

Lacan Contra Althusser: Dialectical Materialism vs Nominalism

Agon Hamza

Althusser's Marxism

In this paper, I will explore the consequences of rethinking the alliance and relation between Marxism and psychoanalysis, and more concretely between Althusser and Lacan. It is part of an ongoing investigation and study on the contemporary relevance of Louis Althusser's project. This study is driven by the following question: is Althusser's work *at all* repeatable (in the Žižekian understanding of the term)? And if the answer is yes, then what is it in his project that remains thinkable in our conjuncture? This question becomes even more pressing given the revival of the interest in his work in recent years. Perhaps it would be safe to argue that the revival of the interest in Althusser is predominantly conditioned by the revival of the scholarship of one of his main philosophical influences, Spinoza. As a consequence, it is not surprising that the greatest Althusserian scholars are specialists in Spinoza. It suffices to recall his students Étienne Balibar and Pierre Macherey, whose works on Spinoza are perhaps one of the greatest outcomes of what can be called the Althusserian field. In this instance, the return to Althusser implies its conditioning to the oeuvre of Spinoza. But, there is another level, another practice, in and through which Althusser's thought can gain a new dimension – pairing it with Lacanian psychoanalysis.

But, let us focus for a moment on what makes the return to Althusser philosophically and politically worthy in the present conjuncture. Many of his critics have argued that Althusser's Marx is an unknown Marx, or even an imaginary one. The Marx of which Althusser spoke, so they tell us, is an invented one, a Marx which cannot be found in his own writings. Perhaps the best-known example is that of his former student, Jacques Rancère, who in his *Althusser's Lesson* sets out to comment on Althusser's Marxism, which according to him, was misleading, a Marxism of closure, as it were.¹ It was a violent act of separating the paths, where Rancère accuses his former teacher of elitism, and sets to work out his theory in which there is no place for a "master" to speak to the masses, but the masses themselves go through subjectivisation.

In his autobiography, Althusser repeats several times that his knowledge on Marx was fairly limited. However, following Althusser's own lesson, we should reject this claim of its importance² and strip him off from the position of authority of his own thought. It is also important to note that later in his life Althusser became very critical of his concept of the *epistemological break* and came to admit that Marx did not break away from Hegel (and Feuerbach). Decisive in this 'conversion' was Jacques Bidet's *Que faire du 'Capital'?*³

Regardless of whether Althusser has read Marx correctly, or read him at all, he was able to formulate some of the most profound and sophisticated epistemological, political and philosophical theses of the time. And this is what should be of our concern: not the true Marx, but the best Marx, as Robert Pfaller brilliantly argues.⁴ To supplement, or rather to advance further Pfaller's thesis, I would argue that whatever Marx we get in Althusser's writings, it is not a Marx without Marxism, a depoliticized and culturalized Marx. To write about Althusser is to write about a Communist militant who also did philosophy. And this is the crucial element as well as the true difficulty in re-reading Althusser's work, regardless of the seasonal trend which is currently declaring him to be relevant. In our "neurotic obsessive" predicament, the *true* philosophical gesture is to avoid both a thoughtless acceptance of a master's thinking or the metonymical displacement from master to master. From the standpoint of historical materialism, far more interesting than critiquing these trends and to a certain degree pointing out on their 'falsity', is to focus on reading and interpreting them as indicators par excellence of the work of ideology in (our) situation. Again, it is easy to demonstrate the limits of Althusser – and many have done so – but it is much more productive to engage with precisely those limits and work *through them*. There is only one way in which we can understand Althusser's work (Marx's too, for that matter). Marx writes that "in so far as political economy is bourgeois, i.e., in so far as it views the capitalist order as the absolute and ultimate form of social production, instead of as

a historically transient stage of development, it can only remain a science while the class struggle remains latent or manifests itself only in isolated and sporadic phenomena.”⁵ Althusser cannot be read from a neutral position, or out of “objective knowledge”, but one has to be engaged, which in his own terms would be that to read Althusser means to occupy a position in philosophy *and* politics. Only from a partial position within the conjuncture of our time, one can read Althusser (and Marx). In other words, it is only from the proletarian position in philosophy (and politics) that one can read and understand Marxism in general, Althusser included. In older times, this position had a name: it was called a partisan position.

Althusser’s work stood for a double breakthrough: on the one hand, he was able to break away with orthodox Marxism, and fight against the ‘spontaneous ideology’ of post-68 capitalism, postmodernism on the one - and, on the other hand, it was able to continue thinking through the ambitions that characterized the previous sequences of Marxist theory. My thesis thus runs as follows: the return to Althusser in the contemporary philosophical-political conjuncture means the confrontation with that kind of current on the Left which has abandoned the difficult task of rethinking the difficult Marxist categories (i.e. exploitation, class formation and class struggle, et cetera). In this regard, it is our task to proceed from where he left off. Most of his critics (and the same holds for the majority of critiques towards Slavoj Žižek) presume that the road to socialism is clear and we need to stick to the old understanding of class, socialism, class struggle, etc. This is the point in which we should insist, more than ever, in the crucial importance of pure thinking, that is to say, to paraphrase Hegel, in philosophy without further determinations. Or, to quote Althusser, “Marxist theory can fall behind history, and even behind itself, if ever it believes that it has arrived.”⁶

We can speak of the limits of Althusser, and we should do so, but we should always bear in mind that in a given instance, the limits of Althusser’s project are simultaneously the limits of the 20th century socialist experiments. In this regard, the critique of Althusser’s project should be done *simultaneously* with the critique of the previous century socialism.

