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Rethinking Althusser's Meta-Marxism

Abstract

Can Althusser's original 1965 project of reinterpreting Marx still inspire new developments in Marxist theory? The present paper aims to answer this question in the affirmative. Focusing on the meta-Marxist framework set up in *Pour Marx*, and notably on the distinction between science and ideology, it argues that even if it may not be possible to uphold this framework, its very collapse points beyond the limitations of the Marxist tradition. It does, in fact, point towards a more dynamic Marxism, emphasising its practical political aspect and claiming that it is necessarily an open theory. Furthermore, the paper stresses the continuity between Althusser's original project and such a development of Marxist theory.

Keywords:

Althusser, Marxism, science, ideology, politics.

Rethinking Althusser's Meta-Marxism

I. Introduction

In philosophical debates, Althusser's Marxism has suffered quite a strange fate.¹ In particular his paper on ideology as interpellation² has proved extremely influential, inspiring such writers as Judith Butler³ and Slavoj Žižek.⁴ In contrast, his attempt to offer a stringent reconstruction of Marx's problematic, a project presented primarily in *Lire le Capital* and *Pour Marx*,⁵ has been more or less abandoned.

Admittedly, some of the key concepts of these works inspired Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe,⁶ but *Lire le Capital* and *Pour Marx* also provoked significant criticism.⁷ In time, the critics came to include some of Althusser's former students.⁸ And even Althusser himself seems to have eventually abandoned his original project. This is expressed, among other places, in his 1978 'Lettre à Merab', where he states that

"Je vois clair comme le jour que ce que j'ai fait voilà quinze ans, c'a été de fabriquer une petite *justification* bien française, dans un bon petit rationalisme nourri de quelque références (...) à la prétention du marxisme (le

¹ For an account of Althusser's influence in literary studies see e.g. Montag 2003 and Ferretter 2006.

² Althusser 1976, pp. 67-125.

³ Butler 1997.

⁴ Žižek 2008.

⁵ Althusser 1996a and 1996b.

⁶ Laclau and Mouffe 2001, pp. 97-8.

⁷ E.g. Avenas et al. 1999.

⁸ Rancière 1975.

matérialisme historique) à se donner comme science. Ce qui est finalement (était, car depuis j'ai un peu changé) dans la bonne tradition de toute entreprise philosophique comme garantie et caution. Je vois aussi que, les choses étant alors ce qu'elles étaient, les prétentions et contre-prétentions étant alors ce qu'elles étaient, et moi étant ce que j'étais, il ne pouvait en aller autrement (...). Les choses sont quand même un peu compliquées: et j'ai de surcroît acquis une autre certitude, savoir que les écrits se suivent selon une logique qui (...) ne se laisse pas 'rectifier' aussi facilement que cela. Rectifie, rectifie, il en restera *toujours* quelque chose...”⁹

Given this background it is tempting simply to conclude that the project formulated in *Pour Marx* and *Lire le Capital* has failed.¹⁰ This paper, however, will argue that such a conclusion is premature and that it misses two important points. First, what might be perceived as the failure of Althusser's 1965 project specifically is really the failure of a dominant tendency in classical Marxism. By presenting us with a reformulation of classical Marxism marked by an unparalleled degree of stringency, Althusser therefore takes us to the limit of this tradition. Second, and more importantly, the 'failure' of Althusser's project, rather than simply disqualifying it, also opens a new direction for Marxist theory which, I will argue, is still compatible with his 1965 conceptual framework.

⁹ Althusser 1994b, pp. 527-528.

¹⁰ Hindess 1996.

To make these points, the present paper will first identify a fundamental difficulty in Althusser's early Marxism: his inability to maintain the division between science and ideology. It will then assess the consequences of this difficulty, suggesting that it implies a change in our understanding of the relationship between theory and political practice in Marx's work. Finally, the paper will outline the basic principles of a Marxism in line with this new understanding, arguing that such an approach can still be understood within a general Althusserian conceptual framework.

II. Althusser's meta-Marxist framework

Why is Althusser's 1965 Marxism of particular interest? His ambition in *Pour Marx* and *Lire le Capital* is not to present yet another interpretation of Marx, but to reconstruct his project¹¹ and to purify it of ideological elements. In other words, it is Althusser's ambition to answer the question about what Marxism has to be, if it is to be not just another philosophy, but a science of history.¹² Even though much of classical Marxism¹³ has asserted that Marx's theories are (also) scientific, this is a crucial question which, in Althusser's perspective, has not been raised,

¹¹ Althusser 1996b, pp. 22-5.

¹² In what follows, I will not make any sharp distinction between 'Marx' and 'Marxism'. This reflects the view that the necessary starting point of Marxist theory is and always has been the interpretation of Marx, and that any attempt to distinguish between Marx and Marxism itself has to rely on just such an interpretation. In other words, there is no 'Marx' outside Marxism and no 'Marxism' that is not (also) an interpretation of Marx.

¹³ E.g. Korsch 2008.

let alone answered, by the representatives of classical Marxism themselves.¹⁴

Broadly speaking, Althusser's project therefore contains two main elements. On the one hand we have the elaboration of what could be termed a meta-Marxist conceptual framework, defining for instance the role of science in Marxism. On the other hand, we have the reinterpretation of Marx's understanding of society and history as a structured whole of relatively autonomous levels overdetermined 'in the last instance' by the economy. Obviously the two elements are inseparable; it is the meta-Marxist definitions of science and ideology that both obligate and allow Althusser to specify exactly how Marx's approach differs from, say, that of Hegel.

