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The Procrustean Bed of Class Struggle

Edgar Illas

This essay reflects on the old problematic of class struggle and historical change. I examine two dilemmas: first, the dilemma between the economy and politics, that is, the question of whether the mode of production must be considered the final structure of history or whether the political has a constituent and ontological role; and, second, the space between the problem of capitalism and the problem of ontology, or, in other words, the impasse between Marxism and deconstruction. I explore the first dilemma in the contested space of Althusserianism, specifically in connection to the notions of structural causality and aleatory materialism. Revisiting Althusser can offer us a fresh insight on the origin of the “political turn” of post-Marxism and the shift from the teleological notion of history to the notion of history as event. A re-examination of Althusser’s points can show us that, against what post-Marxism has led us to believe, this shift does not necessarily involve a replacement of the economic structure for the political event.

In reference to the second issue, I argue that epochal change must be thought not only as transition between modes of production but also through a structure of otherness. My thesis is that class struggle cannot explain nor produce the transition to a new mode of production unless it involves an unanticipated moment of radical difference. Class struggle should not act as a Procrustean bed that keeps us from perceiving the unfathomable, almost miraculous moment of true historical change.

Althusser’s Dialectical Immanence

A fertile space to discuss the enigma of historical change in our contemporary theoretical scene is the battleground of Althusserianism. As is known, Althusser proposed a new reading of the base and superstructure paradigm with the notion of “structural causality” and the conception of historical conjunctures as a complex unities of “relatively autonomous” spheres (over)determined in the last instance by the economy.¹ This model aimed to overcome the

¹ Althusser writes in *Reading Capital*: “[the unity] 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

Hegelian “expressive” conception of historical stages, by which one element of the social expressed the essence of the whole. Yet, the rejection of Hegel’s philosophy of history entailed one major problem, namely that one could no longer explain historical change through the teleological unfolding of some essential principle (such as the Absolute Spirit). The paradigm of structural causality was very useful to understand the synchronic complexity of historical conjunctures while refusing the ideologies of economicism and developmentalism. But, within this new structuralist paradigm, how should one account for the diachronic succession of conjunctures and modes of production? In other words, how should one conceive the transition from capitalism to communism?²

This question was one of the key conceptual challenges that faced the late Althusser, and post-Althusserianism emerged directly from this fundamental problematic. The essential point that defined this problematic can be summarized by saying that the Hegelian logic of history based on supersession (*Aufhebung*) was displaced by the logic of the event. While the first Althusser had redefined the Marxist logic of history through the paradigm of structural causality and overdetermination, the late Althusser continued this task by articulating what came to be known as the logic of the historical event.

A first step toward the outlining of this new logic can be found in his *Essays in Self-Criticism*. In them, Althusser explains that the combination of elements in the structure of a mode of production is not merely formal and that, consequently, one cannot deduce or predict new modes by simply combining these elements: “and, in particular, it is not possible construct in this way, a priori... the communist mode of production!” (Althusser 1976, 129). That is to say, historical change cannot depend on stipulating new combinations of elements, as if human subjects were merely a

this complex structural unity, articulated with one another according to specific determinations, fixed in the last instance by the level or instance of the economy” (2006, 97).

² As Gregory Elliott’s classic study on Althusser (2009) demonstrates, this new structuralist Marxism was itself a product of the conjuncture of 1960s France: Althusser’s attack on economicism was a response to the doctrines of the French Communist Party and also a “left critique” of Stalinism. See also Montag 2003, and Lewis 2005a.

function and a support of new structures. Instead, Althusser stresses that, for Marxism, the agency of real subjects and their unanticipated “encounter” is crucial in the production of new concrete realities.

