Unlike genesis, the idea of *Gliederung*, that is, the whole taken as an articulated hierarchy, allows for making sense of the contingency of the combination of the elements, hence the possibility of political intervention, which is one of the many instances that make up a situation. So, with the idea of *Gliederung*, Althusser seeks to think the transformation of a social formation through a logic that is premised "upon the internal differentiation of the structure, or its non-homogeneity" (Pippa, p. 22). This is actually what he has attempted to do with the notion of the structure in dominance that allows for an interplay between different spheres. It is therefore, important to remember the role of "the principle of the determination 'in the last instance'," which "fixes" the difference of the other instances, their relative independence and their effectivity on the economic instance "in the unity of a conjuncture" (RC, p. 99). The society is constituted through

a certain type of complexity, the unity of a structured whole containing what can be called levels or instances which are distinct and 'relatively autonomous', and coexist within this complex structural unity, articulated with one another according to specific determinations, fixed in the last instance by the level or instance of the economy. (RC, p. 97)

But, how the internal differentiation of the structure can lead to a social transformation, and the role that the structure in dominance plays in this transformation are still left unexplained. So, let us look at how Althusser conceives the relation between these various levels so as to answer the question of how historical transition, if not to be thought in geneticist terms, is possible.

#### 3.2.2.4.2 The Marxist whole and multiple times

The Marxist whole, which can be thought, according to Althusser, with reference to the figure of a topography rather than a circle (ESC, p. 176), “is governed by the order of a dominant structure which introduces a specific order into the articulation (*Gliederung*) of the limbs and their relations” (RC, p. 98). Any social formation is “dominated by one form of production” and it is this specific instance that “forces the unity of any conjuncture” (Young, p. 93). However, as Althusser has discussed in detail in *For Marx*, the economic instance is never active in the pure state. The hierarchy is not a static one and the degree of effectivity among different spheres changes. This particular structure of the Marxist whole makes it “[im]possible to think the process of the development of the different levels of the whole in the same historical time” (RC, p. 99). Each level has “a peculiar time, relatively autonomous and hence relatively independent, even in its dependence, of the ‘times’ of the other levels” (RC, p. 99): time of the forces of production, of the relations of production, of politics, of philosophy, of religion, of science, of aesthetics. Such a conception of totality is completely alien to the idea of supersession and to the temporal continuity and contemporaneity that this idea presumes. Marxist whole is, therefore, resistant to the idea of an “essential section”; there is no singular essence that acts as “the present” of all levels. Instead of a general history, there is a multiplicity of histories that are linked to the existence of a determinate social formation, which is itself

“always a constellation of multiple contradictions, whose ultimate outcome cannot be predicted” (Resch, 1992, p. 38). The history of a social formation is an “intertwining of the different times,” that is, the complex unity of the “‘dislocation’ (décalage) and torsion of the different temporalities produced by the different levels of the structure” (RC, p. 104). So, even in the case of a major transformation (at a specific level), a break valid for one level may not correspond to anything similar in other levels as each of them “live(s) in different times and know(s) other breaks, other rhythms and other punctuations” (RC, p. 104).

Althusser is also wary of the pluralist and hyperempiricist tones the idea of a multiplicity of times co-existing in the present may imply. He repeats time and again that he is not talking about a simple “empirical enumeration of different times.”<sup>189</sup>

the specificity of each of these times and of each of these histories- in other words, their relative autonomy and independence-is based on a certain type of articulation in the whole, and therefore on a certain type of dependence with respect to the whole . . . The specificity of these times and histories is therefore differential, since it is based on the differential relations between the different levels within the whole: the mode and degree of independence of each time and history is therefore necessarily determined by the mode and degree of dependence of each level within the set of articulations of the whole. (RC, p. 100)

So, for Althusser, it is crucial that different times be “relat[ed] . . . to the concept of their difference” (RC, p. 100), to the “structure in dominance”; this is what makes them *differential* and not merely multiple. Again, from the idea of different times, Althusser warns, one may mistakenly derive the idea that there can be a single base time to which different temporalities may be related. In this case, however, the

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<sup>189</sup> Pointing to the originality of Althusser’s conception of historical time, Jameson (2002) says that the “post-structural celebration of discontinuity and heterogeneity is . . . only an initial moment in Althusserian exegesis, which then requires the fragments, the incommensurable levels, the heterogeneous impulses, of the text to be once again related, but in the mode of structural difference and determinate contradiction” (p. 56).

