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# Anachronism of the True. Reading *Reading Capital*

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## Abstract:

This essay explores the vitality of an Althusserian reading of *Capital* by means of a reconsideration of the so-called “theoreticism”. In this sense, I propose to approach the Althusserian intervention in the terms of a proper materialist query about *practices*. Following the idea posed by Etienne Balibar about the philosophical worth of Marxist theory in XXI century, I develop the thesis that in the light of Marxist “philosophy”, the misunderstood relation still existing between theoretical and political practices are nevertheless thinkable. Finally, I propose that in as much as it might be considered that in this relation lies the kernel of Marx’s discovery, it also could be a basis for rereading *Capital* under present challenges.

**Keywords:** Althusser, Marxism, Theory, Political Practice, Dialectical Materialism

## No future without Marx

The question of how to address Marxist theory today in itself implies a rejection of simplified answers. For different reasons, Marxism can be considered – at the same time – extremely actual and almost dead, and while its conceptualization of

*Capital's* mechanisms is unavoidable, the topic of "the crisis of Marxism" appears to be the current starting point for any productive approach to Marxism today. This contradiction is captured by Etienne Balibar when he suggests that "there is no Marxist philosophy, and there never will be; on the other hand, Marx is more important for philosophy than ever before".<sup>1</sup>

In a quite general way, one can also understand this thesis from the sense of Derrida's position:

It will be more and more a fault, a failing of theoretical, philosophical, political responsibility, when the dogma machine and the "Marxist" ideological apparatuses (...) are in the process of disappearing. We no longer have any excuse, only alibis, for turning away from this responsibility. There will be no future without this. Not without Marx. No future without Marx.<sup>2</sup>

In a tense dialogue with Derrida's claim, I recall Balibar's contention that Marx will still be read in twenty-first century "not only as a monument of the past but as a contemporary author".<sup>3</sup> Besides sharing this aim with Derrida, Balibar's development wouldn't entirely subscribe to Derrida's thesis that "there must be more than one Marx" stated to produce his own call for a new reading it in the twilight of the twentieth century. Balibar doesn't subscribe to it because, in the trail of Lenin, his reading implies a *choice*, a side-taking in a *kampfplatz*, which certainly includes some criterion of the *true*, at least, a practical or non-explicit one. Still, they both concur in the idea that it is the future, the very possibility of willing a future, which lies to be rediscovered in these spectral or "contemporary" writings. Further it becomes apparent that, as in the darkest moments of the 20th century, it is within heterodox philosophical thinking (such as Benjamin's, Adorno's, Lukacs's, Gramsci's, Althusser's) where its critical potencies will develop.

This essay intends to follow the apparent contradiction between the dead and the future in the search for the *actual* Marx. In this sense, Louis Althusser would be the philosophical name of the kind of anachronism from which I aim to circumscribe: the one of the so-called *theoreticism*. In this sense, I will pose the thesis that the effort of giving rise to the very political power of Marxist theory today requires rigorous work on the precise status of theory itself. Far from speculative pleasure, this statement follows a strict urgency of current conjuncture: the menace of a joint-

venture between technocratic ideology and the worse-kind of political spontaneism, the sort of *right-wing leftism* currently embodied in desperate or paranoid masses.

In this context governed by technocratical thinking a paradoxical non-philosophical practice of philosophy would emanate as the most *actual* anachronism of Marx. As the most enigmatic, delicate and powerful phrase of *The Eighteenth Brumaire* suggests, there is an unwritten theory of time within the pulse of Marx's theory:

The social revolution of the nineteenth century cannot take its poetry from the past but only from the future. It cannot begin with itself before it has stripped away all superstition about the past. The former revolutions required recollections of past world history in order to smother their own content. The revolution of the nineteenth century must let the dead bury their dead in order to arrive at its own content. There the phrase went beyond the content – here the content goes beyond the phrase.<sup>4</sup>

The enigma of the dislocation (*decalage*) between the phrase and the content opens the field of a theory of time that is both, a practical defense of philosophy and a political call to assume the task that has to be done. Or, moreover, a defense of philosophy in its right to existence; a philosophy that can only be posed by means of a rigorous consideration of its inherent political core.

### *Che vuoi Reading Capital?*

Much debate has emerged since Althusser's philosophical intervention. As Warren Montag has claimed, "more had been written against him than about him (...) to denounce him as a Stalinist, as structuralist, or both, most of his critics, despite their often incompatible theoretical and political positions, unwittingly collaborate to produce an overwhelmingly negative judgment of his work"<sup>5</sup>.