The term “aleatory materialism” represents a step further in this direction, as it proposes that historical change can come through any sort of social event, not necessarily tied to class struggle. “[T]out n’est pas dans la vie lutte de classe” (2005b, 191), proclaims Althusser in one of his latest texts, titled “Du matérialisme aléatoire.” For him, the interstices and margins of society can also be places of heterogeneous resistances and struggles. “[A]leatory materialism,” he states in his interviews with Fernanda Navarro from 1984-87, “[is] required to think the openness of the world towards the event, the as-yet-unimaginable, and also all living practice, politics included” (2006, 264). Therefore, for the late Althusser the ultimate consequence of Marx’s structural dialectics is that historical change does not follow the teleology of *Aufhebung*, but takes place in unpredicted, fortuitous ways through the emergence of historical events and conjunctures.

While Althusser initiated this investigation, it was only within the post-Althusserian context that this problematic was fully developed. Now the logic of the event dominates some of the main currents of contemporary thinking and has replaced teleology quite entirely: from Badiou to Derrida, from Rancière to Hardt and Negri or Laclau and Mouffe, the logic of unpredictable event-ness has become, despite its many theoretical formulations, the most common conception of historical change. This logic has produced a key alteration in the way historical time is conceived. Now conjunctures are no longer conceived as a moment in a succession of temporal periods; rather, they are the consequence of a foundational event. Aleatory events occur and simultaneously institute new conjunctures, and one cannot be recognized without the other. The teleological conception of history as successive periods separated by transitional, world-shattering moments is no longer presupposed. Above all, this means that one cannot imagine a full transition to a socialist mode of production beyond capitalism.

This new historical logic has given way to a crucial deduction, namely that the end of teleology also entails the end of the economic last instance. When one assumes that a determining last instance exists, one still operates within a teleological framework. After all, the “structural causality” determined by the “absent cause” of the

economy or the mode of production still constitutes a causality, a dialectical formation, or a teleological remnant. We can locate in this evolution of post-Althusserianism the core of the so-called political turn in contemporary thought, a turn that has left behind the Marxist paradigm of the mode of production and has predominantly adopted the terms of political ontology (such as power, biopolitics, sovereignty, empire, distribution of the sensible, social or police order, etc.).

In principle, the most fruitful consequence of this rejection of the Marxist economic matrix as the last ontological form is that it opens up spaces for a multiplicity of political struggles and types of resistance. On the basis of these new premises, political struggles no longer need to be unified by the common cause against capitalism and their finality must no longer be the proletarian road to socialism. Transformative events can take place in any context, in any interstitial sites, at the margins of a system that has no center and no order structured by one major “absent cause.” Negri, for instance, defines this post-Althusserian framework as “completely open: ‘man,’ ‘man’ in history, as subject in history--in this opening without finality or necessity but simply available to every aleatory occurrence and to every event--builds on this basis the appropriate practices” (Negri 1996, 62).

To give ontological prevalence to the economic matrix or to the realm of the political seems to be a simple matter of choice. However, many problems arise as a result of shifting from the Marxist economic framework to the new ontology of the political. The renunciation of the structuring “last instance” necessarily entails the impossibility of knowing whether a given political practice is resisting the capitalist system or whether it is secretly obeying its logic. If the realm of the political remains an immanent field without its dialectical counterpart, namely the “absent,” “transcendental” structure that organizes this field, then we run the risk that our transformative political practices leave the system intact. The issue of emancipation becomes crucial here. Without the reference to an “absent cause” that structures the social as a totality, and therefore without the possibility of imagining its (to insert Jameson’s key word: utopian) overcoming, how can we determine the content of political practices? No universal criterion could tell us any more whether the content of a given practice is emancipatory or reactionary, whether it is progressive or

conservative: politics becomes an immanent contest of power forces and hegemonic operations.