Marxism and Psychoanalysis

Psychoanalysis (and especially the Freudian-Lacanian one) and Marxism have a very complicated relation. There are many attempts which try to couple Marxism and psychoanalysis. Ernesto Laclau, for example, in his short text *Psychoanalysis and Marxism* suggests that the only way to think the relation between psychoanalysis and Marxism is through what, following Heidegger,

he calls “de-struction” of the history of Marxism, which means going beyond classical concepts such as “class”, “capital”, etc. In other words, for Laclau, it is post-Marxism as the political field which can co-exist, or more precisely intersect with psychoanalysis.⁷ For Laclau, the dialogue between the two disciplines is possible only under that condition.

The next point to be made here, already criticized by Žižek, concerns the attempt to find points of intersection and supplements between psychoanalysis and Marxism. One of the most common ways to understand this relation is to understand psychoanalysis as a supplement to Marxism. An almost classical example would be to take a situation in which the “objective conditions” for the revolution exist, but the revolution doesn’t take place. Usually, it is expected that psychoanalysis will provide the coherent explanation for the failure. Following this logic would imply that both psychoanalysis and Marxism are untenable in themselves, that both disciplines are in structural crisis, unable to answer to the new developments in our societies, and that help from another discipline is needed. Rejecting the two above-mentioned cases, this paper starts from the following premise: there is no *a priori* compatibility between Freud and Marx, and Lacan and Althusser. One cannot read Marx’s and Freud’s “fetish” as the same or complementary concepts; or surplus-value with surplus-enjoyment. Nor simply trying to find sentences in Lacan and Marx, which could serve as a support of one’s argument. As a philosopher once said everything resembles everything else in one way or another... but this means simply nothing. A much more refined dialectics should be put to work in order to reconcile both Freud/Lacan with Marx and Marx with Hegel, which goes well beyond the focus and the aims of this paper. This also means that there is no such thing as the “Marxist side” of Lacan as seen in his *Seminar XVII*, which is *the* Seminar in which the trio of Freud, Hegel and Marx are overly present.

The structure of psychoanalysis and that of Marxism are different. It is unimaginable for analysts to revolt on the couch, as do the workers in the factories. It is equally unconceivable for the analysts to get organised in a union or a Party, like the proletariat does. There is no natural affinity between the two disciplines. Simply put: the object of psychoanalysis is the unconscious, whereas for Marxism, it is the class struggle. In this sense, it seems to be rather difficult to imagine a class struggle in the field of the unconscious. This is the error of Wilhelm Reich, who attempted to locate the effects of the unconscious (Freud) with the effects of class struggle (Marx). No wonder that for him, the sexual liberation is associated also with the proletarian revolution, and the post-Bolshevik revolution was its realisation. For Lenin as well as for Althusser (although one can trace this back to Marx), the class struggle exists in three domains: economic, political and theoretical. Todd McGowan

provides an excellent account for the differences between Freud and Marx: “What distinguishes both Marx and Freud as thinkers is their understanding of social antagonisms. Where Freud sees antagonism manifesting itself in the excessive suffering of the individual subject, Marx sees it playing out in class struggle.”⁸ It is in this sense that McGowan aims to formulate the political theory of psychoanalysis, which is based on the Freudian concept of the death-drive. The inability to think and incorporate the death-drive in its project, represents the fundamental limitation of Marxism, McGowan argues: “The politics of psychoanalysis after Marxism is an emancipatory project based on the self-sacrificing enjoyment located in the death drive. Marxism is able to theorize sacrifice as necessary for future pleasure, but it is unable to conceive sacrifice as an end in itself, as a source of enjoyment.”⁹

Marxism is concerned with the class struggle and the working class taking over the state power. In other words, Marxism aims to grasp the effects of the class struggle. On the other hand, psychoanalysis begins and is concerned with individuals (analysands) and their sufferings.