plurality of rhythms would only be apparent. The idea of a reference time, which is precisely the basis of such categories as “backwardness,” “forwardness,” “survivals” or “uneven development,” presupposes that different temporalities may be thought as discontinuities within a continuity (RC, p. 106). As Balibar (2017) says, when the multiplicity of times is conceived as “a phenomenological dimension of the processes taking place within” a social or historical totality, then this totality is presupposed to be “a *given* structure . . . an *invariant* of subsequent *variations*” (p. 105). Therefore, according to Althusser, a true refusal of the Hegelian model of expressive totality requires the complete rejection of evaluating the existence of multiplicity of times in a social whole as “deviations,” the ultimate meaning of which can be understood by measuring their dislocation/displacement (*décalage*) against one standard timeline. With the concept of differential time, which is based on Marx’s definition of totality as an organic hierarchized whole Althusser aims to “think these differences in rhythm and punctuation in their foundation, in the type of articulation, displacement and torsion which harmonizes these different times with one another” (RC, p. 100).

The temporality of the present can therefore be conceived neither with reference to contemporaneity, nor to simple multiplicity of times<sup>190</sup>; it should be understood in its singularity, that is, as conjuncture. “The present understood as conjuncture” (Montag, 2014, p. 61) is neither reducible to its past nor to the future; it can no longer be taken as “a temporary condition,” which bears the internalized

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<sup>190</sup> These two conceptions of time refer to three different schools: Hegelian Marxism, structuralism and Annales School. Althusser objects to Hegelian Marxism and the structuralism of Levi Strauss on the grounds that they presuppose a Hegelian conception of historical time, which is both continuous and homogeneous. So, neither historicism (the diachronic) nor structuralism (the synchronic) does away with an expressive conception of totality. Althusser criticizes Annales School for while asserting the multiplicity of times, they measure their difference by referring to a continuous and homogeneous time. See Morfino (2014, p. 160) for a discussion of multiplicity of times.

memory of the past within itself and “will yield its place to a time that is full” (Morfino, 2014, p. 156). Therefore, Balibar (2017) suggests to read the heterogeneity of times as “the only reality of the ‘totality’ itself” (p. 105). In Balibar’s view, such an understanding of totality would, then, be to defend

that the only ‘objects’ for theory are the *conjunctures themselves*, that there is no other use of the category ‘structure’ than forming a concept of the intrinsic complexity of a conjuncture . . . where some tendencies are prevalent over others, and some forces are dominant in a relationship that could become reversed (p. 105).

This is also how the notion of “overdetermination” gains a “quasi-transcendental” character: it is what “expresses the conjunctural character and ‘mutability’ of every existing structure” (p. 105). Hence, Balibar reads “overdetermination” as a demand for rethinking the relationship between transcendentality and empiricity, which Althusser had attempted at the beginning of his career, in order to rule out the possibility of any necessity which is not contingent.

#### 3.2.2.4.3 Invisible time: Knowledge as production

The continuous rhythm of the time of everyday practices, the time of life, of clocks constitutes an ideological impediment to “see” the multiple times of a social structure. To be able to “see,” Althusser argues in perfect consistency with his defense of the philosophies of the concept, we need to break with the empiricist framework; we need “*a concept of time that goes beyond experience*” (Chambers, 2014 p. 152). Althusser claims that besides a non-linear concept of time *Capital* also contains within it a crucial concept of “invisible times”<sup>191</sup> (RC, p. 100). This concept,

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<sup>191</sup> Chambers (2014) argues that Althusser’s concept of invisible times is a harbinger of “current concepts like ‘untimeliness’ as drawn from Derrida’s work, or ‘time as becoming’ as developed out of Bergson’s work” and that Althusser’s arguments “pre-date these works by a number of decades” (p. 209). Chambers says, “Althusser suggests not just the occasional outbreak of untimeliness within history (not just a rupture), but the very untimeliness of history itself” (p. 220, n.11). As I remarked

which proves central to Althusser's theory of time, demonstrates why time is only accessible as a concept, why we need a concept of time that goes beyond experience, a concept that breaks with the empiricist-humanist framework. "Invisible time," which is not an object of experience, but must be constructed as a concept, perfectly suits this purpose. In other words, in the concept of invisible time one can see the gist of Althusser's argument against empiricism/phenomenology and precisely what he seeks to establish by distinguishing the object of knowledge and the real object.

In order to explain the notion of invisible time, Althusser draws an analogy with Freud's concept of the unconscious:

We have known, since Freud, that the time of the unconscious cannot be confused with the time of biography. On the contrary, the concept of the time of the unconscious must be constructed in order to obtain an understanding of certain biographical traits. (RC, p. 103)

The temporality of the unconscious is "only accessible *in its concept*" (RC, p. 101).