In fact, the very notion of emancipation no longer makes much sense within the paradigm of the political. This is Laclau's well-known deduction in *Emancipation(s)*. Laclau explains how the discourse of radical emancipation emerged with the Christian idea of salvation and how, in modern times, it was secularized, via Spinoza, by Hegelian and Marxist eschatology. He observes that emancipation can only be conceived as the radical break from a present situation, that is, as the emergence of a new, liberated realm that cannot be in any sense connected to the previous state of enslavement. If there was any form of continuation between the two states, then no emancipation would have occurred: “*either* emancipation is radical and, in that case, it has to be its own ground and confine what it excludes to a radical otherness constituted by evil or irrationality; *or* there is a deeper ground which establishes the rational connections between the pre-emancipatory order, the new ‘emancipated’ one and the transition between both – in which case emancipation cannot be considered as a truly *radical* foundation” (Laclau 1996, 4).

This deduction challenges the Marxist eschatology in particular. Laclau asserts that the revolutionary emancipation from capitalism to communism is a logical impossibility: one cannot presuppose, as Marxism does, that there can be a transition between modes of production and at the same time conceive this transition as emancipation: a deeper ground and a radical break are logically incompatible. For this reason, one cannot maintain that the proletariat is the special actor that will carry out this emancipatory transition. For Laclau, emancipation will only be meaningful as a political concept if it remains essentially open: if it is open to the possibility that any social agent can articulate itself, by means of a hegemonic operation, as the carrier of an emancipatory content that is not based on a predetermined ground but that emerges as a result of its own articulation. This openness points at the same that Negri says when he affirms that changing the course of history should be “available to every aleatory occurrence and to every event.” Laclau's analogous motto is that “today we are at the end of emancipation and at the beginning of freedom” (1996, 18). Indeed, Laclau's notion of freedom aims to be a purer form of emancipation itself: emancipation freed--or emancipated!--from eschatology and “deeper grounds” and

founded on the very heterogeneous acts that emerge on behalf of freedom itself.³

This embrace of the multiplicity of political practices is highly desirable. And the rejection of the proletariat as the primary emancipatory agent is certainly necessary, if only because in our global times dominated by the logics of immaterial labor, finance capital and biopolitical production one can no longer establish clear boundaries between workers and capitalists, between work and leisure, or between production and life. Thus, one would not have anything to oppose to these prospects if it wasn't because the emancipation from eschatology already took place within Althusserian Marxism.

Althusser demonstrated that the structural or materialist dialectics are not a teleological eschatology that decides the content of emancipatory acts and assumes that transitions from one mode of production to another are fully recognizable revolutionary events. Indeed, the most perplexing fact is that the non-teleological logic of the (political) event was never proved to be incompatible with the last instance of the economy. Althusser's "aleatory materialism" never rejects the Marxist primacy of economic form. In "Du matérialisme aléatoire," he does proclaim that the margins can be places of resistance not necessarily inscribed to class struggle; but, in the next paragraph, he links these margins back to Marx: "Marx wrote: 'the proletariat inhabits the margins of bourgeois society'" (2005b, 191; my translation). Or, in his interviews with Fernanda Navarro, he talks about the aleatory logic of the event and reinscribes it to class struggle: "for a history which is present, which is living, is also open to a future that is uncertain, unforeseeable, not yet accomplished, and therefore *aleatory*. Living history obeys only a constant (not a law): the constant of class struggle" (2006, 264).

Class struggle may be a constant, or a "tendential law" (264), but it certainly continues to function as the underlying, overdetermining economic instance that the post-Althusserian "political turn" has rejected. In fact, Althusser's central project for a materialist dialectics precisely demonstrates that the logic of the event cannot operate without the last instance. Althusser's aim is to recognize the multiplicity and the "relative autonomy" of conjunctural

³ For critiques of Laclau's "anti-essentialist" position, see Dallmayr 1987; Shoom 1995; Lewis 2005b.

