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PANAGIOTIS SOTIRIS
The laboratory of philosophy.
Gramsci and Althusser on philosophy

1. *Introduction*

Louis Althusser's critique of Antonio Gramsci's concept of the "philosophy of praxis" is one of the supposedly definite dividing lines between different Marxist traditions, one more associated with emphasis on structural determinations and theoretical anti-humanism and one associated with emphasis on historical praxis, human agency and praxis. Based upon a parallel reading of Gramsci's definitions of "philosophy of praxis" in the *Prison Notebooks* and Louis Althusser's recently published *Initiation to Philosophy for non-philosophers*, I will try to show that despite their differences both Gramsci and Althusser shared a similar conception of philosophy as a theoretical and conceptual laboratory for the development of forms of hegemony.

2. *Gramsci and philosophy of praxis*

In Gramsci's work the question of the theoretical status of philosophy is related to his more general project of a theory of hegemony¹, something evident in the interplay between the notions of ethico-political history, coming from the work of Croce, of hegemony and of philosophy of praxis.

One can say that not only the philosophy of praxis does not exclude ethico-political history, but that, indeed, in its most recent stage of development it consists precisely in asserting the moment of hegemony as essential to its conception of the state and in attaching "full weight" to the cultural factor, to cultural activity, to the necessity for a cultural front alongside the merely economic and merely political ones (Q10, §7; *FSPN*: 345)².

Gramsci insisted on the originality of Marxism. He stresses that the "affirmation that Marxism is a new, independent philosophy is the affirmation of the independence and originality of a new culture in incubation that will develop with the development of

¹ On the articulation between philosophy, politics and hegemony in Gramsci see Ch. Buci-Glucksmann, *Gramsci and the State*, transl. by D. Fernbach, London, Lawrence and Wishart, 1980; F. Frosini, *Gramsci e la filosofia. Saggio sui Quaderni del carcere*, Rome, Carocci, 2003; P. D. Thomas, *The Gramscian Moment. Philosophy, Hegemony and Marxism*, Leiden, Brill, 2009; A. Burgio, *Gramsci. Il sistema in movimento*, Roma, Derive Approdi 2014.

² Following the standard in references to Gramsci's *Quaderni*, we use Notebook number (Q) and paragraph (§) to refer to the critical Italian edition (Gramsci 1975) and abbreviations to refer to the English translations: *SPN* for *Selections from Prison Notebooks* (edited by Q. Hoare and G. Nowell Smith, London, Lawrence and Wishart, 1971) and *FSPN* for *Further Selections from the Prison Notebooks* (ed. by Derek Boothman, London, Lawrence and Wishart, 1996), *PN* for *Prison Notebooks* (translated by J. Buttigieg, New York, Columbia University Press, 2007).

social relations” (Q4, §3; *PN* II: 144). Gramsci is fully aware of the relation between philosophy and mass ideological practices, when he refers to “the ‘philosophy of the age’, that is, of the mass of sentiments [and conceptions of the world] prevalent among the ‘silent’ multitude” (Q5, §54; *PN* II: 313). That is why he insisted upon the relation of “common sense” to philosophy³. Common sense “is the ‘philosophy of nonphilosophers’ – in other words, the conception of the world *acritically* absorbed from the various social environments in which the moral individuality of the average person is developed. [...] It is the ‘folklore’ of philosophy” (Q8, §173; *PN* III: 333). Only when a theory or worldview manages to remain in contact with people, it becomes actually effective: “Only through this contact does a philosophy become ‘historical’, cleanse itself of elements that are ‘individual’ in origin, and turn itself into ‘life’” (Q8, §213; *PN* III: 360). This leads to Gramsci’s insistence that “all men are philosophers” (Q8, §204; *PN* III: 352). Philosophy becomes synonym to a certain form of intellectuality that accompanies all forms of human activity and social practice and is itself one of the stakes of social antagonism.

There is no human activity from which every form of intellectual participation can be excluded: *homo faber* cannot be separated from *homo sapiens*. Each man, finally, outside his professional activity, carries on some form of intellectual activity, that is he is a ‘philosopher’, an artist a man of taste, he participates in a particular conception of the world, has a conscious line of moral conduct, and therefore contributes to sustain a conception of the world or to modify it, that is, to bring into being new modes of thought (Q12, §3; *SPN*: 9).

Consequently “philosophy cannot be separated from the history of philosophy, nor can culture from the history of culture” (Q11, §12; *SPN*: 324). The actual historical efficacy of any new emerging philosophy and conception of the world is to be judged by the extent to which it affects the mass ideological practices of the subaltern classes.

For a mass of people to be led to think coherently and in the same coherent fashion about the real present world, is a “philosophical” event far more important and ‘original’ than the discovery by some philosophical “genius” of a truth which remains the property of small groups of intellectuals (Q11, §12; *SPN*: 325).

This relation between philosophy and “common sense”, theoretical abstraction and mass ideological practices is itself a part of the political process. “The relation between common sense and the upper level of philosophy is assured by ‘politics’” (Q11, §12; *SPN*: 331), although this does not imply a symmetry between different philosophies as class conceptions of the world: “The philosophy of praxis does not tend to leave the “simple” in their primitive philosophy of common sense, but rather to lead them to a higher conception of life” (Q11, §12; *SPN*: 332). The emergence of a new conception and practice of philosophy is by itself an aspect of the emergence of a new hegemonic

³ On the importance of the relationship between philosophy and common sense as part of the broader “pedagogical” role of the communist party in the attempt towards a new form of mass intellectuality and civility see F. Frosini, *Gramsci e la filosofia*, cit., pp. 170-176. See also G. Liguori, *Sentieri gramsciani*, Rome, Carocci, 2006, pp. 79-82.

project, which also means that philosophy is transformed by the emergence of a new proletarian hegemony. “This is why it must be stressed that the political development of the concept of hegemony represents a great philosophical advance as well as a politico-practical one” (Q11, §12; *SPN*: 333).

Gramsci’s identification between philosophy and history should not be seen as an identification of theory with its subject matter, which was one of the targets of Althusser’s critique in 1965⁴, but as an acknowledgement of the importance of the relation of politics and theory, and a conception of theory as being part of an historical process and its dynamics. This is also important since ideology and discourse practices are part of the historical process and its dynamics.

Ideologies, rather, are the “true” philosophy since they are then those philosophical “popularisations” that lead the masses to concrete action, to the transformation of reality. In other words, they are the mass aspect of every philosophical conception, which in the “philosopher” assumes the characteristics of an abstract universality, divorced from time and space, the characteristics peculiar to a literary and anti-historical origin (Q10II, §2; *FSPN*: 382-3).

When Gramsci chose to refer to philosophy of praxis, this was not a metonymy for historical materialism nor an attempt to avoid prison censors⁵. Gramsci consciously chose the reference to philosophy instead of science in an attempt to distinguish philosophy of praxis from a simple sociological scientism. This is not an underestimation of theory or of a scientific approach to political economy and social relations in general. The elaboration of a new proletarian hegemonic apparatus requires the elaboration of a new conceptual apparatus, an elaboration, which is not simply a theoretical, but also historical and political translation of historical and political dynamics. The realization of hegemonic apparatus, to the extent that it creates a new ideological terrain, determines a reform of consciences and methods of knowledge, constitutes a knowledge fact, a philosophical event: “The realization of a hegemonic apparatus, in so far as it creates a new ideological terrain, determines a reform of consciousness and of methods of knowledge: it is a fact of knowledge, a philosophical fact” (Q10II, §12; *SPN*: 365-66).

For Gramsci “philosophy in general does not in fact exist” (Q11, §12; *SPN*: 326); only different and antagonistic philosophies and conceptions of the world exist. Consequently, what prevails in each particular era is a balance of forces between different philosophical tendencies but also between different ideologies and theoretical practices. “Therefore the philosophy of an epoch cannot be any systematic tendency or individual system. It is the ensemble of all individual philosophies and philosophical tendencies, plus scientific opinions, religion and common sense” (Q11, §16; *SPN*: 455). And every philosopher is in a constant and dialectical relation to his or her social and political environment: “One could say therefore that the historical personality of an

⁴ L. Althusser, É. Balibar, *Reading Capital*, transl. by B. Brewster, London, New Left Books, 1970.

⁵ On this I am following Peter Thomas’ arguments against treating the language and terminology of the *Quaderni* as Gramsci’s way to avoid prison censors (P. D. Thomas, *The Gramscian Moment. Philosophy, Hegemony and Marxism*, cit.).

individual philosopher is also given by the active relationship which exists between him and the cultural environment he is proposing to modify” (Q10II, §44; *SPN*: 350). That is why the history of traditional philosophy, the history of the philosophies of the philosophers is the history of the attempt to correct, transform, and perfect existing worldviews.

The history of philosophy as it is generally understood, that is as the history of philosophers’ philosophies, is the history of attempts made and ideological initiatives undertaken by a specific class of people to change, correct or perfect the conceptions of the world that exist in any particular age and thus to change the norms of conduct that go with them; in other words, to change practical activity as a whole (Q10II, §17; *SPN*: 344).

One of the tasks of a philosophy of praxis is to historicize philosophies and conceptions of the world. “The intention of the philosophy of praxis, in contrast, is to justify [...] the historicity of philosophies, a historicity that is dialectical because it gives rise to struggles between systems, to struggles between ways of seeing reality” (Q10II, §41; *FSPN*: 413). Idealist philosophy is for Gramsci a philosophy that attempts to organize consent in favor of the dominant classes, linked to the process of bourgeois State formation, the role of intellectuals in this process and the transformation of hegemony in an era of passive revolution.

The problem can be formulated as follows: since the State is the concrete form of a productive world and since the intellectuals are the social element from which the governing personnel is drawn, the intellectual who is not firmly anchored to a strong economic group will tend to present the State as an absolute; in this way the function of the intellectuals is itself conceived of as absolute and pre-eminent, and their historical existence and dignity are abstractly rationalised. This motive is fundamental for an historical understanding of modern philosophical idealism, and is connected with the mode of formation of the modern States of continental Europe as “reaction-national transcendence” of the French Revolution (a motive which is essential for understanding the concepts of “passive revolution” and “revolution/restoration”, and for grasping the importance of the Hegelian comparison between the principles of Jacobinism and classical German philosophy) (Q10II, §6; *SPN*: 117).