This is because when one thinks within the time of biography, there is no such definitive moment at which you can point as "the birth" of the unconscious. The unconscious is not visible within the time of biography. Only after Freud's foundation of a *science* the object of which is "the unconscious," only after its construction, identification as such, we can talk about the time of the unconscious; not before.

Again, Althusser is highly appreciative of Foucault's studies (RC, p. 16, 26, 45, 103). For Althusser, Foucault's approach to history has made visible "the distance between the elegant sequences of the official chronicle, in which a

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earlier, October revolution is an exceptional situation in clearly pointing us the problems of interpreting it as a deviation. But I also want to remind that, for Althusser, the revolution is only a "revealing" example and all other ordinary moments are no less exceptional than this privileged moment.

discipline or a society merely reflect its good conscience . . . and the absolutely unexpected temporality that constitutes the essence of the process of constitution and development of those cultural formations” (RC, p. 103).<sup>192</sup> Just as in the case of the unconscious, it is with Foucault’s construction of the concept of the history of the clinical medicine, of madness, of punishment that these instances are made visible. Althusser provides several other examples of invisible time: the time of the capitalist economic production, the repressed Spinozism of the history of philosophy, etc. Concerning this last example, Althusser claims that the visible sequence of works and authors that we call the history of philosophy conceals, in its obviousness, the philosophical events “which cause real mutations in the existing philosophical structural relations” (RC, p. 102). As Read (2005) puts it, the history of philosophy in its traditional sense, which is dominated by the problem of chronology,

cannot address . . . the conditions of philosophy (how and why a given philosophical position emerges at a particular juncture in time) and its effects (how and why it acts on different practices, on political ideologies, on morality etc.). (para. 8)

In order to *see* what others hide, that is, the “invisible” within the visible field of the chronological narrative, in which the philosophers are lined one after the other, it is necessary “to construct *the concept* [emphasis added] of the history of philosophy” (RC, p. 101). For Althusser, the case of Spinoza provides a very good example to this situation. Spinoza’s novelty cannot be made sense within a history of philosophy which is defined by “the categories of empiricism” (RC, p. 38). The import of

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<sup>192</sup> Foucault’s response to his critics, who accuse him for not being a proper philosopher and historian fits well with Althusser’s praise of Foucault on this point:

There is a sort of myth of History for philosophers . . . a kind of great and vast continuity where the liberty of individuals and economic or social determinations are all tangled up together . . . This philosophical myth which I am accused of killing, well, I am delighted if I have killed it, because it is precisely that myth I wanted to kill, not history in general. You can’t kill history, but as for killing History for philosophers—absolutely—I certainly want to kill it. (Foucault cited in Aldea & Allen, p. 7, n.12)

Spinoza's theory of causality, which breaks free from both the mechanistic and emanationist theories of causality, hence a revolution, an "event" in the field of philosophy, can only be made sense through a philosopher that is almost chronologically irrelevant to him: Marx (RC, p. 102, 187, 189). Althusser's broad definition of empiricism and his peculiar approach to materialism and idealism as unstable positions/currents that cut across philosophers that do not even seem to fight in the same front is therefore part of his efforts to dispense with the "immediately legible" history of philosophy.

The concept of invisible time relates to the problem of knowledge. The specific practice of knowledge production is both "*founded on and articulated to* [emphasis added] the existing economic, political and ideological practices, which directly or indirectly provide it with the essentials of its 'raw materials'" (RC, p. 41). Hence, *seeing*, in this context, is always conditioned upon/limited/possible within the horizon of this definite theoretical structure. I am aware that using a "spatial metaphor," such as horizon, which Althusser himself employs together with others such as field or terrain risks thinking the invisible of a visible field as something "outside and foreign to the visible defined by that field" (RC, p. 26). So, it is important to keep Althusser's warning that

[t]he invisible is defined by the visible as its invisible, its forbidden vision: the invisible is not therefore simply what is outside the visible (to return to the spatial metaphor), the outer darkness of exclusion -- but the inner darkness of exclusion, inside the visible itself because defined by its structure. (RC, p. 26)

