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## Adrift of Alienation: Mapping Lyotard's Critique of Althusser

Matthew R. McLennan

T. Mars McDougall

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The name Jean-François Lyotard rightly evokes a “postmodern” strain of Twentieth Century French philosophy, sceptical of grand narratives and emancipatory political projects as such. In a retrospective introduction to his book on the Algerian war of independence, Lyotard claims that all truly revolutionary perspectives are finished (Lyotard, 1989), and that the principle of a radical alternative to capitalism must be abandoned (1989). Marxism in particular persists for the postmodern Lyotard only as a “feeling of the differend” (Lyotard, 1988), a style of listening to radical injustice, and it must remain hyper-vigilant against its becoming substantive and systematic. Marxism, in short, becomes purely critical and is neither a privileged mode of discourse nor emancipatory in the postmodern reading. This sheds light on why, with a few notable exceptions,<sup>1</sup> commentators have downplayed or ignored Lyotard’s early period of council communist, anti-colonial and campus militancy, relegating the latter to an immature stage, a biographical curiosity or a historical footnote of the secondary literature. Against this current, some Lyotard scholars have begun to build a case that there is greater philosophical substance in the early works, as well as greater continuity between the early and the late, than might first be apparent.

In what follows, we will contribute to this project of interpretive reassessment by mapping Lyotard’s critique of Louis Althusser. We will suggest that, far from being a minor episode in Lyotard’s corpus, it may be read as a kind of philosophical hinge. More precisely, in polemicizing with Althusser through a *tour-de-force* reading of Marx, Lyotard plots out the trajectory of his pagan, postmodern and late periods while clinging to the last remnants of his commitment to traditional political activism. Not only does Lyotard’s drift from Marxism become clearer in light of his critique of Althusser, but we can detect therein the continuities and transformations underlying what some commentators have (all too facilely) passed off as a radical break. Unfortunately, Lyotard’s *Dérive à partir de Marx et Freud*, which collects essays surrounding the Nanterre revolt, has been translated into English as the highly abridged *Driftworks* (Semiotext(e), 1984) – the latter missing the one-hundred page plus centrepiece, “La place de l’aliénation dans le retournement marxiste” – precisely, Lyotard’s critique of Althusser and, as Claire Pagès rightly points out in a work devoted to the topic, his most important text with respect to alienation (*Lyotard et l’aliénation*, Paris: PUF 2011: 36). This text of Lyotard’s practically begs for sustained

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<sup>1</sup> We are thinking here of Amparo Vega, whose *Le premier Lyotard* (Paris: Harmattan 2010) is a carefully considered overview of the early Lyotard; also notable is Claire Pagès, who has tracked the fortunes of alienation from beginning to end of Lyotard’s career in *Lyotard et l’aliénation* (Paris: PUF 2011), and whose edited work *Lyotard à Nanterre* (Paris: Klincksieck 2010) revisits Lyotard’s political role at that school. Crome and Williams in their *Lyotard Reader and Guide* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press 2006) also provide a decent overview of the main facts and philosophical significance of the early period. Finally, PUF has contributed to interest in the early period by publishing *Pourquoi Philosopher?* (2012), Lyotard’s 1964 introductory course in philosophy at the Sorbonne.

English language commentary; the following essay performs the humbler task of mapping out, in broad outlines, its purpose, its form and its contents before commenting upon its place in Lyotard's development. A very substantial question – namely, whether or not Lyotard's critique of Althusser is on point – deserves a much longer study. This said, we will flag points of philosophical interest and tension as the sketch develops.

We hope that our text will be read in the spirit of a collegial continuation of the aforementioned and promising work undertaken by Claire Pagès on the topic of Lyotard and alienation, inasmuch as it seeks to a) perform an exegesis of a text she rightly flags as extremely important with regard to the topic, and b) contribute to the linking up of disparate parts of Lyotard's corpus by means of the interpretive key of alienation. Any misreadings, omissions and inaccuracies that may have escaped our notice are of course our own.

We have organized what follows into five sections. First, we will briefly put the Althusser dispute into its historical and philosophical context. Second, we will outline Althusser's views on alienation as expressed in *For Marx*, which serve as the object of Lyotard's critique. Third, we will perform an exegesis of Lyotard's critique. Fourth, we will briefly sum up our exegesis. Finally, we will link the dispute to themes in the mature Lyotard, suggesting continuity where others have situated a break.

## I. Lyotard's Intervention in Context

We can begin by lending some precision to the notion of “Lyotard's early militancy”. The long period between Lyotard's first book, *La phénoménologie* (1954) and his published *soutenance, Discours, figure* (1971) was devoted to revolutionary activity – first as a member of the post-Trotskyist *Socialisme ou barbarie*, then splinter group *Pouvoir ouvrier*, and finally, as a politically autonomous professor organizing with students at Nanterre. This period was punctuated by trenchant, illuminating and precise analyses of the class composition and political situations in Algeria and metropolitan France.