In this sense, the most significant concurrence is that one of J. Rancière and E. P. Thompson, who together bring an extremely dedicated struggle with Althusser, albeit for opposite motives, despite returning to similar conclusions: the conception of theoreticism as a mostly conservative thought. While the latter considers the critique to historicism as a pure disregard of any political *praxis*, the former concedes that the most "theoreticist" thesis of Althusser *paradoxically* encourage many young students to take part in political struggle. This is even though Rancière still accuses Althusser

for furnishing a kind of solution “from above” to the revisionist crisis which in turn misconceives the power of the masses.<sup>6</sup>

It is not my purpose to discuss these accusations, but rather to notice that each of them embody those specularly-opposite ideological tendencies Althusser was fighting against inside the field of Marxism: these being, *historicism* as the blurring of the difference between theory of history as well as the history of theory (and, consequently, the subordination of the real scientific practices to idealist philosophy's normative regulation); and *politicism* as the dilution of the difference between theoretical thought and political thought (and, consequently, the subordination of politics to an idealist, epistemological conception of *practice*). Against the imaginary immediacy of an abstract, general and pure *praxis*, Althusser's position resists *avant la lettre* as reductions of the over-determined complex of concrete practices.

It might be difficult to understand, but it should be underlined that it was on the purpose of conceiving the proper conception of concrete differences of the most heterogeneous social practices, that Althusser was driven to pose the problem of theory itself. In this regard, I suggest that the critical revision of idealist Epistemology – to which Althusser was dedicated during the early sixties- was the prerequisite to consider concrete practices both in their different historical articulation as well as in the singular forms of their concrete existence. I propose, therefore, that the so-called “theoreticist” approach to Marx's *Capital* was oriented by this aim and more so it is this complex connection between politics and theory which happens to be overlooked today when the worth of Marxist theory is debated.<sup>7</sup>

To explore *Capital* in order to find a genuine materialist approach is to demand that theory assume its own practical condition. Further, to pose the practical entity of theory is to problematize (recursively) the procedure of reading itself:

I merely proposed a '*symptomatic*' reading of the works of Marx and of Marxism, one with another, i.e., the progressive and systematic production of a reflection of the problematic on its objects such as to make them *visible*, and the disinterment, the production of the deepest-lying problematic which will allow us to *see* what could otherwise only have existed allusively or practically. As a function of this demand, I can claim to have *read* the specific theoretical form of the Marxist dialectic in its directly political existence (and actively political: the policies of a revolutionary leader – Lenin – immersed in the revolution). But this *reading* was not, nor

could have been, a direct reading or the merely '*generalizing*' reading (...) this reading was in principle a *dual* reading, the result of a different, 'symptomatic' reading, which introduced into a *question* an answer given to its absent question.<sup>8</sup>

*Reading Capital* is an appeal to produce the practical exercise of simultaneously posing two questions: the question of the object of *Capital*, and the question of the specificity of the *relation* of theory with its object: "the question of the nature of the type of discourse set to work to handle this object, the question of scientific discourse."<sup>9</sup>

It is the question of theoretical discourse (a recursive interrogation about theoretical status) placed in the immanent space of both existence and concrete theory. Althusser discovers this meta-question in a "practical state" in Marx's works: the immanency of a *practical criterion of the true*. The question about the specific status of theory, interrogated in its practical condition – in other words, practice taken as the nature of theory itself and not as any kind of "corruption", "expression", "application", "second instance", etc. – needs to be developed into two completely separate problematics, despite these problematics existing together: the "epistemic" problem of the strictly scientific status of some determinate practices – thus, the validation criteria "purely *internal* to the practice"<sup>10</sup> – and the problem of the material (historical) existence of scientific practices in a wider (non-theoretical) conjuncture.

It must be underlined that there is a slight but substantial difference between the sort of critique Althusser discovers in Marx and a mere post-foundationalist critique to metaphysics, which is somehow implied in this distinction. The difference lies in the exigency of deriving from the critique a new positive theory of knowledge production, which of course involves the question of how to discern a criterion of the true. There is no Marxist theory (neither as scientific discourse nor as political thought) if this requirement is abandoned to epistemological (or cultural) relativism.

This supposes an intellectual effort of stating theoretical specificity regarding other discursive formations and regarding other (non-theoretical) practices. Finally, this claims for a complex conception of *practice*, irreducible to a *simple or general relationship to real*, being that the notion of an immediate-corporeal contact with things or an immediate cognition of the truth (either in empiricist or idealist versions).

It was by means of this dual reading of *Capital* that Althusser was capable to identify the complex bond that connect these two incommensurable (while quite imbricated) dimensions of a theoretical combination (*Verbindung*). It was by means

of this practice of reading – which included the interrogation about reading procedures – that he was able to reach the singular dialectic that *conjoins and tenses* history and theory (as a double problem of the conjuncture and as a result of historical process, both acting as structural mechanisms).

When we pose the question of the *mechanism* by which the *object* of knowledge produces the cognitive appropriation of the *real object*, we are posing a quite different question from that of the conditions of the *production* of knowledge. This latter question is derived from a theory of the history of theoretical practice, which, as we have seen, is only possible given the application of the concepts which enable us to think the structure of that practice and the history of its transformations. The question we are posing is a new one, one which is precisely passed over in silence in the other. The theory of the history of knowledge or theory of the history of theoretical practice enables us to understand *how* human knowledges are produced in the history of the succession of different modes of production, first in the form of ideology, then in the form of science.<sup>11</sup>

There, where superficial and precipitated readings have seen a dichotomy between “structure” and “genesis” as a subsequent choice for pure formalist standpoint, Althusser gives rise to a completely different question: the question of the singular (materialist) philosophical practice, capable of making room for two problems *at the same time* (now re-named as the problem of a conjuncture as a “result” and the problem of a conjuncture as a “mechanism”).