But, are Marxism and psychoanalysis founded in such antagonistic positions as many are inclined to think?¹⁰ In 1976 Althusser wrote a short essay entitled *On Freud and Marx*. This is one of his most important essays, but as it often happens, it remains largely forgotten, if not repressed both by Lacanians and Althusserians. Althusser argues that, like Marx, Freud offered us an example of thought in dialectical materialism. For Althusser, Freud is truly a materialist because he rejects the primacy of consciousness, whereas the use of the categories of displacement, overdetermination, condensation and so on, belong to the field of the dialectic. But, there is another dimension to this paper, which is far more important for determining the *field* in which Marxism and psychoanalysis can intersect and co-exist. According to Althusser, the two other elements that Marxism and (Freudian) psychoanalysis have in common are a) they are both conflictual sciences, and b) their ultimate enemy is not an external attack, but revisionism:

It is a fact of experience that Freudian theory is a conflictual theory. From the time of its birth, and the phenomenon has not ceased to reproduce itself, it has provoked not only strong resistance, not only attacks and criticisms but, what is more interesting, attempts at *annexation* and revision. I say that the attempts at annexation and revision are more interesting than simple attacks and criticisms, for they signify that Freudian theory contains, by the admission of its adversaries, something *true* and dangerous. Where there is nothing true, there is no reason to annex or revise. There is therefore

something true in Freud that must be appropriated but in order that its meaning may be revised, for this truth *is* dangerous: it must be revised in order to be neutralized. There is a relentless dialectic in this cycle. For what is remarkable in the dialectic of resistance-criticism-revision is that the phenomenon that begins outside of Freudian theory (with its adversaries) always ends up within Freudian theory. It is internally that Freudian theory is obliged to defend itself against attempts at annexation and revision: the adversary always ends up by penetrating it and producing a revisionism that provokes internal counterattacks and, finally, splits (*scissions*). A conflictual science, Freudian theory is also a scissional science and its history is marked by incessantly recurring splits.¹¹

The same holds for Marxism, too. For Althusser, both Marxism and Freudian theory, have to defend themselves from themselves, as it were, from their inner deviations. He held that a rupture was inherent in psychoanalytic theory, as well as in Marxism; they are both situations in the very field in which they recognise as conflictual. It is for this reason that Althusser maintains that some practices need their concepts of such practices, in order to defend themselves against revisionism, opportunisms, et cetera.

A useful reference to Badiou can be done here. In his *Theory of the Subject*, Badiou makes a reference to the “black sheep of materialism”, where he says that Marxists should move beyond the linguistic idealism that has set in after the “discursive materialism” of Lacan, Foucault, Althusser, etc. For Badiou, only a materialist theory of the subject will divide the *idealinguisterie* into its ideal and material aspects, opening up to a renewal of Marxism again.¹²

From this, we should proceed to the equally complicated duo, the relation between Althusser and Lacan is controversial and certainly not clarified in the terms of *philosophical* overlappings and influences, as well as the formation of the thinkers based on the writings of the other. This means that my aim is not to reconstruct the Althusser-Lacan relation, the influences of one onto another and vice versa. It will not be concerned with the concept of *interpellation*, or with the debts to Lacan of Althusser’s conceptualisation of ideology, or with his readings of Freud and Lacan. To date, the most productive debate between Lacanians and Althusserians is reflected in the debate on the concept of interpellation between Mladen Dolar and Slavoj Žižek on the one hand, and Robert Pfaller on the other.¹³

In *Seminar XX*, Lacan makes a very interesting point, drawing parallels between Marx and Lenin, Freud and himself: “Marx and Lenin, Freud and Lacan are not coupled in being. It is via the letter they found in the Other that, as

beings of knowledge, they proceed two by two, in a supposed Other.”¹⁴ We should read this is from the perspective of the dialectical distinction between the founding figure and the formalization figure, introduced by Slavoj Žižek.¹⁵ In Marxism, it was Lenin who formalized Marx with the party-form organisation and intervention in the historical situation; in psychoanalysis, it was Lacan who formalized Freud; and in Christianity, Christ was formalised by St.Paul. In this sense, we can introduce a new level, which connects both practices. With Althusser’s Marxism and Lacan’s psychoanalytic theory, we are dealing with a relation that is unable to surpass its founding figures (Marx, Freud). Every reformulation, ‘correction’, and advancement goes not through a refusal, but to a ‘return’ (to Marx with Althusser, to Freud with Lacan). In epistemological terms, the knowledge of both theories is constitutively antagonistic, that is to say, errors are always-already part of the ‘real’ knowledge, which to repeat the previous claim of Althusser, revisionism is in a certain sense a constitutive part of the discipline. Marxism and psychoanalysis are ‘unique’ in the sense that they both determine the limitations of themselves, and they work through them to open them up.

In an apparent level, there is no such thing as a philosophical foundation of Marxism and psychoanalysis; they exist on another theoretical level and practice. In Lacanian practice, the end of psychoanalysis, or the dissolution of transference happens when the analysand comes to experience how the big Other (analyst) doesn’t have the truth about his/her desire. That is to say, how the desire of the analysand has neither guarantees nor grounds, it exists only as authorised by him/herself. The desire of the analysands has no support in the Other and he’s the instance of its authorisation. In this sense, we have a shift from the epistemological level to the ontological one. Or in psychoanalytic terms, the end of psychoanalysis is the shift from the desire to the drive. Marxism aims at transforming the object which “constitutes” it, thus at the same time, it gives rise to the revolutionary agent.