Both elements are found in what is arguably a key text in his 1965 works, the essay 'Sur la dialectique matérialiste' in *Pour Marx*.¹⁵ This remarkable text begins by drawing the very basic conceptual distinctions necessary for a consistent Marxist theory, and goes on to define the concept of overdetermination, a centrepiece in Althusser's reformulation of a non-Hegelian Marxist dialectics. Furthermore, the central status of this article is underlined by the fact that its meta-Marxist distinctions are the main target of Althusser's later autocriticism.¹⁶

¹⁴ For a discussion of Althusser's concept of science, see Althusser 1974b and Bensaïd 1999. In general, it is a prevalent view in the Marxist tradition that Marx's criticism of Smith and Ricardo, while breaking with the scientific frame of understanding of classical economics, is still a scientific criticism, attempting to bring the economic sciences beyond their inherent ideological limitations.

¹⁵ Althusser 1996a, pp. 161-224.

¹⁶ Cf. Althusser 1973 and 1974.

It is, therefore, this essay that I will be focusing on in what follows. However, I will only be examining what I have termed the text's meta-Marxist conceptual framework. One reason for this is that Althusser's entire philosophy hinges on the consistency of the demarcations made in this context. Another reason is that it is within this framework that Althusser attempts to give a stringent definition of the basic elements of the Marxist tradition. As pointed out in the introduction, it is the hypothesis guiding the following analysis that this definition also makes him reach the limit of this tradition. In this context, therefore, his meta-Marxist conceptual framework is of particular interest.

Three concepts make up the basic elements of Marxist theory according to Althusser; practical politics, ideology, and Marxist science. These elements, in turn, are organised according to a double distinction.

First and most importantly, Marxism (Communist politics and its theory) is sharply distinguished from ideology understood as 'le rapport *vécu* des hommes à leur monde'.¹⁷ As the 'lived experience' of people, ideology is different from scientific truth. Even though it necessarily presents itself as truth, its purpose is not to make us see the world as it really is, but to integrate people in society.¹⁸ Marxist science, therefore, constitutes an 'epistemological break' with ideology. This break is found in Marx's own writings in 1845, it is irreversible, and it is characterised above all by the abandonment of the idea of 'alienation' as the source of human misery in favour of structural

¹⁷ Althusser 1996a, p. 240.

¹⁸ Althusser 1996a, p. 242.

and economic explanations.¹⁹ In this break, Marx founded Marxism as the (!) science of history. This implies that what defines Marxism as such is Marxist science. Therefore there can be no dialectical exchange between this science and its ideological counterpart; on the contrary, while Marxist science takes the form of a critique of ideology, the latter always threatens to intrude into, and so to destroy, true Marxism.

The other side of this double distinction is Althusser's differentiation of Marxist theory from political activity. On the one hand, the practical political struggle is not necessarily in need of Marxist theory.²⁰ In most instances it does well without theoretical correctives, and that may be one of the reasons why Althusser has strikingly little to say about this practical side of Marxism.²¹ On the other hand, practical political struggle sometimes will need theoretical guidance – and this is what justifies Marxist theory in the first place. The reason for this need of assistance is, of course, the constant threat from ideology. In the heat of battle it may be difficult to distinguish clearly between genuine Marxist viewpoints and ideological deviations, and when this is the case, theory should intervene in the practical struggles to guide the militants.²²

Note how Althusser in this manner only differentiates practical politics from Marxist theory in order to be able to unite them. Theory needs to be something different from the practical political

¹⁹ Althusser 1996a, p. 233.

²⁰ Althusser 1996a, p. 178.

²¹ Another reason may be his loyalty to the party, and his unwillingness at this point in time to provoke disagreements with the official party line.

²² Althusser 1996a, p. 170.

struggles if it is to be able to intervene in these struggles and to correct ideological mistakes. Note also how this is not just one more distinction supplementing the one between Marxism and ideology. It is in fact yet another formulation of this very distinction. Left to their own devices, Communist militants will eventually fall prey to ideological patterns of thought. The differentiation of Marxist science from political struggle is therefore also a distinction between Marxism and ideology.

This is where it becomes clear why Althusser was accused of the ideological ‘deviation’ known as ‘theoreticism’.²³ For in itself, the political struggles of the militants can be both ideological and Marxist; only the interference of theory ensures that they stay within the Marxist camp. What defines Marxism, therefore, is not practical Communist struggle, but Marxist scientific theory. Althusser tries to compensate for this emphasis on theory by underlining that Marxist science itself must be understood as practical – as ‘pratique théorique’. Yet, this defence is decidedly weakened by his further distinction, within the domain of theory, between science proper and Marxist philosophy which he characterises as ‘théorie de la pratique théorique’.²⁴ Here, at least, we seem quite far away from practical politics.²⁵

All the elements in the double distinction undergo significant changes as Althusser develops his theory in the late sixties. This is particularly clear when it comes to the concept of ideology. As stated above, ideology in *Pour Marx* refers to ‘experience’. It is, in

²³ Althusser 1973, p. 55.

²⁴ Althusser 1996a, p. 172.

²⁵ This has led some commentators to talk of ‘philosophism’ rather than ‘theoreticism’ as the fundamental problem in Althusser’s position; see Read & Rodríguez 2008.

other words, described as a mental phenomenon. This is fairly close to Marx's own use of the concept. However, Althusser later, and in particular in *Marx dans ses limites*²⁶, comes to criticise Marx for exactly this understanding of ideology. Instead, he develops a new position presented primarily in 'Idéologie et appareils idéologiques d'Etat', written in 1969-1970.²⁷ Here, the practical or 'material' aspect of ideology is emphasised.²⁸ Ideology is primarily what we do rather than what we think. More specifically it is the practices defining the so-called ideological state apparatuses, the function of which is to interpellate individuals as subjects. While Althusser supplements rather than discards his previous formulation about ideology as experience, the theory about ideological state apparatuses obviously marks a decisive development in his understanding of this concept.