It is obvious that for Gramsci a definition of philosophy cannot be simply theoretical, nor can it be thought in terms of a traditional theoretical division of labour between science and philosophy (as theory of knowledge, ontology and ethics). On the contrary, the theoretical efficacy of a philosophical proposition has to do with how it affects the popular masses. “Mass adhesion or non-adhesion to an ideology is the real critical test of the rationality and historicity of modes of thinking” (Q11, §12; *SPN*: 341). This is what leads Gramsci to the identification of philosophy and history that Althusser considered the epitome of historicism.

The philosophy of an historical epoch is, therefore, nothing other than the “history” of that epoch itself, nothing other than the mass of variations that the leading group has succeeded in imposing on preceding reality. History and philosophy are in this sense indivisible: they form a bloc (Q10II, §17; *SPN*: 345).

The philosophy of praxis is an attempt towards a philosophy that is not a “walking anachronism”, a “future philosophy which will be that of a human race united the world over” (Q11, §12; *SPN*: 324); a philosophy *for communism*. Philosophy of praxis is a philosophy of historical contradiction and a form of struggle of the subaltern classes to gain social and political power.

The philosophy of praxis, on the other hand, does not aim at the peaceful resolution of existing contradictions. It is not the instrument of government of the dominant groups in order to gain the consent of and exercise hegemony over the subaltern classes; it is the expression of these subaltern classes who want to educate themselves in the art of government and who have an interest in knowing all truths, even the unpleasant ones, and in avoiding the (impossible) deceptions of the upper class and – even more – their own (Q10II, §41xii; *FSPN*: 395-6).

Philosophy of praxis is “materialist” in the sense of a break with any form of metaphysical dualism and Gramsci insists on the polemical character of the very term materialism, in the form of “the more extended meaning that it acquired polemically in the debates that grew up in Europe with the rise and victorious development of modern culture” (Q11, §16; *SPN*: 454). At the same time, in his polemic against Bukharin’s manual he is highly critical of any “philosophical alias metaphysical or mechanical (vulgar) materialism” (Q11, §22; *SPN*: 434)⁶. Because of all the metaphysical connotations associated with materialism as a potential “philosophical system”, Gramsci in many instances prefers to refer to immanence and what he describes as an immanentist tradition in philosophy. As Frosini⁷ and Thomas⁸ have shown, the emergence of the importance of immanence is related to Gramsci’s attempt to confront crucial aspects of a non-metaphysical and non-deterministic conception of social practices, expressed in crucial notions such as “*homo oeconomicus*”, “determinate market” and “tendential law” that Gramsci uses in his attempt to theorize social relations and forms in the economy.

The discovery of the formal logical principle of the “law of tendency” which leads to the scientific definition of the fundamental economic concepts of *homo oeconomicus* and of the “determined market”, was this not also a discovery of epistemological value as well? Does it not precisely simply a new “immanence”, a new conception of “necessity” and of freedom, etc.? (Q10II; *SPN*: 401)⁹.

As a new and original way to conceive of philosophy as a theoretical activity, philosophy of praxis should not be seen through the lens of a traditional distinction between pure philosophy on the one hand and economics and politics on the other. In contrast, it is a complex theoretical approach to historical reality.

⁶ On Gramsci’s criticism of Bukharin see F. Frosini, *Gramsci e la filosofia*, cit.

⁷ F. Frosini, “Immanenza” in G. Liguori, P. Voza (eds.) *Dizionario gramsciano 1926-1937*, Rome, Carocci, 2009.

⁸ P. D. Thomas, *The Gramscian Moment. Philosophy, Hegemony and Marxism*, cit.

⁹ According to Burgio (*Gramsci. Il sistema in movimento*, cit., pp. 96-97) we can see important references to immanence already in the “Ordine Nuovo” texts.

This means that, after having accomplished the principal task in the general philosophical part, which deals with the philosophy of praxis proper—the science of dialectics or the theory of knowledge, within which the general concepts of history, politics and economics are interwoven in an organic unity. (Q11, §33; *SPN*: 431).

And if objectivity is the goal of an immanentist philosophy in sharp contrast to any idealism, in the sense of emancipation from ideological misconceptions, then objectivity as aim and communism as a political goal are part of the same historical process. Objectivity as emancipation from ideology is at the end of the process that leads to communism.

Objective always means “humanly objective” which can be held to correspond exactly to “historically subjective”: in other words, objective would mean “universal subjective”. Man knows objectively in so far as knowledge is real for the whole human race historically unified in a single unitary cultural system. But this process of historical unification takes place through the disappearance of the internal contradictions which tear apart human society, while these contradictions themselves are the condition for the formation of groups and for the birth of ideologies which are not concretely universal but are immediately rendered transient by the practical origin of their substance. There exists therefore a struggle for objectivity (to free oneself from partial and fallacious ideologies) and this struggle is the same as the struggle for the cultural unification of the human race. (Q11, §17; *SPN*: 445).

If philosophy is linked to forms of social and political intellectuality, the many ways with which ordinary people deal with the realities of life and social antagonism, and if mass intellectuality is one of the main stakes of the struggle for hegemony, then a philosophy of praxis is an integral part of this attempt towards mass critical intellectuality, an attempt that is also integrally linked to the elaboration of new forms of mass politics and in particular the emergence of the mass party (and of course the proletarian party). The following passages, coming from one of Gramsci’s most dense notes on philosophy (Q11, §12), exemplify this complex articulation between philosophy, mass intellectuality and collective political organizations.

One should stress the importance and significance which, in the modern world, political parties have in the elaboration and diffusion of conceptions of the world, because essentially what they do is to work out the ethics and the politics corresponding to these conceptions and act as it were as their historical “laboratory”. The parties recruit individuals out of the working mass, and the selection is made on practical and theoretical criteria at the same time. The relation between theory and practice becomes even closer the more the conception is vitally and radically innovatory and opposed to old ways of thinking. For this reason one can say that the parties are the elaborators of new integral and all encompassing intellectualities and the crucibles where the unification of theory and practice, understood as a real historical process, takes place (Q11, §12; *SPN*: 335)¹⁰.

The relation of philosophy to hegemony is exemplified in Gramsci’s insistence that any relation of “hegemony” is also an “educational relation” (Q10II, §44; *SPN*, p. 350). It is on the basis of this conception of the relation between philosophy and hegemony that Gramsci suggests the need for a different practice of philosophy leads to

¹⁰ Translation altered.

the need for a new type of philosopher, the “democratic” philosopher, a type of philosopher that is itself the result of an historical process and a certain dialectic between theory and practice.

The environment reacts back on the philosopher and imposes on him a continual process of self-criticism. It is his “teacher”. This is why one of the most important demands that the modern intelligentsias have made in the political field has been that of the so-called “freedom of thought and of the expression of thought” (“freedom of the press”, “freedom of association”). For the relationship between master and disciple in the general sense referred to above is only realised where this political condition exists, and only then do we get the “historical” realisation of a new type of philosopher, whom we could call a “democratic philosopher” in the sense that he is a philosopher convinced that his personality is not limited to himself as a physical individual but is an active social relationship of modification of the cultural environment (Q10II, §44; *SPN*: 350).

The figure of the democratic philosopher suggests the need for a new form of intellectuals where exactly the important distinction has to do with their awareness of the limits of their subjectivity and the need for them to engage in collective political practices and knowledge practices that are the necessary conditions for their critical intellectual activity. This is a highly original conception of a non-subjective or post-subjective condition of intellectuality.

Therefore, it is obvious that Gramsci is treating philosophy of *praxis* as an entire range of theoretical and discursive practices, dealing with social reality and the politics of social emancipation. It is a theoretical laboratory of alternative intellectualities. That is why philosophy of praxis is a creative activity. This complex articulation between philosophy, ideology and politics, including the use of a strategic concept such as the “historical bloc”, offers an insight into the depth of Gramsci’s confrontation with the historical and political modalities of theory. Gramsci’s “historicism” is exactly this apprehension of the historicity and political dynamics of theory, its actual effectivity in the politics of proletarian hegemony and communist emancipation.

If the relationship between intellectuals and people-nation, between the leaders and the led, the rulers and the ruled, is provided by an organic cohesion in which feeling-passion becomes understanding and thence knowledge (not mechanically but in a way that is alive), then and only then is the relationship one of representation. Only then can there take place an exchange of individual elements between the rulers and ruled, leaders [*dirigenti*] and led, and can the shared life be realised which alone is a social force with the creation of the “historical bloc” (Q11, §67, *SPN*: 418).

3. *Althusser’s struggle with the definition of philosophy*

An important aspect of Althusser’s theoretical endeavour has been his confrontation with the questions regarding the status of philosophy as a particular theoretical practice. This is evident in his different definitions of philosophy, from his first definition of – Marxist – philosophy as a potential Theory of theoretical practice to his later definitions of philosophy as political intervention and philosophy as class struggle in theory.

In Althusser's initial move¹¹, the specific status of philosophy as a *Theory of theoretical practice* was instrumental in his attempt to restore the scientific character of his conception of historical materialism. This was politically motivated and represented an important aspect of Althusser's strategy of bringing about a change in the politics of the Communist movement. Althusser's initial conception was that a correct theoretical starting point and knowledge of the balance of forces in the conjuncture can lead to the right political choices and a renewal of revolutionary strategy, then what was necessary was a Theory that would guarantee this scientificity. It was also important for this Theory not to be a construction or something added to Marx's theory, but something always existing in Marx's own theoretical texts, marking a rather peculiar moment where a theoretical revolution carries along its own protocols of scientificity.