The contemporary Left dreams of a society in which social pathologies, neurosis, psychoses are eradicated. That the happy socialist paradise of equality also implies the well-being and happiness of all. But, let us cite Freud: “You will be able to convince yourself that much will be gained if we succeed in transforming your hysterical misery into common unhappiness. With a mental life that has been restored to health you will be better armed against that unhappiness.” If we replace three words from Freud’s passage about the purposes of analysis with the purposes of communism, we get the following result: You will be able to convince yourself that much will be gained if we succeed in transforming expropriation of labour into common unhappiness. With a social life that has been restored to justice you will be better armed against

that unhappiness.¹⁶ That is, one of the most important aspects of communism is to include the discontent into society. Discontent as such will never disappear, but we can utilize it for more creative and progressive purposes. This brings us to a crucial dimension of Marxism as well as psychoanalysis, that of the practice.

But, before we proceed with it, let us pause for a moment and point out a curious detail which points to a rather interesting difference between Althusserianism and Lacanianism. As we said earlier, Marxism, as the theory of Communism, is concerned with masses and classes, whereas two people constitute the psychoanalytic practice. Now comes the paradox of Althusser: unlike Lacan, Althusser didn't think of establishing his school or unifying his philosophy in a formal system. This is why François Matheron can claim, "the field of Althusserian studies has still not been constituted."¹⁷ Against developing a philosophical system, Althusser chose another path: that of philosophically intervening in particular political, ideological and philosophical conjunctures. In other words, a renewed Marxism would be of interest to all, but no systematization that would allow for this was made, while analysis is of interest to a few, but it was formalized to be available to all. Given the "interventionist" aspect of Althusserian philosophy and Marxism, I would argue that the "Althusserian" field is never fully constituted, but it exists only insofar as it is *in constitution*. In this sense relies on of their crucial differences.

On the Dialectical Materialism

One of the most important aspects of Althusser's work is the major switch from dialectical materialism to materialism of the encounter. Faced with the crisis of Marxism in 1970, he chose to abandon his philosophical apparatus of dialectical materialism and pursue another path; that of aleatory materialism, while at the same time remaining a Communist. In his text *Limits of Marx*, he announced that "at last the crisis of Marxism has exploded." As a result, he sought to rethink the potential of Marx's thought and Marxism in general. Althusser was seeking for, to paraphrase Badiou, new forms of political and philosophical subjectivity, without and free from the confines of the "theoretical monstrosity" called dialectical materialism.¹⁸

Let us make a short detour into the main core of Althusser's understanding of dialectical materialism.¹⁹ In an essay called *Materialist Dialectics*, Louis Althusser defines practice from the standpoint of a certain notion of rule (all practices, theoretical and ideological included, transform a raw material into a determinate product). Departing from this, we could criticize the theory of transformation as being the notion of concrete labour in capitalism. Isn't it the capitalist mode of production that has created the theory

of abstract labour, which is this general pattern all activities are supposed to carry as their infra-structure (the pattern of transforming an indeterminate x into a determinate y)? What if militant work requires a different theory of transformation in order to break away from the capitalist mode of production? Let us proceed with the beginning of Althusser's essay, which, in line with the "spirit of previous century Marxism", he gives either an outline or an attempt towards something. He begins this important essay with a very complicated proposal, which in fact condenses the whole problematic of dialectical materialism:

This article proposes the term *Theory* (with a capital T to designate Marxist 'philosophy' (dialectical materialism) - and reserves the term *philosophy* for ideological philosophies.²⁰

But, what does a practice means? Let us quote a longer passage, which can shed light to this definition as well as to his remarks on Lacan:

"I shall call Theory (with a capital T), general theory, that is, the Theory of practice in general, itself elaborated on the basis of the Theory of existing theoretical practices (of the sciences), which transforms into 'knowledges' (scientific truths) the ideological product of existing 'empirical' practices (the concrete activity of men). This Theory is the materialist *dialectic* which is none other than dialectical materialism. These definitions are necessary for us to be able to give an answer to this question: what is the use of a theoretical expression of a solution which already exists in the practical state? - an answer with a theoretical basis.²¹

Notice the strange equivalence of *dialectical materialism* and *materialist dialectic*.²² Should it be read as one and the same concept? Althusser is talking about a specific form of dialectics and equally a specific form of materialism. But, we should be precise on this point: for Althusser, "*Marxism-Leninism has always subordinated the dialectical Theses to the materialist Theses.*" This leads us to another crucial aspect, that of the relation between the thought and practice:

The exact theoretical expression of the dialectic is relevant first of all to those practices in which the Marxist dialectic is active; for these practices (Marxist 'theory' and politics) need the concept of their practice (of the dialectic) in their development, if they are not to find

themselves defenseless in the face of qualitatively new forms of this development (new situations, new 'problems') – or to lapse, or relapse, into the various forms of opportunism, theoretical or practical. These 'surprises' and deviations, attributable in the last resort to 'ideological errors', that is, to a theoretical deficiency, are always costly, and may be very costly.²³

Theory (with a capital T) is not the opposite of practice, the determinant field/aspect, but it is the ground upon which the practice itself is constituted, that is to say, where the production and 'manifestation' of knowledge is always-already part of the practice as such. As he himself puts it, "theory is important to practice in a double sense: for 'theory' is important to its own practice, directly.