political, cultural, social, and tactical struggles. But these struggles, in their very effectivity, refer to a last instance, even though we know too that “the lonely hour of the ‘last instance’ never comes” (Althusser 2005a, 113). What made possible the reconceptualization of historicity as a field of multiple events and emancipatory acts was the (economic) structural causality that converts aleatory conjunctures and occurrences into meaningful events and, potentially, into revolutionary practices. The significance of these events comes from the overdetermining instances which produce them but which become visible and structured as a result of the emergence of the events themselves. And the “last instance” is an essential part of this structuring process, as it (over)determines which events will become dominant and hegemonic; an overdetermination that remains inherent, not external, to the events. The events and the systemic structures in effect are ultimately part of the same (dialectical) process and they cannot be separated without losing their ontological cogency. In this sense, Étienne Balibar explains that the Althusserian conjuncture is not a temporal moment of a structure and that the structure is not a teleological template: “It is no longer a question of viewing the conjuncture as a short moment in the life of the structure or a transition between successive stages of the structure, because the reality of the structure is nothing but the unpredictable succession of conjunctures; conversely, the conjuncture is merely determined as a certain disposition of the structure” (Balibar 1996, 115).⁴

Thus, the unpredictability without finality of the logic of the event does not supersede the causality of the structure; or, in other words, the structure is not an eschatology that rejects the radical foundation of emancipatory acts. On the contrary, events and emancipatory acts are a product of the very reciprocity between conjunctures (of events and acts) and systemic structures. This is an immanent reciprocity, but this immanence does not entail the disappearance of the mode of production as the determinant causality. The immanence of the field of politics involves conceiving

⁴ In this paper, I go back and forth between Althusser’s early and late texts. While Negri speaks of a *Kehre* between the two periods, one of the premises of my reflection is that aleatory materialism was already an implicit element of structural causality. Thus, I interpret the *Kehre* as a re-examination of the same problematics rather than as a break in Althusser’s corpus. For a full reflection on this matter, see Balibar 1994, and the volume edited by Diefenbach et al., *Encountering Althusser*, especially Part I (3-112).

this field as the mode of presence (or *Darstellung*) of the structure in its effects. Given that post-Althusserianism has tended to deduce from this immanence that the primacy of class struggle must be abandoned, now it might be time to re-emphasize the minimal dialectics of this immanent reciprocity between conjunctures and structure. After all, the fact that Althusser retained the words “structure” and “effects” reveals that, in him, immanence is haunted by its inherent other, namely the dialectics between base and superstructure. As Warren Montag argues, Althusser put forth immanence but, in certain parts of *Reading Capital*, he also hesitated and “posited a whole or structure that not only exceeds its effects, is not exhausted in them, but leads a latent existence beneath or behind the manifest content, the truth of which in turn could only be that hidden whole that it is the task of interpretation to decipher” (Montag 1998, 71).

In hindsight, Althusser’s hesitation is not a sign of inconsistency; rather, it offers us a valuable lesson: that, even though immanence can help us affirm the diversity of political struggles, the dialectics of structural causality compel us to direct these struggles against the structure of capitalism. The impossible reconciliation of these two stances makes all the more necessary the attempt to constantly counterbalance them--a counterbalancing that can be conceived as a practice of dialectical immanence.

To sum up, it is only when we assume the ontological supremacy of the political that politics and the economic last instance become incompatible with each other. As a result of this incompatibility, the economy is no longer the structuring form of the social but is turned into one of its ontic spheres, that is, into one of the contents that make up the social order. But, from the Marxist-Althusserian perspective, political events and economic structures are part of the same materialist dialectics. Here the economic last instance is not the eschatology that imposes a single content on the multiplicity of events and practices; instead, it is the necessary structural condition for this multiplicity to emerge. The political and the economic are incompatible only outside of Marxism. Within the Marxist problematic, it is precisely their reciprocity and at the same time their irreducibility to each other (conjunctures vis-à-vis structures) that make possible the emergence of social antagonisms as well as emancipatory acts.

The Ontological Boundaries of Marxism

Let us now move in another direction to deduce further implications from the logic of the event. While this new logic of history does not require the abandonment of the Marxist political economy (as “the political turn” has solved something that Althusserian Marxism had already solved), the logic of the event inevitably destabilizes the ontological foundations of Marxism. The ultimate consequence of this logic is that the most radical historical event, or perhaps the event par excellence, must consist in a change in the very structure of history itself. Paradoxically, the new historical logic of the event cannot have history as its last ontological horizon. The event is unpredictable and simultaneously effective only if it propels radical change within and at the same time beyond given historical situations. The changing event presupposes an opening to an outside of history and ontology altogether; that is, it assumes the possibility of a radically different outside.