In “The State and Politics of the France of 1960”, included in the *Lyotard Reader and Guide*, editors Crome and Williams (2006) suggest that “since the *Socialisme ou Barbarie* analysis was already a limit extension of Marxism, arriving after successive refinements, there was little room to manoeuvre in terms of claiming that the failure [of the prediction that the Algerian war would produce an economic and social revolution] was due to a rectifiable error in revolutionary theory. Any disillusionment with the politics of the group would have to lead to a radically new way of thinking about the political” (Crome and Williams, Ed., 2006). By Marxist criteria, the Algerian revolution did fail, and the group did in fact splinter in 1964, precipitated by decidedly

un-Marxist theses advanced by Cornelius Castoriadis in 1959 (Lyotard, 2006). Lyotard had displayed a similar estrangement from the basic categories of even *Socialisme ou Barbarie*'s supposedly limit-case Marxism by 1960, writing of the increasing distaste of the proletariat for “worn-out organizations” of the Left, but more fundamentally, decisively, and originally even, for “the political sphere itself” (Lyotard, 2006). This is but an early expression of his postmodern view that the political is no longer “the privileged site where the intractable makes itself heard.” (Lyotard, 1989)

Though continuing in the orbit of post-Trotskyist critique for another six years with *Socialisme ou Barbarie* and then *Pouvoir ouvrier*, it is indeed towards an “a-politics”,<sup>2</sup> an ultra-leftist (or better, post-leftist) rejection of the political sphere as such that Lyotard would increasingly drift.<sup>3</sup> In a retrospective preface to the 1994 edition of *Dérive à partir de Marx et Freud*, Lyotard explains how the student “mouvement du 22 mars” took inspiration from *Socialisme ou Barbarie*'s radical Marxist orientation. Accordingly, he “cooperated” – though he claims his heart wasn't in it – in accomplishing the practical-critical tasks that the situation (and “honor”) required (Lyotard, 1994). Lyotard details how even while in the trenches with students, privately he passed from an orientation of “liberation” to one of “resistance” – a rear-guard position, almost defeatist – and how he shifted analytical terrain from revolutionary political violence to literary, aesthetic violence (Lyotard, 1994).

The nature of this shift, as will become apparent below, is linked to the critique of Althusser. In and around the time of the Nanterre revolt – but also earlier, as evidenced by the 1964 lecture course collected in *Why Philosophize?* – Lyotard was experimenting with fusions of, but also critical departures from, Marx and Freud/Lacan. As such, the notion of “resistance” to which he here refers was already inflected by its Freudian handling, according to which the unconscious remains opaque to conscious thought, while the latter remains obstinately blind to the former's manifestations (Lyotard, 1994). Art and literary writing testify to the violence of this resistance, without exactly being its symptom, which sheds light on Lyotard's increasing aestheticism (Lyotard, 1994). But more broadly construed, resistance is set against the concept of reality that Lyotard argues runs through all of Freud's work (Lyotard, 1973): “un ensemble lié de perceptions vérifiables par des activités de transformation, et aussi signifiables par des ensembles liés de mots, c'est-à-dire, verbalisables” (Lyotard, 1973) (“a collection of perceptions that are testable against

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<sup>2</sup> The introduction to Lyotard's *Dérive à partir de Marx et Freud* (translated as “Adrift” in *Driftworks*) admirably captures this rejection of reformative and revolutionary politics as such, and the adoption of a stance that is activist, but not recognizably political or of the order of the political, “pas politique”. See also p. 202-209 of the first edition from Union Générale d'Éditions, which contains the article “Nanterre, ici et maintenant”.

<sup>3</sup> Note that in 1973, Lyotard claims that his drift had begun as far back as the early 1950s (1973: 16).

each other, as well as testable by means of practical activity, and that are also able to be put into language”). For Freud, the criteria of reality are essentially criteria of communication (Lyotard, 1973); objects are “real” only to the extent that they can be communicated through language and practice (Lyotard, 1973). Freudian reality is at once skeletal, social by nature and provisional (Lyotard, 1973), being overdetermined and undermined by that which escapes communication (in general, primary psychic process or the unconscious or the death drive, but more particularly the dream-work and that which remains intractable in perceptions, affects, and aesthetic gestures) (Lyotard, 1973).

The figural – a key concept in *Discours, figure*, but already operant in the Nanterre writings – is important in the articulation of resistance, being that which underpins and erupts into the thin framework of Freudian reality, indicating but never communicating or directly showing the non-place of the unconscious. The figure is an intensity, or rather the singularity of the particular event, felt or experienced as an inarticulate trace (i.e. experienced as an affect rather than a pairing of sense/referent). The figural can be conceived in terms of the dream-work, the radical alterity which works the dream material, or at a further abstraction, the death drive, whose irony is to create myriad thriving complex forms through secondary elaboration, on its ceaseless path to annihilation. By drawing on Freud in this manner, Lyotard sketches a social ontology in which structures of meaning are provisional accretions of a deeper, strictly ungraspable and unmanageable libidinal work. While technically his ontology is monist, Lyotard is construing society according to a dualism of surface and depth.