But the *relation* of a 'theory' to its practice, in so far as it is at issue, on condition that it is reflected and expressed, is also relevant to the general Theory (the dialectic) in which is theoretically expressed the essence of theoretical practice in general, through it the essence of practice in general, and through it the essence of the transformations, of the 'development' of things in general."²⁴

This should be further understood against the common sense understanding of both theory (i.e. 'critical theory', which Althusser would qualify as a 'spontaneous ideology of theorists') and practice (the conviction that the Left has to be done away with theory and engage in the real and actual transformation of the world.)

Let us proceed in a schematic fashion, dear to Althusser himself, in order to recapitulate this problematic.

Philosophy declares positions, whereas theory produces problems. This is a very rigid and mechanical distinction but it might well provide us with the background. Althusser coined a new concept: his materialism is now called Theory, with a capital T. His materialism is Marxist philosophy, as he argues in the opening of this essay. Althusser is concerned with resolving problems through Marxist practice:

By *practice* in general I shall mean any process of *transformation* of determinate given raw material into a determinate *product*, a transformation effected by a determinate human labour, using determinate means (of 'production'). In any practice thus conceived, the *determinant* moment (or element) is neither the raw material nor the product, but the practice in the narrow sense: the moment of the *labour of transformation* itself, which sets to work, in a specific structure, men, means and a technical method of utilizing the means.

This general definition of practice covers the possibility of particularity: there are different practices which are really distinct, even though they belong organically to the same complex totality. Thus, 'social practice', the complex unity of the practices existing in a determinate society, contains a large number of distinct practices. This complex unity of 'social practice' is structured, we shall soon see how, in such a way that in the last resort the determinant practice in it is the practice of transformation of a given nature (raw material) into useful *products* by the activity of living men working through the *methodically organized* employment of determinate *means of production* within the framework of determinate relations of production.²⁵

Then he goes on arguing that

As well as production social practice includes other essential levels: political practice – which in Marxist parties is no longer spontaneous but organized on the basis of the scientific theory of historical materialism, and which transforms its raw materials: social relations, into a determinate product (new social relations); ideological practice (ideology, whether religious, political, moral, legal or artistic, also transforms its object: men's 'consciousness'); and finally, *theoretical practice*. Ideology is not always taken seriously as an existing practice: but to recognize this is the indispensable prior condition for any theory of ideology. The existence of a *theoretical practice* is taken seriously even more rarely: but this prior condition is indispensable to an understanding of what theory itself, and its relation to 'social practice' are for Marxism.²⁶

Following this, the work of Althusser, and especially his *For Marx and Reading Capital* should be understood as a critique of both hitherto existing conceptualisation of dialectical materialism and historical materialism, as well as the development of philosophical theses which guarantee and further develop the scientificity of Marx's historical materialism and its philosophical "effect", dialectical materialism. In order to break away with the philosophical and political obstacles in which it was caught, and freeing it from the various forms of deviations, Althusser announced a philosophical, that is, a historical and epistemological reading of Marx. The relation between science and philosophy is clear: philosophy goes through a radical transformation after every scientific breakthrough and science is *the* condition of philosophy. In other words, philosophy exists only under the conditions of science and politics.

The distinction between science and philosophy compels Althusser to call Marx a scientist and not a philosopher. For him, historical materialism is a science, the science of history, which was inaugurated by Marx in 1845, placing Marx in the same category as Thales, Galileo, and so on. That said, he sets the primacy of the science of history, with philosophy which accompanies it, i.e. dialectical materialism. The latter is always underdeveloped in relation to the former. In this sense, dialectical materialism is always behind. As he puts it elsewhere apropos the relation between science and philosophy, this is a determinate situation for philosophy: “*Outside of its relationship to the sciences, philosophy would not exist.*” Or, as he puts it in *Reading Capital*, “the theoretical future of historical materialism depends today on deepening dialectical materialism, which itself depends on a rigorous critical study of *Capital*. History imposes this immense task on us. Insofar as our modest means will allow, we should like to make our contribution.”²⁷

The crucial question runs as follows: why did Althusser have to abandon dialectical materialism in favour of the materialism of the encounter? It seems to have to do with nominalisms’ absolute homogeneity and immanence (all is in the same plane) while the “Theory of practice” which tries to put all practices at the same level (theory becomes one form of practice), but still keeps a certain difference between them, might not have been “immanentist” enough for his materialism, because it only writes the determinate moments (practice and theoretical practice) and not the indeterminate (or aleatory) ones (which he thinks nominalism can write or think more directly.)