To take this risk once more, the new problematic introduced by Marx can be said to lead to a "change of terrain" that produces a radical transformation in the gaze, not in terms of a change in "view-points," which would be implied by a subjectivist account of "mental decision," but in terms of a structural mutation that challenges the

idealist myth of a “constitutive subject.” Consequently, Marx’s revolution was not a mental shift; Marx was able to see the lacunae in the fullness of the discourse of the political economists, that is, the “surplus value,” not because he had “an acute or attentive gaze,” but “an informed gaze, a new gaze, itself produced by a reflection of the ‘change of terrain’ on the exercise of vision” (RC, p. 27). Again, Althusser thinks within the same lines with Cavaillès (1970), who says concerning scientific development:

What comes after is more than what existed before, not because it contains it or even because it prolongs it but because it departs from it and carries in its content the mark of its superiority, unique every time with more consciousness in it -and *not the same consciousness* [emphasis added]. (p. 409)

So, Marx could “see,” or better, it was “possible to apply to the old invisible the informed gaze that will make that invisible visible,” since he has “already, even partly unwittingly, ha[s] been installed in this new terrain” (RC, p. 28). Seeing, in this new framework, ceases to be “the act of an individual subject,” and becomes the act of the structural conditions within which they think/produce theory. Accordingly, the invisible ceases to be “a function of a subject’s sighting” and becomes “the theoretical problematic’s non-vision of its non-objects”; it becomes “the darkness, the blinded eye of the theoretical problematic’s self-reflection when it scans its non-objects, its non-problems without seeing them, in order not to look at them” (RC, p. 26). What makes certain problems and objects invisible is their non-inclusion to the theoretical field. The invisible is part of the visible, part of reality itself, “a necessary effect of the structure of the visible field” (RC, p. 20). The invisible has a “fleeting presence” in that even if it occurs, it “goes unperceived” (RC, p. 26). So, when knowledge is reduced to “an act of vision,” what is missed is the fact that “the seeing [*la vue*] of what one sees . . . depends on the *apparatus* of theoretical vision” (HC, p.

277), an apparatus, which is constantly shaped and reshaped by new theories and practices. This takes us to the problem of novelty, to the problem of change.

### 3.3 Concluding remarks: The problem of change

In “The Historical Task of Marxist Philosophy” (1967),<sup>193</sup> where Althusser presents a summary view of his ideas on theory and practice relation, philosophy, science and politics, he defines historicism as “one of the most dangerous forms of empiricism” (HC, p. 186). The danger it poses is that by claiming “to know the nature of history directly, immediately, without first producing the theoretical concepts indispensable to acquiring knowledge of it,” it hides Marx’s discovery, that is, the “new theoretical concepts with which to think the reality of what we call, and experience as, ‘history’” (HC, p. 186). This is why it is particularly important to defend against historicist readings of Marx that “history features in *Capital* as an object of theory, not as a real object, as an ‘abstract’ (conceptual) object and not as a real-concrete object” (RC, p. 116).

As Althusser puts in “The Humanist Controversy” (1967), the real problem with empiricism is its inability to explain real change, that is, “the appearance of *new objects not seen previously*” (HC, p. 276). Without a distinction between thought and the real, between “the *theoretical reality* of theoretical problems” and “the *realities* that exist independently of the process of knowledge, and pertain to the *real process*,” Althusser claims, it is not possible to account for “the transformation in the *way problems are posed*, and the transformation of the objects of knowledge within the process of knowledge” (HC, p. 276). Only within an anti-empiricist framework, it

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<sup>193</sup> For an exciting narrative of the events that surrounds this text, which was written on demand by the editor of a Soviet academic journal for the fiftieth anniversary of October Revolution, see Goshgarian’s notes in HC (p. 155-9).

becomes possible to say that Marx produced *new* concepts. In this context, surplus-value cannot be said to exist in the form of a direct experience of relations of production, which Marx, outrivaling his predecessors in his capacity to see, could abstract from the phenomenal, empirical facts of his time. The seeing of this new object that was not previously seen is connected with the *apparatus* of theoretical vision.

Now, it might seem very paradoxical to state that we need a theory of novelty, which Marx has presented to us “partly unwittingly,” in order to make sense of Marx’s novelty. This is very much like what Foucault (1998) says concerning the difficulty of writing a genealogy of history without being tempted by what has so far shaped the historical mode of thinking, yet still within it. He defines this problem as “chang[ing] roles on the same stage” (p. 384). Althusser himself has also pointed to this difficulty: “a philosophical reading of *Capital* is only possible as the application of that which is the very object of our investigation, Marxist philosophy” (RC, p. 34). This is why Althusser needs to make a long detour through an analysis of empiricism in order to find, within the continuity of this discourse “as lightly borne by” us - perhaps not by Marx - “as the inhabitants of this planet bear the weight of the enormous layer of air that crushes” us (RC, p. 105), the cracks that empiricism very professionally plasters.