Althusser also further develops his concept of science. This is seen very clearly in *Philosophie et philosophie spontanée des savants* from 1967. Here scientific practice is no longer intrinsically free from ideology. On the contrary, Althusser identifies what he calls a 'spontaneous philosophy' in the sciences, and this philosophy has both a materialistic and an idealistic element.²⁹ Ideology, here in the form of idealism, exploits the sciences, while materialism reflects the actual scientific practice. Of these two tendencies, idealism is dominant,

²⁶ Althusser 1994b, p. 496.

²⁷ This paper was extracted from the more extensive manuscript published posthumously as *Sur la reproduction* in 1994. See Althusser 1994c.

²⁸ Althusser 1976, p. 105.

²⁹ Althusser 1974b, p. 100.

but the role of Marxist philosophy is to intervene in the scientists' spontaneous philosophy to strengthen its material element.³⁰

Finally, in *Eléments d'autocritique* and *Réponse à John Lewis*,³¹ Althusser alters his view of the role of philosophy in Marxism. It is no longer understood as metatheory, but as 'class struggle in theory'.³² This development, already under way in *Philosophie et philosophie spontanée des savants* and in 'Lénine et la philosophie',³³ from 1968, is his explicit attempt to correct the theoreticism mentioned above. While the original definition of philosophy as 'théorie de la pratique théorique' made the epistemological break appear to be an entirely theoretical event, the substitution of truth for error, Althusser now emphasises that philosophy is political. More accurately, philosophy stands between the sciences and practical politics, functioning both as theoretical intervention in politics and as political intervention in the sciences (as seen above, the latter intervention can be either materialistic or idealistic).

The common denominator of these developments in the late sixties is, therefore, Althusser's increasing focus on practice as the defining aspect of Marxist theory. Science is understood as a practice, philosophy as politics, and ideology as practices – and as the production of practical effects in the sciences. This development, culminating in the redefinition of philosophy as 'class struggle in theory', may be seen as a continuous effort by

³⁰ *ibid.* pps. 107-113.

³¹ Althusser 1973 and 1974.

³² Althusser 1973, p. 56.

³³ Althusser 1998, pps. 103-144

Althusser to rid his theory of ideological remnants in general, and of theoreticism in particular.

The double distinction outlined above is specified in just a few short texts, notably in *Pour Marx*. And as has just been demonstrated, Althusser's position develops considerably after *Pour Marx*. Why, then, is it justified to assign to this distinction such decisive importance? There are three main reasons for this. First of all, whatever the changes made by Althusser in his subsequent writings, the double distinction stays essentially unchanged (at least until the late seventies). Even though the idea of practice comes to play an increasingly important role in his understanding of both science and ideology, and even though it can be argued that the contradistinction between science and ideology is less pronounced in his later works, Althusser never renounces his central idea of an *epistemological* break as constitutive of the difference between the two.³⁴ It is symptomatic in this regard that *Philosophie et philosophie spontanée des savants* deals with the sciences in general, and the humanities in particular, but not, at least not explicitly, with Marxism as a science. Nor does Althusser abandon the idea that Marxism has to be theory. More precisely, it has to be defined by the interplay between theoretical and political practice. As outlined above, Althusser in time comes to stress the dialectical nature of this interplay, but he does not question the distinction between theoretical and political practice which is, on the contrary, the necessary precondition for this interplay. As philosophy's political

³⁴ This point is also made by Lewis (2005).

aspect is emphasised, the theoretical side of Marxism increasingly comes to be identified with Marxist science. This is seen, among other places, in Althusser's new understanding of epistemology no longer as 'théorie de la pratique théorique', i.e. as philosophy, but as a part of the scientific practice itself.³⁵

The second reason for assigning such decisive importance to the double distinction is that it defines what can be recognised in Althusser's other writings as the programme of his Marxism: To specify in what sense Marx's work (and Marxism in general) breaks with ideology. This is his aim not just in his 1965 works but also in his later writings. Finally, the third reason for assigning such great importance to the double distinction is the fact that its collapse is what ultimately brings Althusser's Marxism to disintegrate.

III. The breakdown of the double distinction

As previously mentioned, Althusser's 1965 project was on the receiving end of severe criticism. His insistence on the epistemological break was, among other things, seen as an attempt to rid Marxist theory of its dialectic dimension,³⁶ and so was his attempt to dissociate Marx from Hegel.³⁷ Furthermore, critics never ceased to point out instances of (in Althusser's view) ideological reasoning in Marx's mature work, thus questioning the validity of his idea of an epistemological break.³⁸ And finally, theory was seen as dominating the practical side of Marxism in

³⁵ Althusser 1974, pps. 51-52.

³⁶ Brohm 1999.

³⁷ Althusser 1996a, p. 27.

³⁸ Avenas and Brossat 1999.

Althusser's account of it, hence the aforementioned charge of 'theoreticism'³⁹ and Althusser's efforts to revise his theory. A common feature of all the criticism cited above is, of course, that it refers to the double distinction in his work.

Most of this criticism, although serious, is not fatal to Althusser's project. For instance, what is particularly damaging to the double distinction is neither the occasional appearance of ideological concepts, nor Marx's favourable statements about Hegel. After all, Althusser's aim was to reconstruct Marx's problematic under the assumption that it was incompletely conceived by Marx himself. However, even if one does not agree with the critics, it is fair to say that the double distinction ultimately collapses. What causes its collapse is the fact that ideology seems to be an essential part of the distinction itself.