This is the question of dialectical materialism. Not dialectical materialism as a philosophical system, but dialectical materialism *in action* – that is, working “in a practical state” – in Marx’s writings.

### **Overdetermination: practice and time**

To pose the difference between Marxist and Hegelian dialectics, Althusser tried to name it with the Freudian notion of *overdetermination*. He followed the idea that the materialist conception of necessity may be developed in terms of the deep connection that binds a *non-contemporary* concept of temporality with the complex structure of the social whole:

...*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 (...) with the object of constructing *the Marxist concept of historical time* on the basis of the Marxist conception of the social totality"<sup>12</sup>.

Whereas, in the idealist conception of social totality as a *spiritual whole*, real practices have no incidence but that one already presupposed by an essential philosophical principle.<sup>13</sup>

The question of efficacy is the question of philosophy, in as much as it is the question of the "laws of history". It must be considered therefore, that Marxist intervention is located in an already occupied field: by the Cartesian mechanistic system or the *Leibnizian* concept of expression. In as much as scientific discovery of the theory of history developed in *Capital as a critical work* contained 'in the practical state' (what is to say, without producing *the concept* of it in a philosophical opus) a "simple question" so new and unforeseen that "it contained enough to smash all the classical theories of causality":

The mechanistic system, Cartesian in origin, which reduced causality to a *transitive* and analytical effectivity: it could not be made to think the effectivity of a whole on its elements, except at the cost of extra-ordinary distortions (...). But a second system was available, one conceived precisely in order to deal with the effectivity of a whole on its elements: the Leibnizian concept of *expression*. This is the model that dominates all Hegel's thought. But it presupposes in principle that the whole in question be reducible to an *inner essence*, of which the elements of the whole are then no more than the phenomenal forms of expression, the inner principle of the essence being present at each point in the whole...<sup>14</sup>

Both systems had been rejected by Marx in his *Thesis on Feuerbach* but it had been especially from the rupture implied in *Thesis VI*, which rejects at the same time essential principle and phenomena attributes, that a new materialist causality can be shaped as a movement of a double struggle against idealism and empiricism.<sup>15</sup> Althusser went this far to reach the necessary space to pose a problem that has been all the time so near. The proper statement of the *primacy of practice over theory* can only emerge from a proper critique of the ideological (idealist) notion of

*practice*, in so far that it hides an unseen primacy of ideas (philosophy) over (historical determined) practices. In this sense, a *dual reading* is a critical reading of that double movement and in which the foreclosure of the practical condition (and historical commitment) of *theory* accords with an ideological image of *practice* (finally constrained to *humanism*).

This critical procedure is implied in what Althusser, following Bachelard – in the peculiar way that Balibar has pointed out<sup>16</sup> and has called, *rupture*.<sup>17</sup> The Althusserian conception of *rupture* should be understood against the empiricist conception of time expressed in the image of an “essential section”<sup>18</sup>: “the possibility of reading in the immediacy of a present (or of an instant) the whole system of determinations of a historical phenomenon”. This take us to a singular (almost paradoxical) conception of an “event” that is a process or a “break as the beginning of a process that has no end”<sup>19</sup>, where any reduction of the couple science/ideology to the philosophical dichotomy of truth and error, has no place.

In this sense, it should be underlined that the conception of a plural temporality is the core of materialism. And, if it is pursued as a *concept of time*, it is because it already worked in the very *practical process* in which Marxist materialism thought had taken place. A heterogeneous and contradictory process which conjoins theoretical and political practices lies within that of such political men as Lenin, who “meets Imperialism in his political practice in the modality of a current existence in a concrete present” and that of the theoretician of history or the historian, who “meet it in another modality, the modality of non-currency and abstraction”<sup>20</sup>.

The aim here is to achieve a kind of thought capable of putting together what already resists to be in touch with political practice and theoretical practices and conceived in their differential articulation while also making a claim for a deep consideration of the concept of time. For it is *in relation with temporality* that one of the main aspects of their difference can be captured. Here theoretical practice reads *fait accompli* while political practice focuses “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; in short, on his own action”.<sup>21</sup>

Therefore, the opportunity for formulating in a theoretical form the singularity of this materialism lies in the “space” opened by the duplicity of reading that pursues “a variable relationship between two inseparable terms: the unity of practice and theory”<sup>22</sup>. Once the epistemological dichotomy is discarded, one can start to consider the difference between theory and politics within the framework of a new kind of

philosophical practice, one of a paradoxical *conjunctural theory*, or a revolutionary science:

This is what is irreplaceable in Lenin's texts: the analysis of the structure of a conjuncture, the displacements and condensations of its contradictions and their paradoxical unity, all of which are the very existence of that 'current situation' which political action was to transform, in the strongest sense of the word, between February and October, 1917.<sup>23</sup>

### Theory *sive* practice

In his preface to *Reading Capital* Althusser wonders:

Need I add that once we have broken with the religious complicity between *Logos* and *Being*, between the Great Book that was, in its very being, the World, and the discourse of the knowledge of the world; between the essence of things and its reading; -once we have broken those tacit pacts in which the men of a still fragile age secured themselves with magical alliances against the precariousness of history and the trembling of their own daring— need I add that, once we have broken these ties, a new conception of discourse at last becomes possible?<sup>24</sup>

Why could one say that the question of dialectics, as I have developed thus far, is compelled within the gesture of posing the discursive status of theory? In *Philosophy for Non-Philosophers*, published just recently in English, Althusser develops an answer that might be understood in this sense: as a double-front battle against idealism of general practice, and empiricism of pure theory (which involves the illusion of transparency in language). This supposes two movements: 1) the critique of every image of practice as an *imaginary immediate relationship to the real*, which Althusser recognizes as an element of the genealogy of the Myth of Eden; and 2) the effort of giving rise to a materialist conception of practice.

In the chapter, titled "The Myth of State of Nature", Althusser inscribes empiricism within the legacy of religious discourse, while suggesting that the epistemological *adequatio rei et intellectus*, is deeply committed to an ideological notion of practice as an immediate relationship to real, indebted to the "religious myth of reading"<sup>25</sup>:

Not only was it enough to stretch out one's hand to pick fruit that was always ripe in order to satisfy one's hunger and thirst; it was also enough for Adam to see something with his eyes or take it in his hand in order to know it completely. Contrary to what is all too often supposed, human beings had the right to know all things: this knowledge was provided by the senses, was identical to the understanding in man, was identical to the words designating it, and was perfectly *immediate and transparent*. Adam did not have to work, produce or seek in order to know.<sup>26</sup>

Althusser is dealing with the idealist notion of practice as an immediate relationship to the real in order to show that the most corporeal images, those of mechanic materialism, empiricism of direct pure action, are constitutive elements of the inner world profiled by idealist discourse structure insofar as that notion of practice is the specular inverted partner of pure theory. In Greek, *theory* means "to contemplate", which alludes to the opposition between manual handling and vision, supposing that "one *does not handle what one sees*": "the hand [*main*], which 'handles' [*manie*] or 'manipulates' [*manipule*], which works, is contrasted to the eye, which sees at a distance, (...) commonly called *consciousness*..."<sup>27</sup>.

It is in the persistence of this dichotomy where the separation of pure theory as *vision*, pure practice as *manual labor*, and idealist epistemology and different kinds of idealism of practices (from empiricism to phenomenology) work together. What all emphasizes lack is the inherent complexity of real human relations to the world and where neither theory, nor practice are isolated from one another. In as much as this difference, materialism is understood in terms of a simple inversion of primacy of pure theory over pure practice which it is still captured by the whole idealist problematic. It is at this point where the core of Marxist materialism is interrogated to develop a new concept of practice, capable of avoiding binary schemes.

In order to deal with this question, Althusser introduces a dialectical problematization of the Aristotelian distinction between *praxis* and *poiesis* by means of the triadic approach that is involved in the concept of *social practice of production*. Etienne Balibar has pointed out clearly the depth of Marx's philosophical revolution in this singular rupture of the Aristotelian distribution of practices into the types of *poiesis* and *praxis* and where the former alludes to determined actions in the sort of natural (mechanical) necessity, the latter names the inner subjective transformation of a subject. Regarding the concept of *production* Balibar states that:

Marx removed one of philosophy's most ancient taboos: the radical distinction between *praxis* and *poiesis* (...) not a mere inversion of the hierarchy –a 'theoretical workerism' if I can put it thus (...)– but the identification of the two, the revolutionary thesis that *praxis* constantly passes over into *poiesis* and vice versa. There is never any effective freedom which is not also a material transformation, which is not registered historically in exteriority. But nor is there any work which is not a transformation of the self (...) such a thesis cannot but affect the third term of the classical triptych: *theôria*...<sup>28</sup>

Here, where positivist interpretations of *Thesis XI* might find an invitation to abandon philosophy, it can be discovered instead, a revolutionary turn in the question of materialism, which gives shape to an interrogation about the type of apodicticity which is capable of conceiving the distance between historical objectivity and the true. In this sense, the problem of conceptualizing the specificity of different practices is a matter of furnishing the problem of an immanent and complex causality. It is there where dialectical materialism, insofar as it confronts at the same time the images of Cartesian mechanistic system and *Leibnizian* expressive causality might open the path to a rigorous theory of history, while at the same time, revolutionizing the philosophical field.

The challenge of defining a *non-immediate* conception of practice coincides with the interrogation of the Marxist whole in terms of a conception of an overdetermined condition of human practices.<sup>29</sup> With the notion of *social production*, the whole triptych (*praxis-poiesis-theôria*) is disrupted. It is at this point where the concept of *production* arises in its philosophical depth, which is to say, surpassing the mere sociological scope.