Here the Marxist ontology of history encounters something that cannot be explained within its premises. One may argue that Marxism already theorizes these conditions when it asserts that the changes of modes of production cause the emergence of different temporalities and new ontologies of the present. But this emergence takes place through enigmatic transitions and unpredictable revolutionary events, and the structure that makes these events possible must be conceived as a structure of otherness. The event is the irreducible difference of that which remains structurally unthinkable and non-historical. The conditions for systemic change entail the opening to the possibility of an outside that cannot be reinscribed in any temporality or form of Being.

As we saw, Laclau already warned us against the aporia of systemic change, which establishes that the promise of emancipation and the dialectics of class struggle are logically incompatible: if emancipation is real, then it must involve a foundational act that radically breaks from the previous situation; but if the deeper ground of class struggle is presupposed, then the emancipatory act can be predicted and even provoked by this structure and therefore there is no real break, but just a transition of conjunctures. For Laclau, this contradiction reveals the deceptive nature of Marxist emancipatory promises, and he does not hesitate to throw the communist promise out with the bath water of emancipation.

His caution regarding facile promises of emancipation is important, but this logical refutation has entailed, again, the re-ontologization of the political. Post-Althusserianism has conceived the event in political terms as an unanticipated moment of constitution; in other words, the political refers to the new ontological primacy of the moment of constitution of any new order or conjuncture. And while this change has made political practice accessible to any aleatory event, the ontological power given to the political has ultimately closed off not only the confrontation with the mode of production as structure, but also the possibility of an unnamed moment of radical difference, a moment that should not be conceived as constituent but as impossible, a moment of potential critique rather than actual foundation. In other words, the institution of the political as the ontological basis of politics is both a positive and a negative thing: it has granted political force to all types of collective struggles, but, precisely because of this abstract openness, it has cancelled the possibility of antisystemic delineations and emancipatory practices. And in Laclau's case, the premises of radical democracy, which do not contemplate the possibility of an impossible event, ultimately mesh well with the aims of liberal reform and parliamentarism.⁵

But after encountering the aporia of emancipation, there is another possible way of proceeding that may not require the abandonment of the hypothesis of systemic change. And this is where we must continue to rebalance the critical power of Marxism with a certain Heideggerian-Derridean tradition: the deconstructive tradition that thinks through the (non-)possibility of an outside to historical being and time.

This is a move between two irreconcilable modes of thought: the orthodox Marxist analysis of the mode of production and the deconstruction of ontological closure. A constant counterbalance between them can provide us two things: first, the guidance of the economic "last instance" to understand the structure of historical developments, and, second, the imperative to remain open to the radically unexpected, to the ontologically other, and to the constitutively impossible. The need to counterbalance these two modes of thought perhaps derives from an existing impasse in our historical consciousness, an impasse produced by the seeming

⁵ For an analysis of the contemporary re-ontologization of leftist politics, see Strathausen 2006.

impossibility of conceiving any meaningful distance vis-à-vis the instrumental reason and reifying logic of our global system. The dynamic articulation of these two lines of thought can be a fruitful way of disentangling this impasse. On the one hand, the Marxist tradition, guided by the hope to achieve a realm of freedom beyond the realm of necessity, compels us to confront capitalism and include the economic problematic in our dreams of emancipation. On the other hand, the Heideggerian-Derridean tradition helps us question in a radical way the metaphysical principles that have prevailed in the structuring of our world. This questioning aims to search for the disjunctures in the structures, the constitutive impossibilities of the domain of the possible, and the inhabitable spaces of the real.