Althusser, we have seen, makes two critical interventions to empiricism. First, he criticizes “the mirror myths of immediate vision and reading” (RC, p. 24) and secondly the identification of the object of knowledge with the real object. Marx’s critique unleashes “the latent dogmatic empiricism” inherent in Hegel’s absolute idealism of history: the confusion of the real object with the object of

knowledge.<sup>194</sup> Marx, on the other hand, distinguishes between the world, “concrete, living whole” and “the conceptual world” (RC, p. 41). For Althusser, this is parallel with the Spinozist principle that dictates not to confuse the two objects: “the idea of the circle, which is the object of knowledge” and “the circle, which is the real object” (RC, p. 40).

If we go back to the discussion that Althusser has made in the beginning of his career, we need to ask how this separation between the concrete and the conceptual differs from Kant’s distinction between the real and thought and whether it implies “an idealism of consciousness.” The difference lies in Marx’s conception of this thought-concrete not as a mental representation, as “an essence opposed to the material world,” but as defined by a definite system of theoretical production, which “assigns any given thinking subject (individual) its place and function in the production of knowledges” (RC, p. 41-2). The notion of ‘thought’ is not “a faculty of a transcendental subject or absolute consciousness, . . . a psychological subject,” but rather corresponds to “a peculiar real system” – it is “real” in that it is “historically constituted”- which is “established on and articulated to the real world of a given historical society” (RC, p. 42). Since “the roles and functions of the ‘thought’ of particular individuals” are defined by this “determinate reality,” “human individuals are its agents” in that they “can only ‘think’ the ‘problems’ already actually or potentially posed” (RC, p. 42). Against this, Althusser puts the empiricist/religious “temptation” to delve into the real “origins” of a knowledge-effect. The case that Althusser chooses to exemplify this is highly reminiscent of Cavallès’s critique of

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<sup>194</sup> Althusser argues Marx to have addressed this problem in his *1857 Introduction*:

Hegel fell into the illusion of conceiving the real (das Reale) as the result of thought itself within itself deepening itself within itself and moving itself from within itself whereas the method that allows one to rise from the abstract to the concrete is merely the mode (die Art) of thought which appropriates the concrete and reproduces (reproduzieren) it as a spiritual concrete (geistig Konkretes)’ (*Grundrisse* cited in RC, p. 40-1)

the phenomenological account of the history of mathematics, which Althusser, unsurprisingly, does not mention<sup>195</sup>:

in mathematics it is tempting to think the knowledge effect of such and such an especially abstract formula as the extremely purified and formalized echo of such and such a reality, whether it is concrete space or the first concrete manipulations and operations of human practice. We can readily admit that at a certain moment a ‘dislocation’ (décalage) intervenes between the concrete practice of the land-surveyor and Pythagorean and Euclidean abstraction, but we can think this dislocation as a transfer (décollage), a retracing (décalque) of the concrete forms and gestures of an earlier practice in the element of ‘ideality’. (RC, p. 62)

I had previously pointed to this mechanism of the “reactivation” of an “original act.” On this account, Althusser says, “the immense space” between the modern theories of mathematics and the practices of the ancient land-surveyor is to be filled, by assuming “a continuity of meaning” that would link the end to its origin. So, “the knowledge effect of modern mathematical objects” is referred “to an original meaning effect which is an integral part of an original real object, a concrete practice, original concrete gestures” (RC, p. 62). Althusser would like to replace this approach which draws its sustenance from the idea of “an original unity undivided between subject and object, between the real and its knowledge . . . from a good genesis” (RC, p. 63) with a new one that challenges “the non-problematicity,” hence the invisibility of the problem of the relation between an object and its knowledge (FM, p. 186). According to Althusser, this structure finds support from “repetition,” from “the age-old ‘obviousness’ which repetition, not only the repetition of a false answer, but above all that of a false question, has produced in people’s minds” (RC, p. 53).