As a practice, *production* is irreducible to the image of an immediate relationship to the real because it is irreducible to a simple dyadic relation (hand and nature). It is firstly, impossible to state production as a pure practice not mediated by cognition, ideas, abstractions of all sorts (be that "consciousness" or technical knowledge, physical theories inscribed in tools, cultural ideas involved in different kinds of works, etc.) and, secondly, it is impossible to consider it without stressing the social character of the relationship that overdetermines the dialectical bond between *praxis* and *poiesis*.

If, as Balibar has pointed out, Marx removed the distinction between *praxis* and *poiesis*, it is because of the radically new category of practice which takes shape in his philosophical intervention is part of a new ontological thought. It might be considered *transindividual* ontology, in as much as practices can only be considered "individual" in as much as they are social. As he pointed out, in relation to the VI *Theses on Feuerbach*:

It is significant that Marx (who spoke French almost as fluently as he did German) should have resorted to the foreign word '*ensemble*' here, clearly in order to avoid using the German 'das ganze', the whole or totality. Perhaps things would be clearer formally (...) if we, in our turn, added a word to the text (...) to characterize the *constitutive relation* which displaces the question of the human essence, while, at the same time, providing a formal answer to it (...) The word does in fact exist but is to be found in twentieth-century thinkers (Kojève, Simondon, Lacan...) we have in fact to think humanity as transindividual reality...<sup>30</sup>

Every practice is a social practice, and as such, brings into play a set of elements so complex, that we are led to conceive them "not as acts or simple activities, but as *processes*: that is, *as a set of (...) elements sufficiently well adapted to each other for their reciprocal action to produce a result that modifies the initial givens*". *Overdetermination* is, in this sense, a kind of causality that can be figured as a *structure of structures*, where the material transformation of nature cannot be considered but, rather, determined by social relations as complex processes where both objectivity and subjectivity take shape.

I have previously attempted to account for this phenomenon with the concept of *overdetermination*, which I borrowed from psycho-analysis; as one might suppose, this transfer of an analytical concept to Marxist theory was not an arbitrary borrowing but a necessary one, *for the same theoretical problem is at stake in both cases: with what concept are we to think the determination of either an element or a structure by a structure?* (...) The constant and real presence of this problem in Marx has been demonstrated by the rigorous analysis of his expressions and forms of reasoning in the preceding papers. It can be entirely summed up in the concept of '*Darstellung*', the key epistemological concept of the whole

Marxist theory of value, the concept whose object is precisely to designate the mode of *presence* of the structure in its *effects*, and therefore to designate structural causality itself.<sup>32</sup>

Since *The German Ideology*, the category of division of labour introduces to the core of materialism a notion of practice that won't be any more redirected onto any simplified image, the relation that people have to their means of subsistence is governed by the relation of production, and is thus a social relation "*a three-term abstraction*", underlines Althusser. Insofar practice of production includes this basic relation *as its condition*, "the relations governing the other practices can be *put into relation with* this first relation"<sup>33</sup>.

And since this social relation is, in class societies, a conflictual, antagonistic relation, determination by production (the base) *is not mechanical, but includes a 'play' that comes under the dialectic*. That is why this determination is said to be 'in the last instance' (...) To underscore this determination 'in the last instance', Marx presented his general hypothesis on the nature of social formations and history in the form of a *topography*.<sup>34</sup>

If *production* can be considered in this sense a *term with a double function* –in as much as it determines the belonging of all terms of the structure, while itself being excluded from it by the operation of posing a "*lieutenant*", as many authors had posed, it is quite far from the formalist tendencies of former structuralism. For the main problem of Marxist theory (which, as I have stated, implies the problem of apodicticity itself) is also the problem of elaborating the concept of *time*. A proper approach to the question of production must furnish the problem of "invisible times", a concept of time as the principle on which the very possibility and necessity of a plurality of different histories, corresponding to different levels of a very complex topography is based. This means necessarily accepting "the relative independence of each of these histories in the specific dependence which articulates each of the different levels of the social whole with the others."<sup>35</sup>

I should say that we cannot restrict ourselves to reflecting the existence of *visible* and measurable times (...) we must, of absolute necessity, pose the question of the mode of existence of *invisible* times, of the invisible rhythms and punctuations concealed beneath the surface of each visible time. Merely

reading *Capital* shows that Marx was highly sensitive to this requirement. It shows, for example, that the time of economic production is a specific time (...), but also that, as a specific time, it is a complex and non-linear time -a time of times, a complex time that cannot be *read* in the continuity of the time of life or clocks, but has to be *constructed* out of the peculiar structures of production.<sup>36</sup>

It is at this point where the singularity of Althusserian reading of *Capital* resides, usually occluded by precipitated interpretations that directly assume its belonging to Levi-Straussian structuralism or to barely non-Marxian post-structuralism: in the pursuing of a *materialism of overdetermination* it is capable of conceiving the social whole as a hierarchical and unequal structured process which is unified in its diversification by the type of articulation, displacement and torsion which harmonizes different times with one another. In other words, a transindividual combination of practical processes is a *time of times*:

...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. In exactly the same way, it is essential to construct the concepts of the different historical times which are never given in the ideological obviousness of the continuity of time (which need only be suitably divided into a good periodization to obtain the time of history), but must be constructed out of the differential nature and differential articulation of their objects in the structure of the whole.<sup>37</sup>

The topography of overdetermination is not “an ontology of binarism” nor is it the mere problem of formal structures, not even the problem of structures as processes of variation. Rather, it a question of *structures as complex conjunctures*. This thesis poses itself within the void of political practice in the very epistemological space of the materialist apodicticity.