As outlined above, Althusser himself soon admitted that his meta-Marxist framework suffered from theoreticism, making this admission the starting point of his process of autocriticism. However, his new understanding of philosophy as 'class struggle in theory' (rather than 'théorie de la pratique théorique') in no way manages to fend off the charge of theoreticism, since the basic distinction between politics and theoretical practice remains. Even in his modified framework, theory needs to be something different from the political struggle if both elements are to be Marxist at all. And this differentiation is exactly what is targeted by the charge of theoreticism. Ideology, in other words, seems to

³⁹ Brohm 1999.

be a central element of the very meta-Marxist structure designed to keep ideology out of Marxism.

The distinction between Marxism and ideology is not, of course, a unique feature of Althusser's philosophy. On the contrary, it is a necessary element of a Marxist tradition claiming scientific validity for Marx's theories. This claim is found not just in Marxist mainstream orthodoxy,⁴⁰ but also in early alternatives to this orthodoxy such as Korsch and the young Lukács.⁴¹ What is unique for Althusser, in this respect, is not just his far more refined concepts of science and ideology, but also his insistence on the double character of the distinction between the two. What much of the tradition failed to recognize, or at least to make explicit, is that for Marxist theory to be something qualitatively different from ideology, it also has to be qualitatively different from the day to day political struggles where all the cats are grey.

The necessity of the double distinction is illustrated by a comparison with Lukács' position in *History and Class Consciousness*. Lukács explicitly insists on the *identity* of politics and theory, as well as on the party as their unification. According to his view of the party, "Its closely-knit organisation with its resulting iron discipline and its demand for total commitment tears away the reified veils that cloud the consciousness of the individual in capitalist society."⁴² It is, in other words, the party organisation itself as such which operates the break with ideology.

⁴⁰

⁴¹ Kautsky 1988

⁴² Korsch 2008 and Lukács 1990.

Lukács 1990, p. 339.

If this view is unacceptable from an Althusserian perspective, it has to do not only with the problematic political and theoretical implications of postulating the party's infallibility. His insistence on the double distinction also mirrors the historical circumstances and experiences expressed in his work, specifically the Twentieth Party Congress and the ensuing criticism of Stalin and his "personality cult" referred to explicitly in *Pour Marx*. For this was nothing if not an illustration of the fact that the party was not infallible. Unlike Lukács, Althusser in his reformulation of Marxist theory must therefore operate on the assumption that, as a matter of historical experience, Communist political practice (Lukács' 'party') is not simply Marxist theory incarnate. And this is why he clearly sees (again, unlike Lukács) that for Marxist theory to actually matter, for theory to make a political difference, it has to be separated from practical politics as a matter of principle. In other words, if Marxist theory is to safeguard the party against new ideological deviations, it has to be something different from the day to day dealings of the very same party.

If the double distinction is what makes Althusser's Marxism untenable, it therefore also disqualifies the Marxist tradition. Even if this tradition, as in the case of Lukács, has not always seen the need to supplement its distinction between Marxism and ideology with a corresponding distinction between Marxist theory and practical politics, Althusser makes a compelling point that such a distinction is needed. And if the collapse of the tradition becomes visible in Althusser's project rather than in other versions of Marxism, it is only because his is a more rigorous

account, drawing the full consequences of what it means for Marxism to be different from ideology.

This is also why it is not an option to save Althusser's differentiation between science and ideology (and with that differentiation the Marxist tradition) by giving up the other side of the double distinction, even though this would appease the critics of Althusser's theoreticism. In fact, this is as far as the traditional criticism typically goes, denouncing one side of his double distinction without reflecting on its connection to the question of Marxism and ideology.

A close examination of Althusser's readings of Marx and Hegel confirms that this solution must be rejected. It confirms, in other words, the necessity of the differentiation of science from practical politics. For what characterises the ideological elements in Marx's writings that Althusser tries to get rid of in his reconstruction of Marxism? The answer is: They are political. In the Marxist tradition these elements appear as didactic, polemical and simplifying presentations that for reasons of immediate political use distort the rigor and consistency of Marxist theory. This is seen not just in Althusser's criticism of Marx and Lenin⁴³, but also in his agreement with them. And it is seen not just in *Pour Marx*, but also in his later writings. To mention just one example, Althusser, with Lenin, disqualifies 'spontanéisme' as "une idéologie politique qui, sous le couvert d'une exaltation verbale de la spontanéité des masses, l'exploite pour l'engager dans une

⁴³ Althusser 1996a, pp. 103-4, 113, 177, 204-5, 243.

politique fausse.”⁴⁴ As is clearly stated here, it is under the cover of rhetoric (‘exaltation verbale’) that ideology (‘spontanéisme’) finds its way into and destroys Communist political practice.

This is why Althusser’s basic operation has to be not just a simple, but a double distinction: There is no exclusion of ideology from Marxist theory unless these political uses of theory are also excluded from theory proper. In other words, the ideological elements take the shape of rhetoric, polemics, and simplification *because they serve specific* political purposes in the practical struggles. They are part of a political practice which uses theoretical elements but which is not based on theoretical insights. Althusser therefore seems to be spot on when he insists that the distinction between the two fields of practice is necessary for Marxism to establish itself as different from ideology; only this distinction, as we have seen, seems impossible to maintain.