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<sup>195</sup> Cavallès (1970) also problematizes the idea of an original ground on the same terms with Althusser. He begins by quoting Husserl:

“Before the geometry of ideal objects came the practical art of land measurement . . . Its pre-geometrical results are a foundation of meaning for geometry.” But in what way? Is this not an arbitrary decree which adapts the origin of consciousness to a temporal pseudo-debut which appears to us as such only by virtue of the sequel as well as by approximation? (p. 408-9)

Althusser takes the “spontaneous persistence” of the use of the concept of genesis and the conceptual society to which it relates as a “symptom” that deserves a theoretical effort to reconstruct the assumptions leading to it and to make perceptible the lacunae that these concepts fill. This approach differs from a hermeneutic or a phenomenological analysis with their concern to delve into the “reasons” or “origins” of such a symptom, which is precisely the methodology that Althusser objects to: to presuppose a hidden essence and see every phenomenon in terms of its expressive or specular relation to this essence (HC, p. 124-5). For Althusser, understanding things in terms of their filiation to an essential principle, however, is incapable of understanding real change and novelty.

Althusser elaborates upon the question of novelty in his letter to Diatkine in relation to the distinction he makes between birth and irruption. In both ways, he says, we are referred to a “system” of concepts, to a “model,” to an “experience,” to a “conceptual society,” in which these concepts operate, in which their *meaning* is constituted (WOP, p. 54, 55). Now of these two concepts, the former refers to an origin, whereas the latter relates to the sudden appearance of something new. The “experience” producing the conceptual society of genesis is “that of *generation*, whether it be that of the child becoming an adult, the seed becoming a vegetal or living being, the acorn becoming an oak, and so on” (WOP, p. 55). In the “experience” and “empirical observation” of *generation*

one *sees* what was only a seed or an origin develop and become a plant, an animal, or a man, and one can follow the process of engendering and growth in all its phases, *without any visible interruption*. (WOP, p. 56)

In generation, “the continuity of the process of knowledge” is naturally founded upon “the continuity of the process of engendering and development” (WOP, p. 56). The concept of genesis provides this continuity-effect; a “*guarantee-effect*,” that is,

“the assurance that one is dealing with the *same* individual, the *same* lineage, whose transformations can be followed step by step” (HC, p. 293). In the case of religion this subject is God, but geneticist ideology is active not only in religious or idealist thought, but also in materialisms insofar as they are tempted by the assurance that “one is always dealing, in everything that happens, with one and the same Subject” (HC, p. 293), be it God, Idea, praxis of matter. As in the case of the Hegelian conception of history, this process even allows for “mutations” and “discontinuities,” yet always “on the *absolute condition* that one is able to designate those mutations and discontinuities in the development of a previously *identified* selfsame individual that is thus identifiable as the constant support of those or *its* mutations and discontinuities” (WOP, p. 56). So, Althusser underlines, even dialecticians are not “spontaneously” exempt from the ideology of genesis.

Concerning the “source” of the logic of genesis, Althusser speculates that it is born out of the difficulty to conceive that absolutely nothing exists prior to the “irruption” of a phenomenon. This difficulty leads us to conceive the irruption in “the form of a *birth*”:

I am thinking in particular of the fantasy according to which each person has a hard time imagining that he did not exist *prior to* his own birth, in other words, that he has not for all eternity been endowed with the *right* to be born, the right to his own existence, to his own birth; the terror of the counterfantasy “and what if it weren’t I who was born?” or “what would become of *me* if I hadn’t been born, but if another had been *born in my place*?” bears sufficient witness to this.<sup>196</sup> (WOP, p. 58)

In like manner, with hindsight, we tend to interpret history as an uninterrupted sequence of events that are all related to one another and as if it was meant to be in

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<sup>196</sup> Althusser’s passage surely has an auto-biographical tone, but my comment may be born out of an automatism, which, having read in his autobiography that Althusser is named after his mother’s late and always mourned for fiancé, *Louis*, Althusser’s uncle, dominates my view of Althusser.

this way and not in any other. The irruption of a phenomenon that is radically new in relation to everything that has preceded its own irruption is impossible from this perspective. Or better, logic of genesis cannot but understand the irruption of a new phenomenon in terms other than birth. Yet, there is an important paradox here. If we want to understand the irruption of a new phenomenon from the perspective of generation, then we need to explain how something is born from what is not it, that is, how not-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 *is not* A, nor is it its prefiguration, germ, draft, promise, etc. (all expressions that are but *tendentious* metaphors, by which I mean metaphors *tending* to enforce the belief that A can be born only from A, just as a *little man* is born of a *man*); it is at the same time to accept that the mechanism through which A irrupts from other than A is not the mechanism of engendering or the development of the germ or seed. (WOP, p. 59)