### **Political practice/theoretical practice**

The question of materialism is, from here on, also a question of pursuing a very peculiar kind of *necessity*, a necessity capable of inhabiting *at the same time* the

most heterogeneous practices. As Althusser himself, pointed out, we shall start by considering *practices* in which the Marxist dialectic as such is *in action*. Marxist theoretical practice and Marxist political practice. It must be stressed that the sort of necessity capable of making room for political practice should be seriously considered with the paradoxical formula of a “rule of exception”<sup>38</sup>:

If it is true, as Leninist practice and reflection prove, that the revolutionary situation in Russia was precisely a result of the intense overdetermination of the basic class contradiction, we should perhaps ask what is exceptional about this 'exceptional situation', and whether, like all exceptions, this one does not clarify its rule - is not, unbeknown to the rule, the rule itself.<sup>39</sup>

An accurate reading of this passage could note that the peculiar way in which Althusser understands the conjunction of theoretical and political practices and where dialectical materialism inhabits *in action*, is neither a kind of proper application of theory to politics, nor a complementation of the former by the latter. It is the whole rejection of any subsumption of the notions of politics and theory into the epistemological idealist schemes of pure *Practice* and pure *Theory*, the abstract and the concrete, the Subject and the Object.

I said that Marx left us no Dialectics. This is not quite accurate. He did leave us one first-rate methodological text, unfortunately without finishing it: the *Introduction to the Critique of Political Economy*, 1859. This text does not mention the 'inversion' by name, but it does discuss its reality: the validating conditions for the scientific use of the concepts of Political Economy. A reflection on this use is enough to draw from it the basic elements of a Dialectics, since this use is nothing more nor less than the Dialectics in a practical state. I said that Lenin left us no Dialectics (...) This is not quite accurate. In his *Notebooks* Lenin did leave us some passages which are the sketch for a Dialectics. Mao Tse-tung developed these notes in the midst of a political struggle against dogmatic deviations inside the Chinese party in 1937, in an important text *On Contradiction*.<sup>40</sup>

The aporetic trail that takes form in Althusser's writings on dialectical materialism, in the 60's, must be followed carefully to achieve the complex conjunction that makes Marxist theory not only a theory of history (or, of the class struggle), but also a

singular formula of theoretical thought itself, the one that plunges into crises the whole epistemological tradition.

## A (re)commencement instead of a conclusion

If *Reading Capital* can be read as an exhortation, it should be the exhortation to develop the theoretical consequences of the most fruitful axiom of materialism: *the primacy of practice*. One can find it a delicious paradox that the most accurate effort in giving rise to a theory based on this axiom has been named *theoreticism*. A footnote of *Reading Capital* reveals this suggestive thesis:

For very profound reasons, it was often in fact *political* militants and leaders who, without being professional philosophers, were best able to read and understand *Capital* as philosophers (...) we can study *Marxist philosophy at work* in them, in the 'practical' state, Marxist philosophy which has become politics, political action, analysis and decision.<sup>41</sup>

It is not just by chance, but for very “profound reasons” that is by means of a political practice that dialectical materialism can be read in its philosophical depth. The question of dialectical materialism is within the scope of political leaders and is a question of the *conjunctural* nature of structures. It is also where the claim of a proper concept of time takes place.

It is because of political practice, as I have already mentioned that is a practice that works on *the limits of the present*, that it can *practically* pursue the singular materialist thought that figures the *unrepresentable conjoint* between theory, that “necessarily reflects on necessity's *fait accompli*”, and political practice as the practice “of a revolutionary leader who 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 ; in short, on his own action”.<sup>42</sup>

It is neither mere illustration, nor accurate interpretation of Marx's dialectical materialism which Althusser had searched for in Lenin's or Mao's thought, but rather the movement of a practical *detour* that indicates that political practice is far from being a complement to theory as it introduces a *constitutive void* – a void that is an activity of opening an *inner distance* – in the decentered core of theoretical discourse's structure.

This is an inner distance that could only be reached by a big detour:

One has to leave one's own world behind and make the Big Detour of the world to know one's own world. One can never venture too far a field in quest of the adventure of coming home. The same holds for philosophy.<sup>43</sup>

This subtle paradox may indicate the worthiness of a renewed reading of *Capital* as a kind of symptomatic reading introduced by Althusser. It happens that in searching for the concept of time implied in Marxist dialectical materialism, Althusser's anachronic theoreticism can expose one of today's most weakest flanks of critical theory facing neoliberal ideology's force: the lack of a political will of the true.

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<sup>1</sup> Balibar, E. *The Philosophy of Marx*. London-NY: Verso, 1995., p.1.

<sup>2</sup> Derrida, J. *The Spectres of Marx. The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International*. London-NY: Routledge, 1994., p.14.