However, there was the problem regarding the very notion of a science of sciences and a philosophy offering the protocols of scientificity. It is interesting that at same time Althusser was proposing a highly original epistemology that was in open rupture with traditional theories of knowledge. Althusser's own conception of a science offering its own criteria of validity and his anti-empiricist emphasis on truth being an internal aspect of the text of science and not a question of empirical validation, precluded in advance any notion of protocols of truth. This is most evident in the introductory text of *Reading Capital*, in chronological terms the last one written, where the question of what are the criteria of the "knowledge-effect" is never answered. Although Althusser attempts to describe the difference in form between the knowledge-effect and the ideology-effect, he does not offer any criteria that make possible the distinction or the judgment of the objectivity. That is why the text ends with the declaration of the inability to offer any theory of the *guarantees* of knowledge and, in this sense, of the inability of any potential Theory of theories.

I shall leave the question in this last form, and merely recall its terms. Unlike the "theory of knowledge" of ideological philosophy, I am not trying to pronounce some *de jure* (or *de facto*) *guarantee* which will assure us that we really do know what we know, and that we can relate this harmony to a certain connexion between Subject and Object, Consciousness and the World¹².

Consequently, beginning with the 1966 text on the *Philosophical conjuncture and Marxist Theoretical Research* we begin to have a process of self-criticism regarding philosophy and its role. This change is evident in a series of texts by Althusser from fall 1967 to early spring 1968, where we have a completely different definition of philosophy. These texts are *Philosophy and the Spontaneous Philosophy of the Scientists* and *Lenin and Philosophy* and the unpublished during Althusser's lifetime *Notes on philosophy*. The main points of this process of theoretical self-criticism are the following. According to Althusser what "fundamentally distinguishes a philosophy from a science is the

¹¹ L. Althusser, *For Marx*, trans. by B. Brewster, London, Allen Lane/Penguin, 1969 and L. Althusser, É. Balibar, *Reading Capital*, cit.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 69.

organic, intimate, interior, constitutive relation it maintains with *politics*”¹³. Philosophy is related to scientific and theoretical breaks and ideological revolutions. Philosophy operates by *ruptures*, “philosophy is the ‘theory’ of ruptures”¹⁴. Philosophy is a form of intervention within a conjuncture, the conjuncture determined by epistemological breaks and ideological revolutions: it “*is rupture as a thinking of this conjuncture*”¹⁵. Every scientific discovery brings about a philosophical revolution and science precedes philosophy. Althusser also chooses another way to mark the difference between science and philosophy: the difference between production and practice. Science operates as a mode of production (a theoretical mode of production) whereas practices intervene in the concrete of the conjuncture, in terms of lines, strategies and forms of action. The notion of theoretical practice is presented as theoretician, in contrast to scientific practice¹⁶.

Philosophy and the spontaneous philosophy of the scientists is a crucial text with the introduction of the notion of *philosophical theses* that cannot be “true” but only “correct” [*justes*]¹⁷. This point is extremely important because Althusser acknowledges that philosophy is not a science and cannot claim some sort of “knowledge effect”. Philosophy is presented as a particular discourse “haunted by *practice*”¹⁸, that does not have a real object in the sense that sciences have. Consequently, there is a rather complex relation between science, ideology and philosophy: “philosophy is defined by a double relation – to the sciences and to practical ideologies”¹⁹. Philosophy does not produce knowledge or truth, but intervenes in this complex and necessarily contradictory terrain drawing a line of demarcation between the scientific and the ideological. The relation between science and ideology (practical ideologies) finds its expression in the emergence of *spontaneous philosophies of the scientists*. Therefore, philosophy becomes the particular terrain of the contradictory co-existence and interaction between science and ideology. Historical materialism offers a way for philosophy to have an apprehension of its functioning and of the role of practical ideologies.

It has been seen that the philosophy to which we adhere – or, more exactly, the position we occupy in philosophy – is not unrelated to politics, to a certain politics, to Lenin’s politics, so much so that Lenin’s political formulae were of use to us in stating our theses on philosophy. There is no contradiction here: this politics is the politics of the workers’ movement and its theory comes from Marx, *just as the knowledge of practical ideologies that finally permits philosophy to control and criticize its organic link with practical ideology, and therefore to rectify the effects of this link by taking a “correct” line, comes from Marx*²⁰.

¹³ L. Althusser, *Écrits philosophiques et politiques*, vol. 2, edited by F. Matheron, Paris, Stock/IMEC, 1995, p. 302.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 309.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 302.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 330.

¹⁷ L. Althusser, *Philosophy and the Spontaneous Philosophy of the Scientists*, ed. by G. Elliot, London, Verso, 1990, p. 74.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 75.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 83.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 130-131.

In *Lenin and Philosophy*, Althusser attempts to articulate his new conception of philosophy as an intervention and as a constant redrawing of the line of demarcation between science and ideology (and between materialism and idealism). Philosophy is a very peculiar form of intervention that can be discerned only in its effects.

For the intervention of each philosophy, which displaces or modifies existing philosophical categories and thus produces those changes in philosophical discourse in which the history of philosophy proffers its existence, is precisely the philosophical nothing whose insistence we have established, since a dividing-line actually is nothing, it is not even a line or a drawing, but the simple fact of being divided, i.e. *the emptiness of a distance taken*²¹.

It is on the basis on this conception of philosophy as intervention that Althusser insists on the relation between philosophy and politics.

Philosophy represents politics in the domain of theory, or to be more precise: *with the sciences* – and, *vice versa*, philosophy represents scientificity in politics, with the classes engaged in the class struggle. How this representation is governed, by what mechanisms this representation is assured, by what mechanisms it can be falsified or faked and *is falsified as a general rule*, Lenin does not tell us. He is clearly profoundly convinced that in the last resort no philosophy can run ahead of this condition, evade the determinism of this double representation. In other words, he is convinced that philosophy exists somewhere as a third instance between the two major instances which constitute it as itself an instance: the class struggle and the sciences²².

If philosophy is not a theoretical practice producing knowledge-effects, then Marxism, the first philosophy with an apprehension of its role, is not a new philosophy, nor a philosophical system, but a new practice of philosophy, a new way to intervene in philosophy: “What is new in Marxism’s contribution to philosophy is a new *practice of philosophy*. *Marxism is not a (new) philosophy of praxis, but a (new) practice of philosophy*”²³.

In his 1969 interview with M. A. Macciocchi, Althusser defines “dialectical materialism” as the philosophy that “represents the proletarian class struggle *in theory*”²⁴ and in the *Reply to John Lewis* philosophy is defined as “in the last instance, class struggle in the field of theory”²⁵. The reference to philosophy as in the last instance class struggle in theory is not an expression of the “summit of Althusserian dogmatism”²⁶, nor is it a simple reproduction of an over-politicized conception of theory under the influence of Maoism and the Chinese Cultural Revolution, as has been suggested by Gregory Elliot²⁷. What is implied in this definition is that as a result of class struggle in society (and in ideology) every philosophical text – and consequently every “spontaneous philosophy of

²¹ L. Althusser, *Lenin and Philosophy and other essays*, trans. by B. Brewster, New York, Monthly Review Press, 1971, p. 62.

²² Ibid., p. 65.

²³ Ibid., p. 68.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 19.

²⁵ L. Althusser, *Elements in Self-criticism*, trans. by G. Lock, London, New Left Books, 1976, p. 72.

²⁶ Y. Sintomer, “Présentation” in L. Althusser, *Solitude de Machiavel et autres textes*, Paris, PUF, 1998, p. 11.

²⁷ G. Elliot, *Althusser. The Detour of theory*, Leiden, Brill, 2006².

a scientist” – carries along a certain balance of forces between these basic antagonistic tendencies.

In every “philosophy”, even when it represents as explicitly and “coherently” as possible one of the two great antagonistic tendencies, there exist manifest or latent elements of the *other* tendency. And how could it be otherwise, if the role of every philosophy is to try to besiege the enemy’s positions, therefore to interiorize the conflict in order to master it? Now this mastery may escape precisely whoever is trying to establish it. For a simple reason: the fate of philosophical theses does not depend only on the position on which they stand – because the class struggle in theory is always secondary in relation to the class struggle in general, because *there is something outside of philosophy* which constitutes it as philosophy, even though philosophy itself certainly does not want to recognize the fact.²⁸

4. *Althusser and Gramsci: a missed encounter?*

Regarding the relation of Althusser to Gramsci²⁹, on the one hand, we have Althusser’s positive remarks on Gramsci, referring to him as one of the few Marxists that had attempted a theory of the superstructures³⁰ and citing him as an important influence in the development of the concept of Ideological State Apparatuses³¹. On the other hand, early on Althusser launches an open attack on Gramsci in the “Marxism is not a historicism” section of *Reading Capital*, where he presents Gramsci as a proponent of a historicist conception of philosophy³². Therefore Gramsci was to be considered an important theoretician of the superstructures and of questions of state ideological apparatuses, but at the same time, his observations would be considered as lacking the necessary theoretical rigour and, at the same time, as being tainted with idealist and historicist elements. Althusser’s reference to “practical concepts”³³ – as opposed to

²⁸ L. Althusser, *Elements in Self-criticism*, cit., pp. 144-145.

²⁹ For an overview of Althusser’s relation to Gramsci see V. Morfino, *Althusser lecteur de Gramsci*, “Actuel Marx”, 2015, n. 57, pp. 62-81.

³⁰ “[T]he *theory of the specific effectivity of the superstructures and other ‘circumstances’ largely remains to be elaborated*; and before the theory of their effectivity or simultaneously (for it is by formulating their effectivity that their *essence* can be attained) there must be elaboration of *the theory of the particular essence of the specific elements of the superstructure*. Like the map of Africa before the great explorations, this theory remains a realm sketched in outline, with its great mountain chains and rivers, but often unknown in detail beyond a few well-known regions. Who has *really* attempted to follow up the explorations of Marx and Engels? I can only think of Gramsci” (L. Althusser, *For Marx*, cit., pp. 113-114).