Now Althusser has nothing against the use of rhetoric, didactics, and simplification as such – for the very reason that they may be politically useful. But as he says in the very last sentence of *Pour Marx*, ‘Nous devons prendre garde qu’en ce processus aucun *mot*, justifié par sa fonction pratique, n’usurpe de fonction *théorique* : mais qu’en s’acquittant de sa fonction pratique il disparaisse en même temps du champ de la théorie’.⁴⁵ In other words, the ideological statements are empty words which may work well in politics, but which need to literally disappear from the domain of theory where it is determined ‘what Marxism really is’. While ‘words’ may serve a political function, only ‘concepts’ have a place

⁴⁴ Althusser 1998, p. 125.

⁴⁵ Althusser 1996a, p. 258.

in theory. The basic difficulty for Marxist theory, therefore, is to keep (empty) words and (theoretical) concepts apart.

From the point of view of theory, the problem with the political- ideological statements is not merely that they are false. They are actually uncontrollable by any theory, true or false. On the one hand, ideological statements are, admittedly, at the root of such deviations from ‘true’ Marxism as economism and humanism. Ideology, in other words, is hypertheoretical, as it can be used to legitimise any misreading of Marx. But on the other hand it is also nontheoretical, as the many different ideological statements cannot be fitted into one coherent theory.

What Althusser’s analysis amounts to, therefore, is that unguided practical politics finds theoretical expression not just as ideology, but also and more importantly as theoretical undecidability. Or to put the same point slightly differently: Politics is the source of the differences between Marxism and ideology, and therefore politics itself is undecidable in terms of the distinction that Althusser’s entire work is an attempt to uphold. Politics, therefore, should never be ‘in itself’, it should always be sanctioned by, or at least in accordance with, Marxist science. If the purely political elements of Marx’s work are included in Marxist theory, this theory will no longer be able to differentiate itself from ideology, and that would mean the end of Althusser’s project. Or to use yet a third formulation: Practical politics reveals itself in Althusser’s analysis as the openness or the inconclusiveness of theory – and so of the distinction between Marxism and ideology.

One may actually interpret Althusser's theoretical development, especially after 1970, as driven by the constant attempt to uphold a double distinction threatened by the constant emergence of political-ideological thought patterns in what was believed to be the core texts of Marxist theory. The problem of theoreticism is just the more obvious proof of the futility of this endeavour. Arguably, it finds an even more dramatic expression in *Marx dans ses limites*⁴⁶ which appears rather as the deconstruction of Marxist tradition than its development. It may seem, therefore, that the more Althusser tries to present a rigorous account of Marxism, the more it becomes apparent that it cannot be purified of its ideological elements. The more thorough the purge of ideology, the more it seems to appear everywhere: "Rectifie, rectifie, il en restera *toujours* quelque chose..."

To merely state that Althusser's Marxism has failed is to focus on just one part of this double distinction – the impossible differentiation of Marxism from ideology. On the other hand, to ask how his Marxism, in its very failure, may still inspire new attempts to understand Marx and to develop Marxist theory, is to take seriously, at the same time, the impossibility of the distinction between practical politics and theory, and the identification of practical politics and theoretical undecidability. What does this impossibility-undecidability tell us, albeit indirectly and against Althusser's own explicit intentions, about Marx's work and so about Marxism?

⁴⁶ Althusser 1994b, pp. 357-524.

First, it is clear that we are forced to conclude that Marxist theory cannot be what Althusser wanted it to be: A coherent and consistent science informing political struggles from without. As politics and theory seem inseparable, it may make more sense to understand Marxism as a political practice reflecting on itself as well as on its immediate historical conditions.

Second, in my reading of Althusser I argued that Marx's practical politics found expression in Althusser's theory as hypertheoretical-nontheoretical and so as uncontrollable by theory. If practical politics is at the heart of Marx's work, and so of the Marxism that he inspired, then the breakdown of Althusser's double distinction challenges us to understand the implications of the necessary presence in Marxism of that hypertheoretical-nontheoretical political engagement which is the limit of Marxist theory and of political theory in general. In other words, we need to understand the dialectical interplay in Marx's work between theory and that which cannot be theorised – his practical political engagement.

IV. Rethinking Marx and Marxism

It is, of course, beyond the scope of this paper to present a complete reinterpretation of Marx and Marxism in this light. Yet in the spirit of Althusser I will give an indication of a new meta-Marxist frame of understanding suitable for such a reinterpretation.

At least two points need to be made here. First of all, if the differentiation of theory and politics is what leads Althusser into

theoreticism, a new approach to Marx and Marxism should draw the consequences of the inseparability of these two elements. This has many implications, but first and most importantly it means that the object of Marxist theory has to be the political challenges met by Communist militants.

In this perspective, Marx's own work too has to be understood as driven by the political project of working class emancipation. This might seem trivial, but in fact it is a point of departure which decidedly shifts the emphasis from the scientific consistency underlined by Althusser in his 1965 project to the political consistency of a programme that is formulated, albeit to begin with very vaguely, by Marx already before the epistemological break of 1845. And it implies that it is this political programme which defines the elaboration and use of Marxist theory. Since the struggle for working class emancipation necessarily takes place in constantly shifting circumstances, this approach implies a fundamental dialectical tension in Marx's work which may account for many of its theoretical shifts and developments – what may in an Althusserian perspective look rather like simple inconsistencies. This is the dialectic between a tactical and a strategic perspective. *Capital*, for instance, is clearly an example of strategic analysis in the sense that the infrastructure of capitalist economy is laid bare in order to illuminate the permanent and general conditions of working class anti-capitalist struggles. On the other hand, Marx's political analyses – most famously perhaps *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* – exemplify tactical analysis in the sense that they try to guide

working class struggles in complicated circumstances demanding more than a simple translation of general theory into specific instances.