<sup>3</sup> Balibar, *The Philosophy of Marx*. p.1.

<sup>4</sup> Marx, K. *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Luis Bonaparte*, Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1937 p.6.

<sup>5</sup> Montag, W. *Althusser and his contemporaries. Philosophy's perpetual war*. London: Duke University Press, 2013., p.1.

<sup>6</sup> "From the quarter of Louis Althusser and his numerous followers there has been launched an unmeasured assault upon 'historicism: The advances of historical materialism, its supposed 'knowledge', have rested - it turns out - upon one slender and rotten epistemological pillar ('empiricism'); when Althusser submitted this pillar to a stern interrogation it shuddered and crumbled to dust; and the whole enterprise of historical materialism collapsed in ruins around it. Not only does it turn out that men have never 'made their own history' at all (being only Träger or vectors of ulterior structural determinations) but it is also revealed that the enterprise of historical materialism - the attainment of historical knowledge - has been misbegotten from the start, since 'real' history is unknowable and cannot be said to exist." Thompson, E.P. *The Poverty of Theory or an Orrery of Errors*, London: Merlin Press, (1978) 1995., p.2. And, "The return to Marx, the autonomy of theoretical practice, the theory of the autonomy of instances: all of these are attempts to find a solution, from above, to the revisionist crisis. The autonomy of instances, a substitute for the autonomy of the masses, was, in essence, a new figure of utopia. True, it was not a utopia populated by phalansteries or Icarians ready to welcome workers, but it still gave the thinker's solution there where the real movement seemed to come up short. If Marx describes utopian socialism as the infancy of the proletarian movement, a thought or idea from a moment when workers themselves had not yet developed solutions to their exploitation as workers, Althusser's theory of history can perhaps be described as a modern form of utopia, as the substitute for the self-emancipation we no longer believe in." Rancière, J. *Althusser's lesson*. The Continuum International Publishing Group Ltd., 2011, p.33.

<sup>7</sup>“When once before I claimed that it was necessary to give to this practical existence of Marxist philosophy, which exists in person in the practical state in that scientific practice of the analysis of the capitalist mode of production, Capital, and in the economic and political practice of the history of the workers' movement, the form of theoretical existence indispensable to its needs and our needs, I merely proposed a labour of investigation and critical elucidation, which would analyse one with another, according to the nature of their peculiar modalities, the different degrees of this existence, i.e., the different works which are the raw material of our reflection.” Althusser, L. in Althusser, L and Balibar, E. *Reading Capital*. London: New Left Review, 1970., p.32.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Althusser, L. in Althusser, L and Balibar, E. *Reading Capital*. p.14

<sup>10</sup> “To speak of the criterion of practice where theory is concerned, and every other practice as well, then receives its full sense: for theoretical practice is indeed its own criterion, and contains in itself definite protocols with which to validate the quality of its product, i.e., the criteria of the scientificity of the products of scientific practice. This is exactly what happens in the real practice of the sciences: once they are truly constituted and developed they have no need for verification from external practices to declare the knowledges they produce to be 'true', i.e., to be knowledges.” Althusser, L. in Althusser, L and Balibar, E. *Reading Capital*. p.60

<sup>11</sup> Althusser, L. in Althusser, L and Balibar, E. *Reading Capital*. p. 62.

<sup>12</sup> Althusser, L. in Althusser, L and Balibar, E. *Reading Capital*. p.96.

<sup>13</sup> “Because the Hegelian whole is a 'spiritual whole' (...) in which each part is a pars totalis, the unity of this double aspect of historical time (homogeneous continuity/contemporaneity) is possible and necessary”. Althusser, L. in Althusser, L and Balibar, E. *Reading Capital*. p.96.

<sup>14</sup> Althusser, L. in Althusser, L and Balibar, E. *Reading Capital*. p.187.

<sup>15</sup> “Feuerbach dissolves the religious essence into the human essence. But the human essence is no abstraction inherent in each single individual. In its reality it is the ensemble of social relations. Feuerbach, who does not enter on a critique of this real essence, is consequently compelled:1. To abstract from the historical process and to fix the religious sentiment [*Gemüt*] as something for itself and to presuppose an abstract –isolated – human individual. 2. Therefore, with him the human essence can be comprehended only as "genus," as an internal, dumb generality which links the many individuals merely naturally”. Marx, K. “Theses on Feuerbach”, in Engels, F. *Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy*. Foreign Languages Press, Peking 1976., p. 64.

<sup>16</sup> Balibar, E. “Form Bachelard to Althusser: the concept of epistemological break”. *Economy and Society* Vol 7 Num.3, August 1978., pp.207, 237.

<sup>17</sup> In 1845, Marx broke radically with every theory that based, history and politics on an essence of man. This unique rupture contained three indissociable elements. (1) The formation of a theory of history and politics based on radically new concepts: the concepts of social formation, productive forces, relations of production, superstructure, ideologies, determination in the last instance by the economy, specific determination of the other levels, etc. (2) A radical critique of the theoretical pretensions of every philosophical humanism. (3) The definition of humanism as an ideology. This new conception is completely rigorous as well, but it is a new rigour: the essence criticized is defined as an ideology, a category belonging to the new theory of society and history. This rupture with every philosophical anthropology or humanism is no secondary detail; it is Marx's scientific discovery. Althusser, L. *For Marx*. London-NY: Verso, 2005., p. 227.