³¹ “To my knowledge, Gramsci is the only one who went any distance in the road I am taking. He had the ‘remarkable’ idea that the State could not be reduced to the (Repressive) State Apparatus, but included, as he put it, a certain number of institutions from ‘*civil society*’: the Church, the Schools, the trade unions, etc. Unfortunately, Gramsci did not systematize his intuitions, which remained in the state of acute but fragmentary notes” (L. Althusser, *Lenin and Philosophy and other essays*, cit., p. 142).

³² L. Althusser, É. Balibar, *Reading Capital*, cit., pp. 119-144. In a letter to Franca Madonia dated July 2 1965 (L. Althusser, *Lettres à Franca (1961-1973)*, Paris, Stock/IMEC, 1997, pp. 623-624) Althusser is even more aggressive to Gramsci. He thinks that Gramsci’s writings have “profound weaknesses”, that Gramsci had never read Marx’s *Capital*, that he held the Catholic Church as the model for philosophy as world-view and that his theory of ideology is purely formal.

³³ L. Althusser, *For Marx*, cit., pp. 243-245.

proper theoretical concepts in the sense of what he termed Generalities III – helped this critical inclusion of certain Gramscian notions without excluding the necessary philosophical polemic³⁴. Moreover, Gramsci's conception of the emergence of the modern nation-state, as expressed in his reading of Machiavelli, was praised by Althusser³⁵. However, in the second half of the 1970s Althusser became even more critical of Gramsci³⁶. The target now was not Gramsci's historicism but his conception of hegemony. As Vittorio Morfino has stressed, Althusser “[i]n 1965, [...] attacks historicism as a paradoxical[...] form of justification of Stalinism. In 1977-78 he attacks the concept of hegemony as the inspiring concept for Eurocommunism”³⁷. A whole section of his 1978 *Marx in his Limits* is devoted to criticism of Gramsci³⁸. Althusser accuses Gramsci of over-generalizing the notion of hegemony, of underestimating the economic infrastructure, of downplaying the role of force, of tending towards an idealist conception of the state as educator. This criticism is over-determined by political considerations. Althusser's interventions in the late 1970s were his last efforts to fight against what he perceived as a right-wing eurocommunist turn away from a revolutionary politics of smashing the State apparatus³⁹. This critique was intensified in another unpublished text by Althusser from the same period, entitled *Que faire?*, in which Althusser accuses Gramsci's concepts, such as the historical bloc or the passive revolution, as being tainted by an idealist and normative conception of the state and the different political forms⁴⁰.

However, the question remains. Why did Althusser choose such an open attack on Gramsci especially in *Reading Capital*, taking into consideration that other Marxist thinkers of “historicist” tendencies, such as Lukács and Korsch do not have the privilege of such an attack (even though *History and Class Consciousness* seems to be an “absent opponent” in many instances in *Reading Capital*)? I think that there are two reasons for this insistence. The first is actually Althusser's interest in Gramsci, which is contemporary with his own attempt to theorize a break with idealism and economism⁴¹.

³⁴ However, other members of the Althusserian School chose the road of silence regarding Gramsci. Balibar's *Cinque études du matérialisme historique* (Paris, Maspero, 1974) contains only one single reference to Gramsci!

³⁵ Cf. V. Morfino, *Althusser lecteur de Gramsci*, cit., p. 72.

³⁶ Even though there were still positive appreciations such as the one found in his 1976 text on the *Transformation of Philosophy* (in L. Althusser, *Philosophy and the Spontaneous Philosophy of the Scientists*, cit.) or his positive references to Gramsci in *Machiavelli and Us* (L. Althusser, *Machiavelli and Us*, transl. by G. Elliot, London, Verso, 1999).

³⁷ V. Morfino, *Althusser lecteur de Gramsci*, cit., p. 81.

³⁸ L. Althusser, *Philosophy of the Encounter. Later Writings 1978-1987*, trans. by G. M. Goshgarian, London, Verso, 2006, pp. 139-149. Aspects of this criticism can also be found in other texts of the same period. See for example his 1977 intervention on the Crisis of Marxism (L. Althusser, *Solitude de Machiavel et autres textes*, cit., pp. 267-280).

³⁹ For Althusser's political and theoretical considerations of that period, see G. M. Goshgarian, “Introduction” in Althusser, *The philosophy of Encounter*, cit.

⁴⁰ Cf. V. Morfino, *Althusser lecteur de Gramsci*, cit., pp. 77-81.

⁴¹ See for example his insistence, in a 1962 Letter to Hélène Rytman, that new research in historical materialism must be “in the line of what Gramsci started doing” (L. Althusser, *Lettres à Hélène*, Paris, Grasset/IMEC, 2011, p. 411).

The second has to do with Althusser's particular political and theoretical strategy in the early 1960s, which we discussed earlier. Althusser's initial project was to induce a left-wing correction of the political line of the communist movement, during a period of right-wing reformist de-Stalinization, through a theoretical turn towards a much more scientific version of Marxism. The scientific character of this redefined Marxism would guarantee, in its fusion with political leadership, the making of correct political decisions. Gramsci posed a very important challenge to Althusser's attempt to theorize a potential Theory of theoretical practice that could act as a guarantee of scientificity. While Gramsci did not support a typical historicist – metaphysical conception of a messianic Subject of history, or an all-encompassing substance at the centre of historical dialectics, which seemed to be the main targets of Althusser's attack on Hegelian Marxism, he did insist on Marxism being not a science in the positivist sense of the term. Instead, he insisted – especially in his polemic against Bukharin – on the need for a different theoretical modality for historical materialism. This was expressed in his call for a philosophy of praxis. As Peter Thomas correctly points out:

The philosophy of praxis therefore insists upon its necessarily partial and incomplete nature, as the theoretical expression of an historical subjectivity that wants to help create the conditions of a genuinely human objectivity, that is, a “universal subjectivity”. Its truth, in other words, is located in the world rather than transcending it. As a mode of knowing the world from within it, “immanently”, it challenges both the metaphysical materialism of Bukharin and the idealist traditions of Western Philosophy by offering a radically alternative conception of the relation between thought and Being⁴².

This was something that Althusser obviously thought that it posed a very important challenge to his strategy of a scientific correction of a political line. In addition, Althusser was highly sceptical of any attempt to historicize both social reality and the concepts used to theorize it, despite his insistence on the co-existence of different historical times and their specific structures of historicity⁴³, which, at least in my opinion, opens the way for a highly original conception of historicity. Here Althusser's negative position is also over-determined by his identification of any reference to historicity with a historicist conflation of real history and theory and with a humanist vision of human actors as the authors of their destiny⁴⁴. At the same time, the extent of

⁴² P. D. Thomas, *The Gramscian Moment. Philosophy, Hegemony and Marxism*, cit., p. 306.

⁴³ “[I]t is only possible to give a content to the concept of historical time by defining historical time as the specific form of existence of the social totality under consideration, an existence in which different structural levels of temporality interfere, because of the peculiar relations of correspondence, non-correspondence, articulation, dislocation and torsion which obtain, between the different ‘levels’ of the whole in accordance with its general structure. It needs to be said that, just as there is no production in general, there is no history in general, but only specific structures of historicity, based in the last resort on the specific structures of the different modes of production, specific structures of historicity which, since they are merely the existence of determinate social formations (arising from specific modes of production), articulated as social wholes, have no meaning except as a function of the essence of those totalities, i.e., of the essence of their peculiar complexity” (L. Althusser, É. Balibar, *Reading Capital*, cit., pp. 108-109).

⁴⁴ “It must be said that the union of humanism and historicism represents the gravest temptation, for it procures the greatest theoretical advantages, at least in appearance. In the reduction of all knowledge to

Althusser's continuous confrontation and constant return to the dialogue with Gramsci, indeed suggests that "an important key for the reading of his position can be found in his continuous work on Gramsci"⁴⁵.

5. *How can everyone be a philosopher?*

In light of the above, it is important to return to some of Althusser's elaborations on the question of philosophy in the 1970s. The recent publication of Althusser's *Initiation à la philosophie pour les non-philosophes* offers important insights to Althusser's attempt to redefine philosophy and at the same time offers a conception of philosophy as a conceptual laboratory that is indeed close to Gramsci's conception.

The *Initiation* belongs, along with texts such as *Machiavelli and Us*, to Althusser's completed manuscripts that he decided not to publish. Thematically it is close to the 1976 lecture on the *Transformation of Philosophy*, delivered at the University of Granada, a text that coincides with the preparation of the *Initiation*.

For Althusser the perpetual struggle between idealism and materialism is not a fight between two different philosophies; it is a struggle between two "contradictory practices of philosophy"⁴⁶. These two different practices of philosophy are not symmetrical. One refers to the practice of teaching *idealist* philosophy by specialized *professors* of philosophy. In contrast, materialist philosophers "(like Diderot, Lenin, Gramsci)" insist that "everyone is a philosopher"⁴⁷. It is interesting that Althusser uses here a well known phrase from Gramsci, from a passage from the *Prison Notebooks* that has been the target of Althusser's critique of historicism in *Reading Capital*⁴⁸. For Althusser this natural philosophy of ordinary people, includes knowledge and ideas and has both a practical and theoretical aspect, that according to him had already been highlighted by Gramsci. However, Althusser thinks that this "natural" philosophy can be paradoxical and contradictory. Unless it is "educated" by political struggles, it can be "profoundly *passive* and *conformist*"⁴⁹, a philosophy of resignation and defeat. Above all, idealist philosophy inherits the preoccupation with the question of the Origin of the World. One of the

the historical social relations a second underhand reduction can be introduced, by treating the *relations of production* as mere *human relations*. This second reduction depends on something 'obvious': is not history a 'human' phenomenon through and through, and did not Marx, quoting Vico, declare that men can, know it since they have 'made' all of it? But this 'obviousness' depends on a remarkable presupposition: that the 'actors' of history are the authors of its text, the subjects of its production. But this presupposition too has all the force of the 'obvious', since, as opposed to what the theatre suggests, concrete men are, in history, the actors of roles of which they are the authors, too. Once the stage-director has been spirited away, the actor-author becomes the twin-brother of Aristotle's old dream: the doctor-who-cures-himself" (Ibid., p. 139).