Both strategic and tactical analysis are political in the sense that they are made necessary by a political programme that they relate to in different ways. This is true no less of *Capital* than of *The Eighteenth Brumaire* – which is also why it is unsurprising that later studies have emphasised the intrinsically political nature of *Capital*⁴⁷. All elements of Marx's oeuvre can, in other words, serve a political purpose. Actually, looking over just some of the more important titles in his work allows us to distinguish between at least six different, but interrelated political functions. *The Communist Manifesto*, for instance, is clearly an example of propaganda, while *Capital*, as already mentioned, provides the strategic foundation for the workers' movement. In *The German Ideology* and *The Misery of Philosophy* Marx and Engels develop their own theoretical and political position in polemical criticism of other left wing theorists of the day, while *Criticism of the Gotha Programme* constitutes their direct intervention into the debates of the German Social Democratic Party. *Salary, Price, Profits* is the manuscript of a lecture given by Marx before the general assembly of the International workers' association, and *The Civil War in France* is a report to the leadership of this same organisation about the political turmoil in France in 1871.

The point is not, of course, that each work serves one and only one function. Nor is it to insist that Marx's texts fulfil *only*

⁴⁷ Bidet 2000

political functions – or, for that matter, that the political functions of his work give us an exhaustive list of what political practice can be. Obviously, practical politics is so much more than what can be found in books. The point, however, is that the political is omnipresent in Marx's work. There is no 'theoretical practice' which is not also inherently political, and this also implies that theory as such can never be the stringent and consistent monolith envisioned by Althusser.

This leads us to the second point to be made here. For if practical politics is at the heart of Marx's work, and if practical politics is, as Althusser's reading of Marx has demonstrated, hypertheoretical-nontheoretical, then Marxist theory always carries with it, because of this political element (and so because of its necessary tie to the passing circumstances defining the immediate political tasks, possibilities, and limitations), that which cannot be theorised, but marks the limit of all theory – and which finds theoretical expression as the non-theoretical, e.g. as didactics, polemic, simplification... In other words, because of its political element, Marxism is always overdetermined by politics in a manner which is beyond the control of Marxist theory. It is a theory *in* but not *of* the political.

A famous illustration is Marx's *Critique of the Gotha Programme*. Marx refrains from making his critique public, as the new party based on this programme, much to his own surprise, becomes a political success. And he thereby implicitly accepts that the theoretical integrity of Marxism is compromised for political reasons. In this context too, therefore, ideology is politics without

theoretical backing, and its theoretical expression is the impossibility of a stringent Marxist position. It is unsurprising, therefore, that Althusser in *Marx dans ses limites*, cites the *Critique* as a particularly frustrating example of what he refers to as the “absolute limits” of Marx’s theory⁴⁸.

Furthermore, it is also in this light that one must understand the different views about the distinction between politics and theory. This is obviously more than just a theoretical disagreement. The insistence on the unity of politics and theory found not just in Lukács, as cited above, but also e.g. in Korsch⁴⁹, is overdetermined by the political need to counter Social Democratic revisionism. As previously mentioned, Althusser’s position, on the other hand, is overdetermined by the criticism of Stalinism. But it also reflects another direct political concern, as the insistence on the difference between theoretical and political practice is meant to keep the party from interfering in the work of Communist intellectuals. Considering how prominent intellectuals risked expulsion from the party if their theories were deemed deviant (the best known example being, of course, Garaudy), this was a very real concern, and in his later years Althusser himself was quite frank about this function of his theory as political strategy.⁵⁰ Recent commentaries not only emphasize this function,⁵¹ but also recall that several elements of Althusser’s work caused political controversy within

⁴⁸ Althusser 1994b, pps. 405-409.

⁴⁹ Korsch 2008, pps. 86-97.

⁵⁰ Althusser 1994a, pps. 31-34.

⁵¹ Lewis 2005, p. 461.

the Communist Party, making his concern for the autonomy of theory all the more politically important.⁵²

In other words: Whether Marx, Korsch, Lukács, or Althusser, theory is overdetermined by a political context, the theoretical expression of which is the aporetic inconclusiveness or openness of theory (as seen above where theory both has to be and cannot be separated from practical politics). This also implies that Marxist theory can never be finished, it can never be perfected in the grammatical sense of the word. It is always, in more than one sense, a work in progress, necessarily invested in political circumstances that are constantly changing. As Althusser's problems demonstrate, it is this investment that prevents any interpretation of Marx to be coherent and consistent. And this has two immediate consequences.

First, it means that we need to reconsider the logic of the concept of ideology in Marxist theory. Žižek may find a decisive difference between Althusser's 1970 article on 'ideological state apparatuses',⁵³ where ideology is the interpellation of subjects, and Lacanian ideology critique where this interpellation is never perfect, but always leaves a scar of 'the Real'.⁵⁴ Yet if we follow the above interpretation, it seems not only that we find a similar essential imperfection in Marx and in Marxist theory, but also that this imperfection constitutes the dynamic of Marxist theory itself. If, in other words, we understand Marxist practical politics as that which makes both science and ideology at the same time

⁵² See Ferretter 2006 p. 69 and Eyers 2014 p. 277.

⁵³ Althusser 1976, pp. 67-125.

⁵⁴ Žižek 1999, pp. 21-30.

definable and ungraspable, the distance from Marx (and Althusser) to Lacan may not be that long after all. The challenge for a new Marxist ideology critique then becomes to reflect on this essential undecidability and to search for it not just in Marxist theory, but in theory in general.