Many of his commentators pointed out the *continuity* in Althusser’s thought, that is to say, they find elements of the materialism of the encounter from the 1960s. For G.M.Goshgarian, a translator and commentator of Althusser’s work, insists that from 1970 Althusser transformed his philosophy and thus reformulated his dialectical materialism into materialism of the encounter. In his understanding, only by reading Althusser’s late texts are we able to understand Althusser’s earlier philosophical periods.²⁸ The question of continuity in Althusser’s work in general, and particularly with regard to the presence of aleatory materialism throughout his work is a very difficult one. One of the ways to properly understand the continuity is if we emphasise the question of *materialism* and the *practice* it requires in order to be the philosophy of our time. In my understanding, this radical shift in his work remains one of the most important aspects in the whole of the Althusserian project. Due to the scope of this essay, I will limit myself to a few propositions. The first one concerns his understanding of practice. If we explore the consequences of rethinking its notion based on the Lacanian and Žižekian psychoanalytical and philosophical thought - especially considering the theory

of the drives, where means and ends can be inverted, and the theory of the subject, where the result of a transformation is not always determined, but is sometimes negative and elusive - we come to understand his limits.

Another aspect is, to understand it along the lines of the crisis of Marxism, in which Althusser, while completely recognising it, remained unquestionably loyal to Communism and the proletarian position in philosophy. Thus, aleatory materialism should be understood as his (last) attempt to rethink the communist project.

What is the materialism that Althusser defends in his late writings? In his autobiography, writing on Spinoza, Althusser says that:

he was also a nominalist, and Marx taught me that nominalism was the royal road to materialism. In fact, it leads only to itself, but I can think of hardly any more profound *form* of materialism than nominalism. Without offering any explanation of the origins of its meaning, Spinoza declared: 'We have a true idea', a 'norm of truth' provided by mathematics - yet another fact offered without any explanation of its transcendental origins. What is more, he was a man who believed in the *facticity* of facts, which was astonishing in a supposedly dogmatic person who deduced the existence of the world from God and his attributes! Nothing could be more materialist than this thought without origin or end.²⁹

The basic thesis of nominalism is "there are only cases", which Althusser borrows from Wittgenstein's "the world is everything that is a case". For him, this is a "superb sentence *says everything*."³⁰ When asked about his understanding and conceptualisation of nominalism and Marx's thesis that nominalism is the antechamber of materialism, Althusser gives the following elaboration:

Precisely; and I would go still further. I would say that it is not merely the antechamber of materialism, but materialism itself. Certain ethnologists have made a striking observation: that in the most primitive of observable societies, those of the Australian Aborigines or African Pygmies, nominalist philosophy seems to hold sway in person - not only at the level of thought, that is, of language, but also in practice, in reality. Conclusive recent studies have shown that, for these societies, there exist only singular entities, and each singularity, each particularity, is designated by a word that is equally singular. Thus the world consists exclusively of singular, unique objects, each with its own specific name and singular properties. 'Here and now',

which, ultimately, cannot be named, but only pointed to, because words themselves are abstractions - we would have to be able to speak without words, that is, to show. This indicates the primacy of the gesture over the word, of the material trace over the sign.³¹

Our position towards this thesis should be: Althusser became the Althusser only with *For Marx and Reading Capital*. His aleatory materialism should be subjected to the same critique to which he subjected his earlier period and especially to dialectical materialism. And an unexpected ally emerges here: Jacques Lacan. In (an unpublished) *Seminar XVIII* from 1971, Lacan critiques Althusser from the standpoint of (none other than) dialectical materialism:

If there is something I am, it is clear that I am not a nominalist. What I want to say is that my starting point is not that the name is something like a nameplate which attaches itself, just like that, onto the real. And one has to choose. If one is a nominalist, one has to renounce completely dialectical materialism, so that, all in all, I evidently reject the nominalist tradition which is effectively the only danger of idealism which can arise in a discourse like mine. The point is not to be a realist in the sense in which one was a realist in Medieval times, in the sense of the realism of the universals; the point is to emphasize that our discourse, our scientific discourse, can only find the real insofar as it depends on the function of the semblant. The articulation, and I mean the algebraic articulation, of the semblant-and because of this we are only dealing with letters-and its effects, this is the only apparatus which enables us to designate what is real. What is real is what opens up a hole in this semblant, in this articulated semblant which is the scientific discourse. The scientific discourse progresses without even worrying if it is a discourse of semblance or not. All that matters is that its network, its texture, its lattice, as one is used to say, makes the right holes appear at the right place. The only reference reached by its deductions is the impossible. This impossible is the real. In physics, we aim at something which is real with the help of the discursive apparatus which, in its crispness, encounters the limits of its consistency.³²