⁴⁵ V. Morfino, *Althusser lecteur de Gramsci*, cit., p. 81.

⁴⁶ L. Althusser, *Initiation à la philosophie pour les non-philosophes*, ed. by G. M. Goshgarian, Paris, PUF, 2014, p. 51.

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 52; see Q8, §204; PN III: 352.

⁴⁸ L. Althusser, É. Balibar, *Reading Capital*, cit., p. 128.

⁴⁹ L. Althusser, *Initiation à la philosophie pour les non-philosophes*, cit., p. 56.

main achievements of materialist philosophy is to prove that questioning why there is something instead of nothing is exactly the kind of “*questions that have no sense at all*”⁵⁰. In contrast, a materialist philosophy like Epicurus’ does not pose the question of origins but the question of the beginning. The materialist thesis is that “[*t*]here is [...] *always already something, always already matter exists*”⁵¹, and Althusser points to the direction of the Epicurean theme of the rain of atoms falling that encounter each other after a deviation, which would later be a cornerstone of the imagery of aleatory materialism in the post-1980 works.

For Althusser, a materialist philosophy is another tradition within philosophy, a tradition that “*rejects the questions that have no sense*”⁵². Although Althusser insists on the spontaneous philosophy of the people being one of resignation, associated with religion, he insists that also we can find in it another conception that appeals people “*at work, at the transformation of nature, and at a laborious research of some truth on the world*”⁵³. It is exactly this effort, in most parts collective, to transform the world and act upon it that inscribes the “*conviction that there are reasons at things, and reasons that people can understand and master, since man arrives at producing definite results by respecting the laws of their production, that are the laws of nature and society. Production and action are also the proof of the truth of these laws*”⁵⁴. This produces a “*philosophy of work and struggle, an active philosophy*”⁵⁵. Consequently, this materialist philosophy is a “*philosophy of practice*” in contrast to idealism as a “*philosophy of theory*”⁵⁶.

Althusser then makes a *grand detour*, not in philosophy, but towards *non-philosophy*, towards the outside of philosophy, a potential “*History of the non-philosophy*”, that would take account of the materiality of concrete social practices and antagonisms outside philosophy, that had been “*neglected, rejected, censored, abandoned*”⁵⁷ by idealist philosophy. Materialism is presented as a detour not simply through other philosophers or through the sciences, but as a detour through the very materiality of labour, exploitation, class struggle, sexual difference, madness, state power.

Abstraction is what links philosophy to the materiality of practices. Abstraction is not about abandoning the concrete terms of our existence or about talking about non existing things: “*every specific practice (labour, scientific research, medicine, political struggle) abstracts from the rest of reality in order to concentrate at the transformation of a part of reality*”⁵⁸. For Althusser there is a certain “*dialectic*”⁵⁹ between the abstract and the concrete. There is a “*real concrete*” in our lives, namely “*what we make ourselves*”⁶⁰. However, these concrete practices cannot be understood without some reference to

⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 64.

⁵¹ Ibid., p. 66.

⁵² Ibid., p. 71.

⁵³ Ibid., p. 82.

⁵⁴ Ibid., p. 84.

⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 85.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 100.

⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 105.

⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 116.

⁶⁰ Ibid., p. 117.

ideological relations that make people repeat the same “gestures fixed in advance”⁶¹, either in labour, or in the “ceremony of love”⁶². Abstraction represents exactly this tendency for the reproduction of practices that determine the concrete human practices. This relational aspect links the abstract and the concrete. The abstract is in reality not something that is separated from the concrete but something that *adds* to the concrete a certain aspect of generality, or of repetition. Scientific practice does not only add an element of abstraction and generality, like practical-technical knowledge; its abstraction points towards not “*generality, but universality*”⁶³. Science is not limited to particular cases and the “concrete of science is the *experimental* concrete, the ‘purified’ concrete that is defined and produced in relation to a problem that has been posed”⁶⁴. Therefore its concrete character is not primary, but it is produced as a result of the theoretical operations of an experimental *dispositif*. Therefore we have a “*concrete – abstract – concrete*” cycle or a “*practice – theory – practice*”⁶⁵.

Turning to philosophical abstraction, Althusser stresses the tendency of idealist philosophy to think about everything that exists and everything that is possible to exist; philosophy has to do not with generality but with totality. Philosophical abstractions are not “universalizing” but “totalising”⁶⁶ and in contrast to science, which “always ends up in front of its finite object”, philosophy ends up facing “its infinite project”⁶⁷. Althusser links this totalizing character of philosophical abstraction to the functioning of dominant ideologies. Consequently, philosophy deals, in reality, less with the knowledge of existing and possible beings, but “*the conflicts they are the stake of*”, making every philosophy “haunted by its contrary [...] idealism is haunted by materialism just as materialism is haunted by idealism”⁶⁸. The particularity of philosophical abstractions is that they are active, polemical, and divisive, referring not only to “objects” but to “positions” that have to be affirmed in their very contradictory co-existence with opposite positions. It also brings forward an image of philosophy constantly trying to master conflictual tendencies that come from outside, from the materiality of social practices, of class struggles and of ideological formations, which determine philosophy and which philosophy is obliged constantly to interiorize. Philosophical abstraction becomes the site and the form of this interiorized conflict. This relation of idealist philosophies to science and social practices can be in certain cases positive and progressive, as was the case with bourgeois idealist philosophy during the period of the ascendancy of the bourgeoisie. However, after the end of the bourgeois revolutionary era, the attempt of positivist or logical-positivist philosophy to offer guaranties to science, is also an attempt to “*control*” people working in science in the name of a certain “idea of Order”⁶⁹, that

⁶¹ Ibid., p. 118.

⁶² Ibid., p. 119.

⁶³ Ibid., p. 134.

⁶⁴ Ibid., p. 135.

⁶⁵ Ibid., p. 136.

⁶⁶ Ibid., p. 144.

⁶⁷ Ibid., p. 145.

⁶⁸ Ibid., p. 158.

⁶⁹ Ibid., p. 198.

comes from the “class struggle of a bourgeoisie forced [...] to *impose its Order*, because it is contested by workers, in the name of a philosophy that guarantees that we need an Order and that the bourgeois Order is the real one”⁷⁰.

In contrast, the materialist element in scientific practice is based in the fact that is dominated by the process itself, by the confrontation with the materiality of the object of knowledge and of the experimental apparatus.

[The researcher] is an agent in a process that surpasses him and is not its subject, namely the origin or the creator. The process of the practice, namely scientific production is therefore a “process without a subject” [...] it is subjected to objective laws that also determine the nature and the role of the agent, the scientific researcher⁷¹.

A complex ensemble of relations, both relations of existing theory and technique and philosophical and ideological relations dominates processes of scientific production. This constant struggle, linked “in the last instance, to class struggle”, implies that there is a part of philosophy that “serves the interests of science and another that exploits them in favour of the dominant ideology”⁷². Only a handful of scientists realize this particular efficacy of philosophy, “by the instinct of their practice”, “Materialist philosophers” and Marxist militants “by the theory of historical materialism”⁷³.

Regarding political practice Althusser contrasts the bourgeois and proletarian practices. In contrast to the “political ideas of the bourgeoisie” which are “*ideas for others*” proletarian ideas “born from the struggle, cannot avoid being translated into actions, [...] pass into action”⁷⁴. Political practice is also about abstractions, because “it exists under the absolute condition of relations (economical, political, ideological)”⁷⁵ and because “under these social relations, *it produces abstractions itself*, above all practical and then abstract and theoretical, that modify its proper terrain of action and verification”⁷⁶. Finally, these abstractions “encounter” a science, namely historical materialism, “constituted by intellectuals” but based upon the “theoretical (philosophical) positions of the proletarian class”⁷⁷. For Althusser, in the last analysis, political practice is a practice that concerns “*the process itself*”⁷⁸. Consequently, political practice is closer to the Aristotelian definition of *praxis* than of *poiesis*⁷⁹, since it has more to do with a process where the agents involved are transforming themselves. Here Althusser seems to endorse a certain version of Marx’s reference to “*revolutionäre Praxis*” in the *Theses of Feuerbach*:

⁷⁰ Ibid., p. 199.

⁷¹ Ibid., p. 207.

⁷² Ibid., p. 219.

⁷³ Ibid., p. 220.

⁷⁴ Ibid., p. 276.

⁷⁵ Ibid., p. 282.

⁷⁶ Ibid., pp. 282-283.

⁷⁷ Ibid., p. 283.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Ibid., p. 284.

[Proletarian political practice] *realizes the unity and transformation of the objective situation and the transformation of itself*. Marx has given the first formulations of this identity in the *Theses on Feuerbach*, where he talks about the revolutionary “praxis” like the identity of the transformation of the object (the relation of forces) and of the subject (the organized revolutionary class). In this case what substitutes exteriority in the bourgeois political practice, between those that lead and those that act, between ideas and action, would disappear in favour of a dialectic of mutual unification and transformation between the objective situation and the revolutionary forces that are engaged in this battle. [...] It is this new relation, this new concrete abstraction that gives the full sense to the Marxist-materialist position on the primacy of practice over theory⁸⁰.

Psychoanalytic practice, in its turn, represents for Althusser an attempt to put an end to “the bourgeois idealist representation of man as [...] sensible, juridical, moral, political, religious, philosophical subject, as a transparent being, ‘without a behind’”⁸¹. For Althusser, in a line similar to some of the observations made in the “Discovery of Dr. Freud” (the text of the infamous “Tbilisi Affair”) insists that psychoanalysis, even in its Lacanian version, is not a proper science. It is still in a pre-scientific state.