This is not to deny any distinction between Marxism and ideology. But this distinction has to be understood not as an ‘epistemological’ break establishing Marxism as a science once and for all, clearly differentiated from its epistemological and political counterpart. Instead, it must be understood as a practical break, taking place in the political struggles that form Marx’s work. This is the reason why it can never be definitive but always ‘leaves a scar’. This is, in other words, the reason why we continue to detect ideological elements in Marx even in his mature work. Marxist theory is developed as the continuing confrontation with ideology in and through political practice.

Second, the above interpretation also implies the task of rethinking the relationship between Marx and political philosophy. It may at least be hypothesised that one decisive difference between Marx’s theories and those of mainstream political philosophy is that while the latter aim for theoretical consistency, the purpose of Marx’s theories is to make a practical difference. For Marx there is no retreat from the political realities into an original position under a veil of ignorance.⁵⁵ His approach is rather the abolition of philosophy’s constitutive distance between the theoretical and the practical, a distance that he

⁵⁵ Rawls 1999.

explicitly denounces already in *The German Ideology*.⁵⁶ This denunciation is actually the very purpose of his concept of ideology, as it is developed in that very text. In other words, by coining his concept of ideology he criticizes philosophy for being blind to its own actual political functionality because of this self-imposed distance. It is in this sense that there, strictly speaking, can be no 'Marxist philosophy'.⁵⁷

How does the meta-Marxist framework sketched above relate to current discussions about Marx? Even in recent interpretations of his work, politics and science remain key concepts. Many theorists still view it as scientific.⁵⁸ Some emphasize, e.g., Marx's enduring epistemological importance for the social sciences, while others claim that Marxism should be seen a hermeneutic science.⁵⁹ Still others, like Terrell Carver, argue, to the contrary, that far from being a scientist, Marx must be understood as a journalist and a rhetorician, and that he can only be portrayed as a theorist if the rhetorical parts of his work are 'bracketed off'.⁶⁰ Interestingly, this implies the same view of rhetoric as the limit of theory as outlined in the above analysis. However, the point made in this paper differs decidedly from the one made by Carver, as it does not warrant the conclusion that Marx's work, and Marxism for that matter, is not (also) scientific. As mentioned above, a text may fulfil different purposes, being at the same time both scientific and political. The point made in this paper is rather that

⁵⁶ Marx 1990, p. 31.

⁵⁷ Balibar 1993, p. 3.

⁵⁸ See e.g. Mezhuev 2012 and Skordoulis 2007.

⁵⁹ Compare e.g. Lamola 2013 and Smith 2004.

⁶⁰ Carver 2010, p. 118.

Marxist science, if there is indeed such a thing, can never be a closed, coherent and stringent theory, because it is invested in, and so overdetermined by, a political context (or to use a classical term, it is ‘revolutionary science’). It can be argued, however, that it is exactly openness or imperfection which characterises scientific practice as such, i.e. as a process rather than as a system. Therefore, while it has not been the purpose of the present paper to either confirm or deny the scientific status of Marx’s work, its conclusions are compatible with seeing this work as not only political, but also scientific.

V. Beyond Althusser?

Is it not the case that one might arrive at this approach to Marx and Marxism in so many other ways than by the examination of Althusser’s failing meta-Marxist framework? It probably is. Yet it makes sense to emphasize not just the ways in which Althusser more than any other facilitates this turn towards the political in Marxist theory, but also the degree to which this alternative still has to be understood as Althusserian in its fundamental approach.

To begin with, it is because Althusser more than any other Marxist philosopher, and in such an uncompromising fashion, tries to purify Marxist theory of ideological (and political) contamination that his failure to do so directly leads to the task defined above: the necessity to reflect on the inseparability of theory, politics, and ideology in Marx’s work. To do that is simply to reflect on the failings of Althusserian Marxism.

Yet as stated above, this project is still, for several reasons, kept within a general Althusserian frame of understanding. First of all, the fundamental ambition is the same, to provide a meta-Marxist framework allowing a consistent interpretation of Marx's work. Admittedly, consistency is no longer sought after in theory, but rather in Marx's political project. Still, however, the aim of achieving (some sort of) consistency is the same. As should be clear from the above account of Althusser's 1965 project, this meta-Marxist approach is very Althusserian, and therefore not uncontroversial. Yet with the principles of a possible reinterpretation of Marx and Marxism outlined above, I hope to have made the case for the value of such an approach.

Second, unlike so many of Althusser's critics, the present reading of his Marxism and its failings does not seek to challenge his characterisation of Marx's manuscripts prior to 1845 as pre-Marxist (Althusser 1996a: 45-83). On the contrary, focusing on the political aspects of Marx's work actually seems to confirm that a decisive break takes place around the time of the editing of *The German Ideology*. What characterises Marx's writings before this time is precisely, among other things, is the absence of the practical political functionality that we find in his mature work. Here, on the contrary, 'philosophy' is to materialize itself in the proletariat,⁶¹ which is decidedly something quite different from putting philosophical reflection at the service of a proletariat struggling to liberate itself from the yoke of capital.

⁶¹ Marx 2006, p. 385.

