

Introductory Note, “Sur la genèse”

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In his first book, the 1959 *Montesquieu: Politics and History*, Althusser traces what the 1966 “Sur la genèse” calls the “theory of the encounter or conjunction” to a Montesquieu bearing an improbable resemblance to the Althusserian Marx. Notwithstanding a proto-Hegelian flirt with the “expressive totality,” Montesquieu is said to defend a “topographical” conception of society as a whole comprising “autonomous levels” “determined in the last instance” by one of those levels. In his “reduced case” topography, the ultimately determinant instance coexists with one other, to which it “farms out a whole zone of subordinate effectivity.” Montesquieu’s discovery of this “strange circular causality” sparked the “theoretical revolution” that removed the main obstacle to the emergence of a science of history: a (religious) teleology for which “the end of history... is inscribed in its origin.” Montesquieu was “probably the first person before Marx . . . to think history without attributing to it an end.” His antigeneticism is radical: rejecting “the problem of origins” as “absurd,” he also rejects the disguised teleology that reduces the “concrete . . . diversity” of social formations to “ideal and abstract model[s]” contaminated, in their empirical avatars, by inessential contingencies. His theory of the necessity of historical “accident” aspires, rather, to encompass “the whole of human history and all its particulars.” Key to it is the idea that “the necessity of history [can] only be thought in the unity of its forms and their conditions of existence.” Thanks to this new logic of the unity of forms and conditions, or the “reflection in contradiction itself of its conditions of existence (For Marx),” Montesquieu can grasp the singular essence of a historical society, rather than tracing it, in a positivist inversion of geneticist ideology, to a “plurality of causes” “discovered separately and then heaped together . . . in a list.” Thus his determinant instance, “the spirit of a nation,” is only “apparently” a concatenation of “radically disparate” causes. It is in fact the complex unity that arises from their “encounter” or “conjunction” [rencontre].

Conceivably, Althusser first discovered this new logic of the singular in Montesquieu. If so, he rediscovered it in the early 1960s at its source. The Marxist dialectic can seize “the very essence of the object,” *For Marx* continues to argue without naming Spinoza, because it is animated by the Spinozist principle that a thing cannot only not be considered in the absence

of its essence, but also that that essence cannot “be conceived or be” in the absence of the thing of which it is the essence. The related idea that social formations arise from the encounter of apparently radically disparate causes echoes the Spinozist proposition that individual things, “composite bodies” composed of other composite bodies, become the singular things they are when the encounter of their elements so unites them “in one action that all are simultaneously the cause of one effect.” *Reading Capital* (1965) develops this theory of the encounter or conjunction along lines Althusser maps out in an unposted, unpublished November 1963 letter.

“Contingency, chance, or what Machiavelli calls fortuna,” the letter playfully has its addressee declare, is “the pre-Marxian concept that comes closest to what Lenin calls the encounter of the objective and subjective conditions of any practice whatsoever. . . . Knowledge, too, is only ever produced by an ‘exceptional’ encounter . . . in other words, it is produced by a historical conjuncture in which several distinct practices intervene: I can sense, Louis, that you're going to develop . . . this point; I can already sense in your essay [the 1963 “On the Materialist Dialectic”] the imminence and, as it were, ineluctable necessity of this discovery.” *Reading Capital* realizes the program outlined here in two passages in particular. Both argue that a new structure emerges from the unpredictable fusion of distinct elements with distinct histories in a form radically discontinuous with its predecessors, so that “the meaning of these elements changes with the new structure, which precisely confers on them their meaning.” The first, by Althusser, was intended as an earnest of a (soon abandoned) theory of “theoretical modes of production.” It illustrates the irruption of the “reign of a new logic” that is not “the development of [an] old one, but literally takes its place” with regard to Foucault's demonstration that the modern concepts of madness and the clinical gaze emerge from the “combination” of “a whole series of . . . practices and ideologies” and a “set of apparently heterogeneous conditions.” The second, parallel passage, by Etienne Balibar, theorizes the transition from the feudal to the capitalist mode of production. The precapitalist “elements combined by the capitalist structure,” it argues, “have different and independent origins.” To account for the unity of that structure, we need only attend to the “encounter” [rencontre] of “elements identified on the basis of the result of their conjunction,” elements whose “relative independence and historical variety” is underscored in Marx's work on primitive accumulation. Both Althusser and Balibar make much of a Marxian word, *Verbindung* (translated “combination” in *Reading Capital*),

supposed to indicate the consonance between the Marxist dialectic and (the history of) social formations on the one hand, and Spinoza's conception of singular essences and the way they emerge on the other. In brief, social formations are “spatial” *Verbindungen* (“conjunctions”) of elements in their necessary contingency; they result from “temporal” *Verbindungen* (“encounters”) that confer their necessity on these contingent elements; and the hierarchical order of the ideas that Marx forges to account for these spatial and temporal connections in the order of things—“the form of the systematicity of the ‘essences’ (theoretical concepts),” to cite *Reading Capital*—is itself a *Verbindung*, a claim staked on Althusser’s analysis of Marx’s discussion of his theoretical method in the 1858 “Introduction.”

“Sur la genèse” summarizes the early Althusserian theory of the encounter, illustrating it with Balibar's genealogy of capitalism. Contemporaneous, posthumously published Althusserian texts expose some of the same ideas, notably “Three Notes on the Theory of Discourses,” “The Humanist Controversy,” and “On Lévi-Strauss.” Althusser elaborates them in more sophisticated form in a long 1966-1967 manuscript and related notes and sketches on the “encounter” of theory and political practice. The notes, in particular, make explicit reference to Spinoza, on whom Althusser had planned to teach a 1966-1967 seminar. They focus on his definition of the singular essence, drafted into the service of a theory of (Lenin’s) political practice of the conjuncture as a “realization” of theoretical concepts in the form of “empirical concepts.” The only published excerpt from this material is the 1967 “On Theoretical Work,” the introduction to Althusser's abortive book on theory and practice.