Regarding artistic practice Althusser begins by a reference to the *inutility*⁸² of the work of art as a social object, that is similar to a Kantian “purposiveness without purpose”. Artistic pleasure, as the result of a social process that attributes to objects of art their beauty and inutility, is the product of “*a new form of abstraction*”, that presents itself as a “*concrete object*”⁸³. Althusser insists on this dimension of artistic pleasure referring both to Aristotelian catharsis and Freud’s reference to art as realization of a desire. Both the production and the consumption of artistic objects is subject to the ideological class struggle: “aesthetic practice, far from being an act that purely creates beauty, takes place *under abstract social relations*, which are not only the norms that define beauty but also the ideological relations of the class struggle”⁸⁴. Althusser attempts to recapitulate his definition of the importance of abstractions in all social practices. What Althusser defines as *abstractions* has to do exactly with the relational character of social reality, the importance of the constant efficacy of social relations and consequently of class struggle. That is why he insists that there is no *abstraction in general*, although there are general abstractions. For Althusser abstraction refers exactly to social relations that are “*rooted in the materiality of social practices*”, and are abstract “in the sense that they permit the *final production of the concrete*”⁸⁵. These abstract relations exist only to the extent that they are rooted in concrete practices. It is this contradictory articulation of concrete practices and abstract relations, traversed by the constant efficacy of class struggles that produces what we tend to define as human history.

For Althusser this entire detour regarding all forms of practices (and the relations that determine the relevant abstractions) aims at defining the object that philosophy transforms, namely the ideologies related to these social practices: “*what philosophical*

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Ibid., p. 287.

⁸² Ibid., p. 305.

⁸³ Ibid., p. 306.

⁸⁴ Ibid., p. 309.

⁸⁵ Ibid., p. 313.

practice transforms, are the ideologies under which different social practices produce their proper effects”⁸⁶. Althusser insists on the “performative” character of philosophical propositions with a direct reference to Austin’s theory of speech acts⁸⁷ and he offers as an example the functioning of Descartes’ declaration that God exists, which for Althusser “opens the world”⁸⁸ of Descartes idealist philosophy, although in reality it offers no objective knowledge. Althusser insists on the position, first introduced in the 1967-68 texts that philosophy “*does not produce the knowledge of real object, but it posits Theses*”⁸⁹. In this sense philosophy “has no object (in the sense that scientific practice and productive practice have an object), but it has something else in view: *objectives or stakes*”⁹⁰. Philosophical theses are “abstract terms” but should be viewed as “*categories*” instead of scientific concepts⁹¹. Philosophical objects, although purely “internal to philosophy” and “not real” are “*a means to occupy some terrain over a philosophical adversary*”⁹². The aim of philosophical interventions is “strategic and tactical war against the theoretical forces of the adversary, which, as in every war, comprises *stakes*”⁹³. However, there is a something specific in the philosophical *Kampfplatz*: philosophy is by nature contradictory, there is always question of which tendency prevails, the materialist or the idealist. Moreover, in every philosophy one can find both tendencies in their contradiction: “*in every philosophy what is realized is not the tendency but the contradictions between the two tendencies*”⁹⁴. It is in the nature of the philosophical warfare to always attempt to enter the “enemy’s territory”, to “occupy the adversary’s positions”⁹⁵. The specificity of philosophical battles is that although they refer to real stakes, in the sciences or in other social practices, at the same time these stakes do not appear “in person” in the terrain of philosophy. In a certain way, philosophy attempts to answer the major ideological repercussions caused by scientific discoveries. Consequently, Althusser’s provisional conclusion is that philosophy plays an important role to the whole process of the unification of “existing ideological elements into dominant ideology”⁹⁶.

For Althusser philosophy is a “theoretical laboratory”⁹⁷, and he talks about philosophy and philosophers as “fitter machinists [*ajusteurs*]”⁹⁸ in order to describe the role philosophy plays in unifying diverse ideological elements into a dominant ideology. This role that in the past was mainly played by religion, but now because of the emergence of scientific knowledge and the “materialist menace” it brings to “established

⁸⁶ Ibid., p. 315.

⁸⁷ Ibid., p. 317.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Ibid., p. 319.

⁹⁰ Ibid., p. 320.

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Ibid., p. 321.

⁹³ Ibid., p. 322.

⁹⁴ Ibid., p. 323. On this see also P. Macherey, *L’histoire de la philosophie comme lutte de tendances*, “La Pensée”, 1976, n. 185, pp. 3-25.

⁹⁵ L. Althusser, *Initiation à la philosophie*, cit., p. 324.

⁹⁶ Ibid., p. 337.

⁹⁷ Ibid., p. 339.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

powers”⁹⁹, this role falls upon philosophy. In order to accomplish this task philosophy had to incorporate certain elements of scientific discourse, such as the logical vigour of mathematics, in order to make them serve the dominant ideologies. “*Domesticate its adversary by stealing its language*: here is the secret of ideological struggle, even when this takes, for given historical reasons, the form of ideological struggle”¹⁰⁰. This reaction of philosophy does not coincide with the event. Sometimes this reaction comes with a certain delay, the time needed “to pass from an economic revolution, to revolution in politics, and then in ideology”¹⁰¹. Sometimes it can come before the event and Althusser refers to the long process of the transition to the dominance of capitalist relations of production, a large part of which took place before the full emergence of new forms of the bourgeois State, although bourgeois ideology was effective during all this process. Consequently, philosophy has to take the form of a theory which includes existing forms of scientific demonstration, in order to “*participate*”¹⁰² in this process of ideological unification which is not limited to philosophy. Philosophy as a “theoretical fitter machinist” may even find itself in need of a “production line of polyvalent pieces” which can be used in all cases where such an “ideological fitting [*raccord idéologique*]”¹⁰³ has to be imposed. Moreover, the “the work of the fitter-philosopher consists *in forging categories that are as universal as possible, capable of unifying under their theses the different domains of ideology*”. Consequently, philosophy imposes its “theoretical power” not only upon actually existing objects but also upon the “ensemble of ideologies” in order to overcome “the contradictions existing in every ideology, in order to unify this ideology into a dominant ideology”¹⁰⁴.

This function of philosophy in the ideological class struggle can explain the traditional form of the philosophical system. “The system is thus the verification of the existence of unity, produced by unification, a unity exhibited and demonstrated by its proper exhibition, the visible proof that philosophy has well embraced and mastered the ‘whole’ and that there is nothing that exists and does not fall under its jurisdiction”¹⁰⁵ In contrast, philosophers that have refused this kind of systemic form, such as Kierkegaard or Nietzsche in reality waged in the “paradoxical form” of their philosophy a sort of “philosophical dispositive of guerrilla warfare [...] attacking [...] by surprise, by aphorisms, in an attempt to dismember the enemy front”¹⁰⁶.

For Althusser all past philosophies were subjected to this mechanism, namely the reproduction and unification of dominant ideologies, they were dependent upon their *class* “*subjectivity*”¹⁰⁷ The question that arises is how to make sure that “philosophy is not the theoretical delirium of an individual, or a social class in its quest for guaranties and

⁹⁹ Ibid., p. 341.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., p. 342.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., p. 345.

¹⁰² Ibid., p. 348.

¹⁰³ Ibid., p. 349.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., p. 350.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., pp. 353-354

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., p. 354.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., p. 361.

rhetorical ornaments”¹⁰⁸. Philosophies that attempt to help the unification of dominant ideologies are affected by the “dynamics of class exploitation”¹⁰⁹. The important difference of a potential materialist philosophy related to the political ideology of the proletariat is exactly the special relation to a historical materialist scientific knowledge of the ideology. “*It is this scientific knowledge of the ideology commanding the philosophy charged with unifying proletarian ideology that will enable the conditions of a philosophical adjustment as objective as possible*”¹¹⁰. This particular form of adjustment is linked to “Marxist category of correctness”¹¹¹.

Idealist philosophy, when it takes the form of a system, in order to help the unification of diverse ideological elements is “reproducing within itself the form of the State: its unity, more powerful than any diversity”¹¹². If a strategy for communism requires a new practice of politics, it also requires a new practice of philosophy, not another philosophical system, a practice of philosophy in sharp break to the State.

It is always the strategy of communism that is in operation in these perspectives, both philosophical and political. It is about preparing now for a revolutionary and communist future; it is about putting in place, now, entirely new elements, without ceding to the pressure of bourgeois ideology and philosophy; in contrast it is about resisting them. And as it is the question of the State that commands all, it is important to break, now, the subtle but very strong link that links the State to philosophy, in particular under the form of the “system”¹¹³.

This means that there can be another emancipatory relation between philosophy and social practices and in particular the political practices of the proletariat. “*We can envisage an entirely different [un tout autre] relation of philosophy to ideologies and to practices in the revolutionary perspective of Marxism: no longer a relation of servitude and exploitation, but a relation of liberation and liberty*”¹¹⁴.

The problem is that the question of such a new practice of philosophy in the history of Marxism has been seen as the question of a new philosophy, either in the form of a philosophy that could “absorb [...] the science of history”, a position he attributes to young Hegel, to Labriola, to Gramsci, but also to Stalin that “made out of philosophy a science that includes in the Marxist theory of history”¹¹⁵. The problem, according to Althusser, was that all these attempts at thinking about Marxist philosophy were still inspired by the existing model of bourgeois philosophy, defined in the form of a “system” or a “theory”, and he self-critically admits that he made the same mistake when in his earlier texts he presented philosophy “after the model of science”¹¹⁶. A new philosophy cannot take the form of an epistemological break, it is “not marked by this

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., p. 362.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., p. 363.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., p. 364.

¹¹¹ Ibid. Note the play of words in French here between *ajustement* (adjustment) and *justesse* (correctness).

¹¹² Ibid., p. 369.

¹¹³ Ibid., p. 370.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., p. 372, my emphasis.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., p. 373

¹¹⁶ Ibid., p. 374.

discontinuity”¹¹⁷. Even a philosophy that aims at representing “the worldview of a revolutionary class in philosophy” will have to intervene in the same philosophical terrain of struggle, even when it chooses to refuse traditional rules of combat, such as the reference to a “system” and to impose its own. This makes necessary a “new Marxist practice of philosophy”¹¹⁸. It is interesting that he still feels the need to again repeat his respectful but critical position regarding Gramsci’s conception of a “philosophy of praxis”. It is as if he realizes that Gramsci is his main intellectual interlocutor regarding the question of this new practice of philosophy.