<sup>18</sup> “Essential section: (coupe d'essence). Ideological theories (empiricism, idealism, historicism) see the historical totality as analysable in a present, a contemporaneity, in which the relations between the parts can be seen and recorded. To see this present implies the possibility of cutting a section through the historical current, a section in which the essence of that current is visible. This essential section is impossible for Althusser and Balibar because there is no present for all the elements and structures at once in their conceptual system. The possibility of an essential section is one of the positive tests for an empiricist ideology of history.” Brewster. B. “Glossary” in Althusser, L. and Balibar, E. *Reading Capital*. London: New Left Review, 1970, p.314.

<sup>19</sup> Balibar, E. “Form Bachelard to Althusser: the concept of epistemological break”. *Economy and Society* Vol 7 Num.3, August 1978., pp.207, 237.

<sup>20</sup> Althusser, L. *For Marx*. London-NY: Verso, 2005., p.178.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> “The Marxist thesis of the ‘primacy of practice over theory’ is nevertheless liable to misinterpretation, because of the little word ‘primacy’ and the sharp distinction between practice and theory. It is idealism which radically separates practice from theory and, in general, puts theory in power over practice. In fact, there is theory (knowledge) in all practice, as there is practice in all theory (all knowledge results from labour)”. Althusser, L. *Philosophy for non-philosophers*. London, Bloomsbury.2017., p.66.

<sup>23</sup> Althusser, L. *For Marx*. London-NY: Verso, 2005. p.179.

<sup>24</sup> Althusser, L. in Althusser, L. and Balibar, E. *Reading Capital*. London: New Left Review, 1970, p.18.

<sup>25</sup> “...the yearning for a reading at sight, for Galileo’s ‘Great Book of the World’ itself, is older than all science, that it is still silently pondering 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. This makes us suspect that to treat nature or reality as a Book, in which, according to Galileo, is spoken the silent discourse of a language whose ‘characters are triangles, circles and other geometrical figures’, it was necessary to have a certain idea of reading which makes a written discourse the immediate transparency of the true, and the real the discourse of a voice. The first man ever to have posed the problem of reading, and in consequence, of writing, was Spinoza, and he was also the first man in the world to have proposed both a theory of history and a philosophy of the opacity of the immediate. With him, for the first time ever, a man linked together in this way the essence of reading and the essence of history in a theory of the difference between the imaginary and the true. This explains to us why Marx could not possibly have become Marx except by founding a theory of history and a philosophy of the historical distinction between ideology and science, and why in the last analysis this foundation was consummated in the dissipation of the religious myth of reading.” Althusser, L. in Althusser, L. and Balibar, E. *Reading Capital*, pp. 16-17.

<sup>26</sup> Althusser, L. *Philosophy for non-philosophers*. London, Bloomsbury.2017., p.72.

<sup>27</sup> Althusser, L. *Philosophy for non-philosophers*, p.79.

<sup>28</sup> Balibar, E. *The philosophy of Marx*. Verso, London, NY, 1995., p.41.

<sup>29</sup> “We know that the Marxist whole cannot possibly be confused with the Hegelian whole: it is a whole whose unity, far from being the expressive or ‘spiritual’ unity of Leibniz’s or Hegel’s whole, is constituted by 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 co-exist within this

complex structural unity". Althusser, L. in Althusser, L. and Balibar, E. *Reading Capital*. London: New Left Review, 1970, p.97.

<sup>30</sup> Balibar, E. *The philosophy of Marx*. Verso, London, NY, 1995. p.31.

<sup>31</sup> Althusser, L. *Philosophy for non-philosophers*. London, Bloomsbury.2017., p.82.

<sup>32</sup> Althusser, L. in Althusser, L. and Balibar, E. *Reading Capital*. London: New Left Review, 1970 p.188.

<sup>33</sup> Althusser, L. *Philosophy for non-philosophers*. London, Bloomsbury.2017., p.82.

<sup>34</sup> Althusser, L. *Philosophy for non-philosophers*, p.83.

<sup>35</sup> Althusser, L. in Althusser, L. and Balibar, E. *Reading Capital*. London: New Left Review, 1970., p.101.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Althusser, L. in Althusser, L. and Balibar, E. *Reading Capital*. London: New Left Review, 1970, p.103.

<sup>38</sup> Althusser, L. *For Marx*. London-NY: Verso, 2005., 179.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Althusser, L. *For Marx*. London-NY: Verso, 2005. p.182.

<sup>41</sup> Althusser, L. in Althusser, L. and Balibar, E. *Reading Capital*. London: New Left Review, 1970, p.76,

<sup>42</sup> Althusser, L. *For Marx*. London-NY: Verso, 2005, p.179.

<sup>43</sup> Althusser, L. *Philosophy for non-philosophers*. London, Bloomsbury. 2017, p.47.

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