But the irreconcilable gap between deconstruction and Marxism is not a marked difference between the two theoretical practices, but rather an internal difference that both unites and separates them in their attempt to think the possibility of an alternative space or systemic outside. J. Hillis Miller has described magisterially how Marx's analysis of the historical succession of modes of production involves a moment of internal disruption that is constitutive of his narrative:

Over and over, at each stage of the universal historical progression [Marx] sketches out, he shows (1) that you cannot see how to get from one stage to the next, or think the transition, though (2) the transition does nevertheless occur, by a species of unfathomable or unintelligible leap, while nevertheless (3) a leap is not necessary because all the later stages were always already there from the beginning. These three things are asserted at once in undialectizable contradiction. (Hillis Miller 1995, 355)

This undialectizable contradiction is key to understanding that an internal/external moment is always necessary to keep the dialectics of class struggle moving. A true radical historical event must entail a change in the structure of history itself, even though this moment of change was already an undetectable potentiality within the established historical system. To explain this impossibility, again, change cannot have history and production as the last ontological horizon but instead must presuppose a structure of otherness vis-à-vis the (im)possibility of an outside to history and ontology altogether. In this respect, if deconstructive critique matters it is not so much because it proposes new conceptualizations of historical

change (Derrida's ethical notions of promise or messianism without messianism do not seem to offer any directives for revolutionary politics), but because it theorizes a necessary and unfathomable step in this process of systemic transformation.

Do Marx and Engels not articulate the possibility of communism as a contradictory, impossible leap too, as we can see when they affirm in the *Manifesto* that all history is "the history of class struggles" (Marx and Engels 1998, 34), but that communism will be the "forcible overthrow of all existing conditions" (77)? Class struggle constitutes a necessary template to understand the antagonisms of capitalism, but it also turns into a Procrustean bed that prevents the potential emergence of an alternative system beyond class antagonisms. In other words, the dialectics of class struggle cannot lead us to the emergence of an emancipated realm unless they are rebalanced, by means of a non-dialectical move, with the thinking of the impossible outside.

In fact, we can find this constitutive divergence between Marxism and deconstruction already in some succinct words that Heidegger used to define his thinking vis-à-vis Marx's. While for Marx the point is to change the world rather than interpret it, Heidegger adds a fundamental inflection to this axiom when he states that, in order to change the world, we must first change our thinking of it: "For, meanwhile, it has also been demanded of philosophy that it no longer be satisfied with interpreting the world and roving about in abstract speculations, but rather that what really matters is changing the world practically. But changing the world in the manner intended requires beforehand that thinking be changed, just as a change of thinking already underlies the demand we have mentioned" (Heidegger 1998, 338).

Thus, the attempt to counterbalance these two different tasks must follow a further axiom: our imperative must be to change the world and change our understanding of the world at the same time. But this critical rebalancing cannot be dialectical nor can it presuppose a (non-)relation of otherness between Marxism and deconstruction. It must necessarily be an always unresolved interchange, with no possibility of conclusion in the form of a compromise, a synthesis, or the prevalence of one practice over the other.⁶ As Brett Levinson has rightly observed, "neither

deconstruction nor leftism can activate or *say* that which lies between the two, the site where the one contaminates the other” (Levinson 2004, 17). Thus, while the differences between these two modes of thought make their rebalancing theoretically untenable, this interchange may nevertheless be articulated in the analysis of singular situations. When globalization is occupying all spaces, precluding all emancipations, and breaking down all languages, a myriad of singularities are calling for ways to transform the world and also transform our understanding of it.

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⁶ We should pursue this exploratory path very cautiously. Above all, we must avoid appropriating Heidegger for the Marxist tradition, as previous efforts by Herbert Marcuse (2005), Lucien Goldmann (1977) or Christopher Pawling (2010) to establish a dialogue between the two modes of thought have collided with the intransmissible components of Heideggerian thought. On the other hand, the famous debate around Derrida’s *Specters of Marx* assembled by Michael Sprinker (1999) exemplifies the difficulties of articulating this dialogue.

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