It is important to note that Althusser does not defend that the irruption of a new phenomenon is inexplicable. As he argues with reference to the history of social formations, the problem of explanation does not become redundant whence the generative explanation, the concern with the origin and end of things, is refused. Rather, it becomes possible to account for change. Then, how can “the mode of irruption of a new reality” (WOP, p. 62) be explained? As we have seen with regard to Althusser’s approach to Marx’s works, to Lenin’s political practice and the concept of history, and totality this is possible by renouncing the empiricist/geneticist framework and its concepts, which he had referred in *Reading Capital* to three: origin, genesis and mediation. All these terms refer to a relation of “resemblance” between the new and its past, the result of the becoming and its beginning. The logic of irruption is first conditioned upon, Althusser says, the rejection of “the search for whatever, before the ‘birth’ of A, ‘resembles’ . . . A” (WOP, p. 61). Rather, one

should look at “what effectively *intervenes* in the production of the ‘A effect’,”

which would not be of any resemblance or direct relation to A (WOP, p. 61).

Secondly, Althusser notes, this mechanism that produces the A effect is not “the mechanisms of procreation, development, *filiation*, etc.,” (WOP, p. 61) but as has been discussed in detail in *For Marx* and *Reading Capital*, the various instances of “production.” Lastly Althusser adds a third condition for the possibility of the explanation of change:

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. . . . *absence* possesses a certain efficacy on the condition . . . 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 absence. (WOP, p. 61-2)

It is not the elements that resemble and the most visibly close to the effect, but those elements that are indirectly related and may even be absent from the conditions of the phenomenon in question that logic of irruption should direct its focus. According to the logic of irruption, although the elements that make up the new phenomena are the products the previous structure, these elements, as Pippa (2016) puts with reference to Balibar, are not “of the same genealogy” (p. 22). This is why Althusser insists that “the historical relation between a result and its conditions of existence” cannot be understood in terms of “origin” and “end.” Rather, the irruption of this new phenomenon should always be conceived as a *production*. From the perspective of the logic of irruption, this transition is always contingent and its necessity can only be assigned after the fact, after its accomplishment. Hence, the Spinozist/Marxist/Althusserian dictum that one should not confuse the “the *order* of knowledge” with the “order of history.”

## CHAPTER 4

### CONCLUSION

This dissertation has undertaken a close reading of Althusser's selected works until the end of the '60s with a view to presenting the overdetermined presence of a discussion on a particular way of thinking that, with inspiration from Althusser, I have called "the logic of genesis." The logic of genesis implies a certain epistemological outlook, in which the relation between the beginning and the result is taken to be continuous. The selection of Althusser's works was intended for their particular focus on the relation between Hegel and Marx. If put in the most straightforward way possible, these two figures are taken to represent for Althusser the two positions in the philosophical battlefield: the idealist and materialist positions in philosophy; Hegel as the most accomplished representative of the former and Marx as the latter. The dissertation has undertaken to demonstrate that these positions are not homogeneous and so clearly demarcated for Althusser, although from his early works on, he is very clear on the presence of a battle line.

Especially with the post-humous publication of his early and late works, we have witnessed the complexity of the way in which Althusser thought the main figures of this battlefield. For my part, it was the exceptional character of his late works, in which he seems to denounce -as the first impression I had – Marxism and dialectical materialism that led me to re-read Althusser's canon, which I thought I already knew quite enough. These texts certainly ignited the motivation for a new encounter with Althusser. But it was his early writings and the texts that were contemporaneous with his canonical texts that made a radical intervention to my interpretation of Althusser. It is this "informed" gaze, which made visible the

presence of a discussion on contingency, the complexity of his relation to Hegel, his privileging of science and his theoreticism articulated on the basis of his rejection of “experience” as a viable foundation for philosophical inquiry and his conception of materialism, which he develops through a rigorous discussion of the existing materialisms and empiricisms and their notion of “concrete” and “practice.” These issues that had not caught my attention before constitute the main discussion of this thesis.

In the introduction, I have attempted to present the demise and the unexpected rise of Althusser. My intention was to reflect on the very different appropriations of Althusser’s work before and after the translation and publication of his unpublished and semi-public works. In my narrative, I may have unwittingly omitted some of the works and scholars that continued, in the post-70s context, to discuss and develop Althusser’s project. This omission was perhaps the result of my endeavor to underline the discrepancy between the old and the new episode in Althusser scholarship, in which he is no longer represented only as a figure of post-Marxism. In my reading also, Althusser shows up as a theorist of contingency, which, for the reasons I discuss in this dissertation, I do not see as a radical break neither from his earlier position in his canonical texts, nor from Marx, nor even from Hegel.