What is Lacan really saying with this? Lacan touches on one of the most important aspects of the philosophical 'debate', precisely because he takes a position which is anti-Althusser and anti-Foucault, to mention just the two. The sense in which Lacan is not a nominalist, is

not to be a realist in the medieval sense, but in the sense that our (scientific) discourse “can only find the real insofar as it depends on the function of the semblant”: reality is a semblant, but not in the simple sense that it is a deceptive appearance hiding true Being—there is nothing, no true substantial real, behind the veil of phenomenal reality. Reality is a semblant in the sense that its structure already materializes a certain fantasy which obfuscates the Real of a social antagonism. This is why we “can only find the real insofar as it depends on the function of the semblant”: by way of identifying the impossibilities, cracks, antagonisms which underlie and generate the inconsistent multiplicity of semblants.³³

For Lacan, there are not only particulars and the reality itself, but there are social antagonisms, which do not exist “as a case”, but that one has to refer to. To formulate it differently, there are many particularities which try to resolve the same antagonism, and Žižek’s example here is that of modernity. There are different ways which try to deal with capitalist modernity and its antagonisms: one is liberal democracy which argues that liberal freedoms will ‘tame’ class struggle, the other way is that of fascism (capitalism without class struggle/antagonisms), and so forth. All these are various attempts to handle the same central antagonism. In Lacan’s terms, this is the universality, which for him, is always the Real.

Now, to go back to our previous argument on the theory of the drives, which could be the crucial path which could solve this problem. Let us propose a thesis, by which we will end this paper: the Lacanian ontology of drives, given its immanent and transcendent aspect at the same time, is the ontology that solves the problem of nominalism in Althusserian philosophy. But, the question that remains unanswered is that about the relation between the death drive and practice. In what follows, I will propose a few ‘working thesis.’

Freud’s pleasure principle and its beyond, that is the death drive, has been an object of various interpretations. Gilles Deleuze argues that everything cannot be neither accounted for, nor governed by the pleasure principle. But, the Freud’s position is that in order to account for the pleasure principle, a more radical dimension has to be posited: that of the death drive and the compulsion to repeat, which makes it possible for the pleasure principle to act.

But what is the drive, and more precisely, the death drive? The death drive appears with the subjectivity, just as the subject enters or is alienated into the symbolic order. The constitution of the subject into the symbolic order is traumatic, it presents a loss of something which one doesn’t have, an

originary loss, and this is the point at which death drives aims at. This is why the repetition, which is a part of the death drive, is not the repetition of the same, but the repetition of the originary loss, which is the 'source' of enjoyment.

The drive is that something which persists, goes on even after the psychoanalytic session is over, that is, after the 'traversing the fantasy'. *In Seminar XI* asks "What, then, does he who has passed through the experience of this opaque relation to the origin, to the drive, become? How can a subject who has traversed the radical phantasy experience the drive? This is the beyond of analysis, and has never been approached."³⁴ Lacan's wager is: at the end of psychoanalysis, after traversing the fantasy, the desire is transformed into drive.

Neurotics always take the desire for demand. He mistakenly looks for a desire, where the field of that of the drive. But the desire always begins with a misrecognition, it is always-part of the nature of the desire. The neurotic does so because s/he believes in the loss of an object, but they fail to see that the object become such only through the loss. In this sense, it tries to do away with the drive by reducing desire to the desire of and for something, and thereby s/he works with the ideals alone, i.e. the ideal of the lost object. Desire always looks for a new object, object which would satisfy its needs. But, if this object were to be 'found', the desire would cease being such. For this reason, desire doesn't attempt satisfaction, but it attempts to maintain itself as a desire. It is always an imaginary anticipation of that which would realise a given want, or an imaginary sense of fulfilment. Any practice that is not based on this, would and shall be a practice that is not based on ideals. And perhaps, this is what Althusser wanted.

¹ Jacques Rancière, *Althusser's Lesson* (London/New York: Continuum, 2011). It is interesting to note here that all of his former students, at one point of their careers, distanced themselves from Althusser's philosophy and project. It seems that the only way for his students to pursue their own philosophical trajectories was to break away from Althusser's project.

² Judging from his own work, it is clear that one cannot trust him on this point. A better assessment on this would be to take into account that he was very self-deprecating, which incidentally is *the* leitmotif of his autobiography. Instead, we should rather assume that he thinks he didn't read it due to his insecurity, which is the best way of protecting himself from judgments and critique of his work.

³ Jacques Bidet, *Que faire du 'Capital'?* (Paris: PUF, 1985), in English translated

as Jacques Bidet, *Exploring Marx's Capital: Philosophical, Economic and Political Dimensions* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2006).

⁴ For an excellent defence of the contemporary relevance of Althusser, see Robert Pfaller, *Althusser's Best Tricks*, *Crisis and Critique*, 2:2, 2015, pp.25-45.