I wouldn’t talk about, as Gramsci does, perhaps constrained by the prison guard censorship, about Marxism as a “philosophy of praxis”: not that consider the idea of praxis (transformation of the self by the self) as a displaced within Marxism, on the contrary, but because this formulation can enter a discussion with the old idealist form of the “philosophy of” which defines in essence or in “sense” from the ensemble of things a particular determination, here of “praxis”. In order to say my whole thinking, such a formulation can lead to an idealist interpretation of the position of Marx in philosophy¹¹⁹.

Therefore, the task of new practice of philosophy that would serve as an “arm of the revolution” is difficult. On the one hand, it has to affirm constantly “the primacy of practice over theory”, but, at the same time, it must be something more than a simple “servant of [proletarian] politics”¹²⁰. Rather it is

an original form of existence of theory, entirely turned towards practice, and which can possess a true autonomy, if its relation to political practice is constantly controlled by knowledges produced by Marxist science of the law of class struggle and its effects. The most extraordinary, without doubt, of this conception is the profound unity that inspired all its determinations, at the same time liberating the practices that are the stake of its struggle of all forms of exploitation and oppression by bourgeois ideology and philosophy¹²¹.

Althusser insists on a certain positive and liberating role philosophy as a relatively autonomous theoretical intervention can play regarding social practices and their emancipation from the constraints imposed by bourgeois ideology and its philosophical forms. This particular relation to social practice also implies that Marxist philosophers cannot live isolated from social reality and struggle. In contrast, a Marxist philosopher is “a theoretician that behaves as a militant, not only in philosophy, but also in political practice”¹²².

In the final pages Althusser returns to the question he posed at the beginning of the manuscript, namely whether every man is a philosopher. For Althusser we can say that every man is “virtually a philosopher”¹²³ in the sense that he could have conscience

¹¹⁷ Ibid., pp. 374-375.

¹¹⁸ Ibid., p. 375.

¹¹⁹ Ibid., p. 376.

¹²⁰ Ibid., p. 377.

¹²¹ Ibid., p. 383.

¹²² Ibid., p. 384.

¹²³ Ibid., p. 385.

of philosophical question in a spontaneous way in social life. However, philosophy requires also the study of works of philosophy, but above all a certain practice of philosophy, “we must learn philosophy in practice, in the different practices, and above all in the practice of class struggle”¹²⁴. Consequently, one can become a philosopher, but this apprenticeship in philosophy requires that one has a theoretical formation both in terms of theory and scientific practice but also of political practice and class struggle. This combined philosophical education by both theory and militant practice, in reality renders a completely different modality, both theoretical and political, to a materialist practice of philosophy in the service of the proletariat, at the same time offering the only possible way to revitalize philosophy as such facing the very decline of bourgeois philosophy in a time of capitalist technocracy as an aspect of the crisis of the bourgeoisie’s ability to offer a hegemonic narrative:

If we ask ourselves: finally what is a philosopher? I would say: *he is a man that struggles in theory*. And in order to struggle, he has to learn to struggle by fighting, and to struggle in theory he has to become a theoretician by scientific practice and by the practice of political and ideological struggle.

In a time that the bourgeoisie has renounced producing even its eternal philosophical systems, at a time that it has renounced the guarantee and the perspective of ideas in order to entrust its destiny to the automatism of computers and technocrats, at a time when it is incapable of proposing to the world a thinkable and possible future, the proletariat can take up the challenge: give life to philosophy and in order to liberate people from class domination, make philosophy “an arm of the revolution”¹²⁵.

Althusser insists on the possibility of philosophy becoming vital again only through the development of a radically different practice of philosophy and a new figure of the philosopher, this “militant theoretician”, trained both in theory and in class struggle. In particular this emphasis on an active relation to social practices and militancy is, in a certain yet distant way, close to Gramsci’s conception of the “democratic philosopher”, that we discussed earlier.

All these attest to the importance of the *Initiation*. Althusser stresses the importance of practices and relations and consequently abstractions in all aspects of social life. This is not only an important contribution to a relational conception of social practices; it is also a way to rethink the way philosophical reflection is linked to the ideology and social practice, by means of a reference to the broader relation between practices and ideology. In all aspects of social life, we encounter particular practices and consequently relations. This also means that we encounter ideology, or to be more precise, ideologies. Dominant ideologies attempt to impose a certain “unity” of social practices, a certain “unification” of practices that are contradictory, antagonistic and traversed with struggles. Philosophy emerges exactly as part of this process of forced unification. Therefore, Althusser’s conception offers the possibility to rethink both the role of idealist philosophy in forging and establishing forms of ideological and political domination, and the possibility of a materialist practice of philosophy aiming not only at defending the materialist potential of the sciences (their “scientificity”) but also at liberating the collective social and political practices of the subaltern classes. If

¹²⁴ Ibid., pp 385-386.

¹²⁵ Ibid., p. 386.

philosophy is the theoretical laboratory of forms of hegemony of the dominant classes, a materialist practice of philosophy can also help the collective elaboration of forms of counter-hegemony. It performs this task not in the form of revolutionary “philosophical systems” and not only in the sense of a response to the constant re-emergence and reproduction of idealist tendencies. Above all, it enables practices of collective critical intellectuality, of facilitating new forms of collective elaboration of theories and political practices, of helping the establishment of new vocabularies and metaphors, in the service of social emancipation.

The 1976 lecture on the *Transformation of Philosophy* elaborates more on this theme of – idealist – philosophy as an attempt to impose a certain conceptual violence in the sense of imposing a certain Truth that is an aspect of an attempt towards Hegemony.

In both cases it is a question of reorganizing, dismembering, recomposing and unifying, according to a precise orientation, a whole series of social practices and their corresponding ideologies, in order to make sovereign, over all the subordinate elements, a particular Truth that imposes on them a particular orientation, guaranteeing this orientation with that Truth. If the correspondence is exact, we may infer that philosophy, which continues the class struggle as befits it, in theory, responds to a fundamental political necessity. The task which it is assigned and delegated by the class struggle in general, and more directly by the ideological class struggle, is that of contributing to the unification of the ideologies within a dominant ideology and of guaranteeing this dominant ideology as Truth. [...] In short, philosophy produces theoretical schemas, theoretical figures that serve as mediators for surmounting contradictions and as links for reconnecting the different elements of ideology. Moreover, it guarantees (by dominating the social practices thus reordered) the Truth of this order, enunciated in the form of the guarantee of a rational discourse¹²⁶.

In contrast, a new practice of philosophy can only be a non-philosophy at undermining and deconstructing traditional philosophical systems and philosophical idealism in general and thus opening up the way for emancipatory and transformative social and political practices.

To support our argument by comparison with the revolutionary State, which ought to be a State that is a “non-State” – that is, a State tending to its own dissolution, to be replaced by forms of free association – one might equally say that the philosophy which obsessed Marx, Lenin and Gramsci ought to be a “non-philosophy” – that is, one which ceases to be produced in the form of a philosophy, whose function of theoretical hegemony will disappear in order to make way for new forms of philosophical existence. And just as the free association of workers ought, according to Marx, to replace the State so as to play a totally different role from that of the State (not one of violence and repression), so it can be said that the new forms of philosophical existence linked to the future of these free associations will cease to have as their essential function the constitution of the dominant ideology, with all the compromises and exploitation that accompany it, in order to promote the liberation and free exercise of social practices and human ideas¹²⁷.

The *Initiation* offers the way to rethink exactly this possibility of a liberating role for a different materialist practice of philosophy. The main role of such a practice is not to systematize and elaborate, as is the case with traditional philosophy, but to liberate, to

¹²⁶ L. Althusser, *Philosophy and the Spontaneous Philosophy of the Scientists*, cit., p. 259.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 264-265.

emancipate, to emancipate social practices. If proletarian political practice aims at liberating collective practices of transformation from the coercive constraints of bourgeois politics and the State, a materialist practice of philosophy, aligned to the working class movement, aims also at liberating collective practices, of resistance, transformation and creativity, from the forced ideological unification, imposed by dominant ideology. This in its turn is directly related to the conception Althusser had about communism being not a “project” or an “ideal”, but a process of collective resistance and experimentation with alternative social configuration. Althusser insisted on communism emerging at the margins of capitalism, in practices and resistances that oppose the commodity form, in *virtual forms of communism* existing in the interstices of capitalist social forms.

Marx thinks of communism as a *tendency* of capitalist society. This tendency is not an abstract result. It already exists, in a concrete form in the “interstices of capitalist society” (a little bit like commodity relations existing “in the interstices” of slave or feudal society), virtual forms of communism, in the associations that manage [...] to avoid commodity relations¹²⁸.

Therefore we might say that the role of a different materialist practice of philosophy is exactly this liberation of relations, practices and imaginaries coming from the terrain of the autonomous class struggles of the working classes, their resistances, their collective experimentations, in an attempt to bring them from the “margins” to the centre of social life.

Dominique Lecourt also tried to offer such a reading of an alternative materialist practice of philosophy. The epilogue to his 1981 critique of logical positivism, *L'ordre et les jeux*¹²⁹ titled “For a philosophy without feint. Towards a sur-materialism” follows exactly such a conception of a practice of philosophy and was then further expanded in the 1982 *La philosophie sans feinte*¹³⁰. Beginning with a reading of Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical Investigations* Lecourt insists on the need to “transform profoundly the very notion of ‘materialism’”¹³¹. For Lecourt we must be in opposition to “every philosophy of ‘unification’, of cement” because it is “a language game” that has the effect of balancing and absorbing differences. Therefore “another practice of philosophy”¹³² aims at helping the emergence of differences within social practices and cannot be a “theory” or a “doctrine”: “Rather, it will be an ‘anti-machine’ which by practicing philosophy in a radically dissymmetrical mode, will systematically dismantle the gears of the former [idealist philosophy]”¹³³.