In the second chapter, I looked at Althusser’s early writings and the conjuncture, which shaped them. In order to limit my attention to his relation to Hegel and what Althusser inherits from Hegel I have reduced this overdetermined history to only the post-war discussions on Hegel and even from this very rich discussion only to the two figures that Althusser directly confronted: Alexandre Kojève and Jean Hyppolite. My main interest was to show how Althusser’s

objections to the phenomenologico-existentialist reconceptualization of Hegel and his unavowed alliance with the French epistemological tradition, Jean Cavaillès as its leading figure, shaped these writings and also affected his later anti-humanist and anti-historicist thought, which can be expressed simply as an anti-empiricist position in philosophy.

The third chapter focused on Althusser's canonical works with the exception of "On Marxism," a manual of Marxism written in 1953. I have included this posthumously translated text among other well-known texts in order to draw attention to Althusser's change of vocabulary and interlocutors/adversaries accompanying the novel problematization of his project around materialism/idealism rather than the philosophy of the concept/of intuition couple. I continued with a close reading of several articles from *For Marx* and then with *Reading Capital* with a special focus on the 4<sup>th</sup> and the 5<sup>th</sup> chapters, which I think best reflect Althusser's complex relation to Hegel and his critique of empiricism. I aimed to reconceptualize, with support from his early writings and other unpublished or recently translated writings from '60s, Althusser's conception of materialism, which, I defend, is based upon a critique of the logic of genesis. Althusser's critique of the false materialisms as empiricisms, which are taken over by a geneticist approach to the concrete, to practice and particularly to political practice, was the main problem of this chapter. For this purpose, I looked at Althusser's discussion of Hegelian conceptions of totality and temporality, with a view to clarify Althusser's conception of history, which, according to some of his critics, he totally abandoned due to his structuralist "deviation" from Marxist theory. I read Althusser's rethinking of Marxism not as abandonment of history, but of a peculiar understanding of history as genesis, which,

I argued following Althusser, corresponds to abandoning history and politics *tout court*.

There is one very early text that I find important in portraying Althusser's itinerary, but which I have not included in the present dissertation: "The International of Decent Feelings," written in 1946, way before Althusser became "Althusser." This section was excluded for it would disrupt the unity of the narrative of the dissertation; a different conjuncture and different characters that Althusser does not further discuss in his texts. But I still find this text to be important in demonstrating the interventionist character of Althusser's writing and in showing that very early in his career, he started thinking about the problem of the end of history and the problematic nature of the "messianic," "eschatological" discourses and their relation to politics. This text remains as a candidate for further study, a study, which would perhaps be more courageous to broach further into a field that questions the teleological tendencies in politics and their meaning within the contemporary conjuncture, which is dominated by the feeling of a "lost paradise" and "end of times."

One of the fundamental shortcomings of the present dissertation is the lack of archival work. I have not visited Althusser's archives, which would provide the thesis with much more solid material to produce a more nuanced study of Althusser's work. I have depended on the published texts, dominantly in English translations, and tried to supply the missing points by referring to the vast literature that has formed in recent years, especially the works of Montag, Peden and Balibar. Another important event that needs mentioning as an important contribution to my "incomplete" reading was the publication in 2012 of *Concept and Form*, a two-volume book co-edited by Hallward and Peden, the first volume of which compiled

many important texts from the journal the *Cahiers pour l'Analyse* (1966–69) that encompassed the main discussions on French structuralism and the second volume based on the recent interviews with people, who were associated with this project. This edition was helpful in understanding in a broader context the peculiarity of Althusser's work.

The scope of this dissertation is limited to Althusser's work until the end of '60s with the exclusion of the writings on other important philosophical figures such as Feuerbach, Rousseau, Spinoza, etc. and other important theoretical fields such as psychoanalysis, theology and art. A further inquiry into these omitted works would deepen our understanding of this period and perhaps radically change the visible field. Furthermore, this study would also benefit much from a close reading of the later texts from the '70s and '80s from the perspective of Althusser's critique of the logic of genesis and his proposition of a theory of the logic of irruption and their relation to his "philosophy of the encounter" introduced in his texts from the '80s.

I have limited my study to the period which is before and contemporaneous with Althusser's articulation of his project as a philosophy of contingency with the fear of falling into a retrospective reading of his work from "the end" to search for "the birth." I hope I have eliminated as best as I could, this kind of "teleological" reading, but I am aware that my reading is still "guilty" for its omissions and for the inevitable influence of the retroaction effected by the post-humous publications and the growing literature on Althusser on my choice of particular passages and texts rather than others.

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