⁵ Karl Marx, *Capital Vol. 1* (New York, Penguin, 1976) p.96.

⁶ Louis Althusser, "Is it Simple to be a Marxist in Philosophy," in *Philosophy and the Spontaneous Philosophy of the Scientists and other essays* (London: Verso, 1977), p.230.

⁷ Ernesto Laclau, *Psychoanalysis and Marxism*, *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 13, No.2, Winer 1987, pp.330-333.

⁸ Todd McGowan, *Enjoying What We Don't Have: The Political Project of Psychoanalysis* (Nebraska: The University of Nebraska Press, 2013), p.1.

⁹ Ibid.p.2.

¹⁰ It is interesting to repeat that in the socialist countries as well as most of the Western Communist Parties, psychoanalysis was considered a bourgeois discipline, an enemy of Marxism and the proletariat.

¹¹ Louis Althusser, *On Freud and Marx, Rethinking Marxism: A Journal of Economics, Culture & Society*, 4:1, Spring 1991, p.19.

¹² Alain Badiou, *Theory of the Subject* (New York: Continuum: 2009), pp.185-189.

¹³ Mladen Dolar, *Beyond Interpelation*, *Qui parle*, vol. 6, no. 2, Berkeley, CA; Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 1989), Slavoj Žižek, "Class Struggle or Postmodernism? Yes, please", in Žižek, Slavoj, Laclau, Ernesto, & Butler, Judith, *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality: Contemporary Dialogues on the Left*, London: Verso; Slavoj Žižek, *Absolute Recoil: Towards a New Foundation of Dialectical Materialism*, London, Verso; Robert Pfaller, "Negation and its Reliabilities: An Empty Subject for Ideology", in Slavoj Žižek (ed) *Cogito and the Unconscious* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998).

¹⁴ Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan. Book XX. Encore 1972- 1973* (New York/London: Norton, 1999,) p.97.

¹⁵ Slavoj Žižek, *Repeating Lenin* (Arkzin; Zagreb, 2002), p.32.

¹⁶ Joseph Breuer and Sigmund Freud, “Studies on Hysteria”, in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 2, (London: Hogarth Press, 1955), p.305.

¹⁷ François Matheron, “Louis Althusser, or the Impurity of the Concept”, in Jacques Bidet and Stathis Kouvelakis, eds., *Critical Companion to Contemporary Marxism* (Leiden: Brill, 2008) p. 503.

¹⁸ In an interview conducted by Fernanda Navarro, Althusser explains that “it would be any exaggeration to say that Stalin’s political strategy and the whole tragedy of Stalinism were, *in part*, based on ‘dialectical materialism’, a philosophical monstrosity designed to legitimize the regime and serve as its theoretical guarantee - with power imposing itself on intelligence”, Louis Althusser, “Philosophy and Marxism: Interviews with Fernanda Navarro, 1984-87,” in *Philosophy of the Encounter: Later Writings, 1978-87* (London: Verso, 2006) p.244. For (also) an analysis of Althusser’s critique of Stalinism, see: Agon Hamza & Gabriel Tupinambá, *On the Organisation of Defeats, Crisis and Critique*, 3:1, 2016, pp.427-441.

¹⁹ For a more detailed analysis on Althusser’s dialectical materialism, see Agon Hamza, “Going to One’s Ground: Žižek’s Dialectical Materialism”, in *Slavoj Žižek and Dialectical Materialism*, A.Hamza & F.Ruda (eds) (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), pp.163-176.

²⁰ Louis Althusser, *For Marx*, (London: Verso, 2005) p.162.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p.168.

²² For a detailed elaboration on this, see Gabriel Tupinambá, “Splitting Althusser at the Point of Religion”, in *Althusser and Theology: Religion, Politics and Philosophy*, Agon Hamza, ed. (Leiden: Brill, forthcoming).

²³ Louis Althusser, *For Marx*, (London: Verso, 2005) p.169.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p.167.

²⁶ Ibid., p.166.

²⁷ Louis Althusser & Étienne Balibar, *Reading Capital* (London: Verso, 2009), p.84.

²⁸ G.M.Goshgarian, “Translator’s Introduction”, in Louis Althusser, *Philosophy of the Encounter: Later Writings, 1978-87* (London: Verso, 2006), pp.xiii-xlix.

²⁹ Louis Althusser, *The Future Lasts Forever* (New York: The New Press, 1993) p.217.

³⁰ Louis Althusser, “Philosophy and Marxism: Interviews with Fernanda Navarro, 1984-87,” in *Philosophy of the Encounter: Later Writings, 1978-87* (London: Verso, 2006) pp.265.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Quoted from Slavoj Žižek, *Less Than Nothing: Hegel and the Shadow of Dialectical Materialism* (London: Verso, 2012), p. 780.

³³ Ibid., p.782.

³⁴ Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan Book XI, The Four Fundamentals of Psychoanalysis* (New York/London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1998), p.273.