Lecourt chooses to describe this philosophy as a “sur-materialism”, in a play of words following Bachelard’s “sur-rationalism”. He is highly critical of references to “dialectical” materialism insisting that “materialist” positions are also “dialectical” in

¹²⁸ L. Althusser, *Solitude de Machiavel et autres textes*, cit., p. 285.

¹²⁹ D. Lecourt, *L'ordre et les jeux. Le positivisme logique en question*, Paris, Grasset, 1981.

¹³⁰ D. Lecourt, *La philosophie sans feinte*, Paris, J.-E. Hallier/Albin Michel, 1982.

¹³¹ D. Lecourt, *L'ordre et les jeux*, cit., p. 211.

¹³² *Ibid.*, p. 214.

¹³³ *Ibid.*

exactly the sense of a refusal of “ontology”¹³⁴. In the *La philosophie sans feinte* Lecourt elaborates on this point. In a line similar to Althusser, he insists that lived experience is determined by abstraction, the first abstraction being language. Moreover, the emergence of dominant ideologies, implies a mechanism by means of which “local” ideologies or “microideologies”, which by themselves are “anchored” to particular social practices, are reabsorbed and unified. Philosophy and its “language machine” attempts to give “to this unification a systematic and *total* form”¹³⁵. Therefore we need to “practice [philosophy] without feint”¹³⁶. This is necessary especially if we take into consideration the efficacy of philosophical abstraction once they have been inscribed into ideological representations and language games.

Surely, philosophy will never stop being “abstract”, but it will be answering the exigency of those that reproach it [...] by putting in movement, by means of a play of displacements, the abstractions in their concrete existence, it could contribute to the concrete deployment of social practices, without being an obstacle to them¹³⁷.

6. *Philosophy as a challenge for Marxism*

How are we going to conceive this new practice of philosophy that promotes “the liberation and free exercise of social practices”? Is it simply an attempt to deconstruct and subvert idealist tendencies and bring forward the radical and materialist element in theoretical practices, as constant bending of the stick to the opposite side, an attempt to intervene and change the theoretical and in the last instance political balance of forces, as Althusser has suggested? Or is a much more positive attempt to rethink philosophy or – to be more precise – an attempt simultaneously at realizing and historicizing philosophy as a highly original historical social theory as Gramsci has suggested? Do Gramsci and Althusser represent two different and even opposing approaches to these questions?

I think that the parallel reading of Gramsci’s and Althusser’s conceptions of philosophy make it evident that they both shared in fact many elements and that any rethinking of the specific modality of a materialist practice of philosophy today must confront these conceptions.

Both Althusser and Gramsci stress that philosophy should be conceived not as a speculative system-building, but as a particular practice of philosophy, as a form of intervention in a theoretical terrain with historical and political determinations, and as a constant conceptual experimentation. They both insisted on the close links between philosophy, ideology and politics and the deeply political character of philosophical debates and confrontations and their relation to the emergence of hegemonic politics. They both link philosophy to a particular conception of the intellectuality of politics

¹³⁴ Ibid., p. 215.

¹³⁵ D. Lecourt, *La philosophie sans feinte*, cit., p. 78.

¹³⁶ Ibid., p. 93.

¹³⁷ Ibid., pp. 94-95.

Both Gramsci and Althusser shared the same apprehension of the historical and political dynamics traversing theory in general and also of the historical and political efficacy of theory in its articulation to social and political movements and dynamics. In particular, they both pay attention to the dialectical relation between ideology and theory, to how mass ideologies evolve and are transformed by theoretical developments, and at the same time to how the social dynamics and aspirations associated with the political struggles of the subaltern classes can affect and transform theories.

Both Gramsci and Althusser have the same apprehension that philosophy is the crucial theoretical terrain for the emergence of this dialectic of theory, ideology and politics. They both understand that philosophy is a sort of a laboratory of new ideas, metaphors, notions, conceptual frameworks, that is within philosophy that new ideas and theories can be forged and adjusted according to the exigencies and dynamics of the historical conjuncture. They were both fully aware of the role of philosophy in the formation and elaboration of hegemony and specific hegemonic projects, in the sense that it is within philosophy where the ideologies and worldviews of potentially hegemonic classes – and also the resistances of subaltern classes – are transformed into theory and strategic ideology.

Both Gramsci and Althusser also share the same distrust against any form of metaphysical materialism. Both Gramsci's conception of immanence and Althusser's insistence on materialism as a negation of any teleology of Origin and *Telos* point to the same direction of a non-ontological materialism, a materialism that points towards the primacy of practice, either historical/political or theoretical, towards the actual historicity of thought, to the constant efficacy of social interactions and antagonisms. In this sense, we can see both positions as useful in any attempt to rethink of Marxist philosophy as militant materialist practice of philosophy. I also think that some of Althusser's questions concerning the theoretical status of Marxist theory, especially his insistence that a potentially *scientific* theory of history cannot be articulated in traditional philosophical terms, but needs a novel theoretical apparatus, are still of value, despite Althusser's own shortcomings in answering them. I am not suggesting a return to Althusser's early scientism and his idealized conception of science as rigidly separated from ideology, which is in fact a reprise of the idealist distinction between truth and falsity. Nor do I suggest that we must think critical social theory only in terms of an "ideal type" of science, or treat all forms of philosophically inspired social theorizing as some form of non-theory. However, I insist that Marxist theory of history represents a theoretical modality different than traditional philosophy, and requires a different conception of theory and a strong claim to the intelligibility of social reality as at the same time "historical-practical" and "objective", even though any actual attempt at such theorizing would be necessarily uneven and inherently contradictory. As a result Gramsci's effort to rethink a radically novel *historical* materialism through the vocabulary of classical Marxism and historicist philosophy, as well as his insight that post-renaissance philosophy has to be studied as the theoretical expression of a more general historical movement, need to be considered as *starting points* rather than definitive answers. In a certain way, both position point to the open, unfinished and inherently experimental character of historical materialism both as theoretical and political project.

Both Gramsci and Althusser realize that the philosophical practice for a new potential proletarian hegemony cannot be symmetrical to idealist philosophical system, since the traditional philosophical form is determined not only by idealism but also by its relation to dominant ideologies and the reproduction of relations of domination and exploitation. In this sense, and despite Althusser's repeated opposition between his call for a new practice of philosophy and Gramsci's philosophy of praxis, both Althusser's insistence on a new practice, a new way to intervene in philosophy, and Gramsci's quest for a new and original philosophy of praxis, immanence and historicity are referring to the same challenge of a philosophy *for communism*.

Moreover, it is also important to stress certain affinities between Gramsci's notion of praxis (and its origin in Marx's reference to "revolutionäre Praxis") and Althusser's references to the centrality of practices. Especially in the *Initiation to Philosophy* Althusser articulates his argument about the role of philosophy through references to the centrality of practices, the fact that wherever there are practices one can also see "abstractions", namely relations that determine concrete social practices, and the role of philosophy in dealing with abstractions. For Althusser, the particular role of philosophy has exactly to do with the encounter between science, class politics and ideology and also with the reflection in theoretical terms of this relational "abstract" character of social relations. Wherever there are practices, one can find social relations that determine them, relations that represent the "abstract" aspect of reality, the relations that in their reproduction lead to the reproduction of these concrete "singular" practices. And wherever there are these abstractions, one can see theories and ideologies, in the last instances determined by social struggles and antagonisms, and this can account for the constant re-emergence of philosophy as a specific form of theoretical practice, as a battlefield for hegemony. Althusser's intervention in theory and the balance of forces within ideology and science, this struggle of words against words, this forging of new metaphors and new concepts, this form of collective theoretical creativity (another common trait of Gramsci and Althusser is this emphasis on the creative character of philosophical interventions), is itself a practice, and as Althusser himself admits, when he refers to the Aristotelian distinction between *poiesis* and *praxis*, a form of praxis, namely the "identity of the transformation of the object (the relation of forces) and of the subject (the organized revolutionary class)".

And indeed I think that today, faced with the limits (as well as the importance and insights) of much of current post-historicist and post-humanist radical theorizing with its refusal of any claims to scientificity and its return to a more philosophical drawing of lines of demarcation, we still need to elaborate and produce an adequate conceptual apparatus for a Marxist theory that would be at the same time historical, critical, reflexive but also with a strong claim at producing some sort of "knowledge effect". In this effort it is obvious that Marxist philosophy can indeed play an important role, neither as the guarantor of scientificity, nor as a simple deconstructing of idealist tendencies, but as a crucial theoretical laboratory, a testing ground, a theoretical terrain of experimentation. And to deal with this challenge we need both Althusser's warnings against the inherent idealism of philosophical elaborations but also Gramsci's insight that philosophy has still a positive role to play in the development of Marxist theory.

7. *Conclusion*

This parallel reading and the attempt to highlight some of the affinities between the Gramscian and the Althusserian projects can offer us valuable insights about how to rethink Marxist philosophy, or in general any conception of a philosophy for *communism*. In contrast to both a temptation towards a return of grand-scale quasi ontological thinking – something evident, at least as a tendency, in some of Alain Badiou’s post-*Being and Event* thinking – and a rejection of philosophy *tout court*, in Gramsci and Althusser we see an attempt towards the redefinition of a new practice of philosophy, a practice of philosophy that while being philosophical, also attempts to avoid the shortcomings associated with the traditional philosophical form.

In a certain way, for both Gramsci and Althusser, philosophy is both unavoidable (the contradictions emerging at the intersection of science, ideology and class struggle, necessarily take a specifically philosophical form) and necessary: we need a new materialist and historical practice of philosophy as a theoretical laboratory as a way to forge not only new concepts but also new forms of mass critical political intellectuality. And we need philosophy in order to be able to experiment with new ways of thinking in order exactly to be able to think about how to experiment with new social forms and relations, new practices and terrains of experimentation for new social and political configurations. We need a philosophy for communism.