Furthermore, this new framework maintains the major building blocks of Althusser's collapsed theoretical architecture while slightly rearranging them. Reading Marx is still a matter of understanding how theory, politics, and ideology play together in his work. Althusser greatly emphasized the importance of political practice – to such an extent that it has been said about his philosophy that it identifies 'being' with 'struggle'.⁶² Yet according to critics this emphasis was rather a rhetorical attempt to cover up the fact that his structural Marxism left very little room for political agency.⁶³ In the approach outlined above, Althusser's explicit focus on political agency is given a better theoretical underpinning exactly because Marx's work is now understood as defined and driven by a political project. Theory still has a vital role to play, but theory can never be purified from ideology precisely because it is *political* theory, that is because it is motivated by and finds its application in the aforementioned political project.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the present project of reinterpretation may not have been so strange to Althusser after all. For he himself also developed an alternative account of theory and politics.⁶⁴ This account, differing substantially from his 'official' Marxism, has already previously been described as an attempt to conceptualise the unity of theory and practical politics.⁶⁵ Its precise outline, however, has only become clear after Althusser's death, primarily because it is presented in writings

⁶² Balibar 1991, p. 75.

⁶³ Avenas and Brossat 1999, p. 134.

⁶⁴ Terray 1993, pp. 137-160.

⁶⁵ Matheron 1997, p. 38.

that he did not publish himself. It is found, for instance, in *Sur la philosophie*,⁶⁶ and in his masterpiece *Machiavel et nous*.⁶⁷

In these works, Althusser comes to define political practice as the limit to, or the ‘outside of philosophy’⁶⁸ which exists as traces in philosophy itself. In Machiavelli he sees ‘le premier théoricien de la conjoncture’⁶⁹ exactly because he turns upside down the hierarchy of theory and political practice that Althusser advocates in his ‘official’ Marxism. Machiavelli is not attempting to make grand theory, he is not interested in what is universally or even generally the case. Instead his point of departure is the specific challenges for a political programme (the reunification of Italy) under specific historical circumstances, and his application and development of theory is dictated by this concern. This produces in theory an emptiness and an ambiguity that is both the void necessary for political agency and the theoretical reflection of that which is beyond the grasp of theory as its necessary precondition.⁷⁰

Interestingly, contrary to what is believed by some commentators,⁷¹ this alternative approach is not a new development in Althusser’s work after 1980. His reflections on Machiavelli date back to the early sixties, and the ‘materialist undercurrent in philosophy’, an idea so important to his late work, is mentioned already in *Lire le Capital*.⁷² Furthermore,

⁶⁶ Althusser 1994a.

⁶⁷ Althusser 1997, pp. 39-168.

⁶⁸ Althusser 1994a, p. 152.

⁶⁹ Althusser 1997, p. 59.

⁷⁰ Althusser 1997, p. 62.

⁷¹ See e.g. Raymond 1997, pp. 168-9 and Skordoulis 2008, p. 564.

⁷² Althusser 1996b, p. 288.

recently published documents show that another central category, ‘the encounter’, is a theme already in 1966.⁷³ It is therefore with good reason that recent studies have underlined the continuity between Althusser’s earlier work and his later ‘materialism of the encounter.’⁷⁴

Rather than a criticism of Althusser, the programme outlined above can therefore be seen as an attempt to think along the line of what might be referred to as a ‘hidden undercurrent’ in Althusser’s own Marxism, while at the same time emphasizing the logical connection between this undercurrent and his original 1965 programme for Marxist theory

VI. Conclusion

What does it mean for a philosophical project ‘to fail’? No philosophy remains eternally valid and unsurpassed, and that could never be the goal of Marxist philosophy anyway. In agreement with the 11th Thesis on Feuerbach, Marxist philosophers reflect on current society with the aim of facilitating its change. They aim to provoke debate and critical reflection on ideological thought patterns.

If this is the definition of ‘success’ in Marxist philosophy, Althusser’s 1965 project can hardly be said to have failed. On the contrary, few works in the Marxist tradition have, to the same extent, provoked debate as well as sharpened people’s consciousness about the role of ideology in theory and in society. That is also the case with his meta-Marxist framework discussed

⁷³ Althusser 2012

⁷⁴ See e.g. Montag 2012

in this paper, even though it only indirectly touches upon the question about how to understand current society. After all, in a Marxist perspective, the question about how to understand Marx and Marxism properly is also a question about how to understand society.

In this paper I have argued that even if Althusser's 1965 project of redefining Marxism as a stringent and coherent theory has proved untenable, this in no way implies its uselessness for current reflections on how to reinterpret Marx and Marxism. On the contrary, if its problems are due to the fact that Althusser follows through the ambitions of scientific status present in classical 'official' versions of Marxism, his theory itself points beyond its breaking point to new interpretations. Stating that the mess of practical politics cannot be filtered out from Marxism as a theoretical enterprise in itself implies the task of uncovering the dialectic between practical politics and theory in Marx's work.

Therefore, I have also argued that one does not need to abandon an Althusserian approach to Marxism. Central elements, such as the idea of a decisive break in the theoretical development of the young Marx, can be reintegrated into a new meta-Marxist framework. In other words, it is still possible to be an Althusserian Marxist, even if one leaves behind the idea of the double distinction. Althusser himself may actually be the best proof of this. With his analyses of Machiavelli and the idea of political practice as the uncontrollable outside of theory he himself may have paved the way for one last turn in the development of his theory. In these analyses he therefore not only

in theory insists that political philosophy must always contain an openness, an inconclusiveness that is the possibility of political agency. His analyses are also, practically, to be understood as open invitations to carry on the politics of Marxist tradition beyond its theoretical limitations.

The above analysis obviously does not settle all (if any) questions on how to read Marx. In particular, it needs to be debated just how his original project of working class emancipation (if it is, as has been argued above, ever present in his theoretical work) translates into today's social, political, and economic context. That, however, has not been the topic of this paper. What it has done, on the other hand, is to argue why this is a question not just of political, but also theoretical importance. For in this perspective, understanding Marx's theories on their own terms also requires one to continuously reinvest them in practical politics.

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