Political spontaneism appears to lurk at the bottom of Lyotard’s drift, since the source of political/aesthetic energy is prior to or “beneath” the field of contestation. One drifts, after all, on a current one doesn’t control. Lyotard’s position is to this extent also tailist, since it remains to the intellectual to lag behind and map out the spontaneous eruptions of the figural (McLennan, 2013). But through self-criticism Lyotard detects and expunges the Hegelian residues of this spontaneism/tailism, giving himself over, in Nietzschean inspiration, to a kind of political/aesthetic voluntarism and adventurism. As such, the libidinal drift ends in a celebration of the inherent potential of capitalism to conduct intensities, and an accelerationist program of actually conducting them on an active-nihilist, purely voluntaristic basis. Thus from the Freudo-Marxist drift away from liberation and towards resistance, Lyotard eventually established the (ill-fated, later largely disavowed) antihumanist/anti-critical militant philosophy which would receive its fullest and most aporetic expression in *Libidinal Economy* (1974).

It may of course be objected that things are not quite so simple; Lyotard’s political position in the years of drift cannot be “tailist” because it does not appear to be, strictly speaking, a political position at all. But this would beg a definition of

“politics”, as the contestation of a *situation*, i.e. the state of a field of discourse / communication / representation: in Freudian terms, contesting a given state of reality, usually in the name of a counterfactual state of reality that is claimed to be more just or in some other way superior. As any reader of Rosa Luxemburg knows, there are two broadly-construed ways of going about this: reform and revolution. Lyotard’s drift program troubles the very alternative, since it tends toward the contestation of reality as such. The a-politics of Lyotard’s position is therefore not the taking or dissolving of power, a given *state* of reality, by reformist or revolutionary means. Rather, it is the thoroughgoing rejection of politics as a field of representation and therefore, of meaningful action. Such an a-politics, in outline, accords with Lyotard’s career-long methodological materialism,<sup>4</sup> i.e. his philosophy of the event. But it also describes, for Lyotard, what was genuinely novel about the protests of May 68 and the March 22<sup>nd</sup> movement. Finally – and most importantly of all for our purposes – such an a-politics, as we will see below, conceives of the scene of politics as radically and thoroughly alienated.

With the preceding in mind, a clash or settling of accounts with Louis Althusser – French master of Marxist philosophy, leading theoretical antihumanist, and penetrating reader of Freud/Lacan – was both inevitable and, as we hope to show, of considerable interest in the interpretation of Lyotard. The year of publication of his intervention in *Les Temps Modernes* is autumn 1969; the broad historical context is the apparent failure (in strictly revolutionary terms) of May 68 and the fresh memory of the obfuscating, if not flatly counter-revolutionary role played in those events by the French Communist Party (PCF), to which Althusser belonged as a leading (though far from dogmatic) theoretician. Althusser had by this time published his two major works, the magisterial *For Marx* and (with students who would go on to carve out their own names in French philosophy) *Reading Capital. Lenin and Philosophy* had also appeared. Althusser’s philosophical programme for a scientific Marxism purged of Hegelian, teleological, idealistic and humanistic residues was well established and well known by this point. His “self-criticism”, contained in an otherwise merciless reply to British communist John Lewis – wherein he identified a “theoreticist” tendency in his own works and conceded the presence (but hardly the importance) of such Hegelian residues as “alienation” in the mature Marx – was still three years off.

The historical setting is telling. Althusser was at the centre of fierce disputes over the meaning of Marx’s texts, the role of the party, and the relation of Marxism to philosophy. But insofar as the Lyotard of 1969 was bathed in the antihumanism of his milieu, he cannot at face value be said to have taken issue with Althusser’s dismissal of

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<sup>4</sup> Cf. James Williams, *Lyotard: Towards a Postmodern Philosophy*. Cambridge and Malden, Polity Press / Blackwell Publishers Inc., 1998.

the concept of alienation on humanistic grounds. Indeed, Lyotard's position by that point little resembled the humanistic Marxism of a Jean-Paul Sartre or a John Lewis. And as he notes explicitly in his retrospective preface to *Dérive à partir de Marx et Freud*, it is not just Althusser's "epistemological purification" which is attacked therein, but also the humanistic Marxism of Maximilien Rubel (Lyotard, 1994). Essentially, we find a fellow antihumanist attacking Althusser on the grounds that alienation is both crucial to Marxism, *and* that it needn't be read in humanistic terms. Granted, the Lyotard of 1969 was not the Lyotard of 1974, for whom alienation and even critique itself would indeed be read wholesale as humanistic, Hegelian, nihilistic residues. But regardless of Lyotard's later about-face, the intervention against Althusser strives to preserve the concept of alienation within a theoretically antihumanist Marxist position.

## II. The Object of Lyotard's Intervention: Althusser on Alienation

In the section 'To My English Readers' of *For Marx*, Althusser claims that there are two events in the history of actually existing communism that had come to dominate communist and leftist intellectual discourse since the death of Josef Stalin in 1953. He is speaking of the Sino-Soviet split and the criticism of the cult of personality surrounding Stalin (Althusser, 1969). He notes that the following work is formed and informed by this conjuncture and should be understood as such. While he acknowledges the importance of the break between the Chinese Communist Party and the Soviet Communist Party, the critique of the cult of personality is the crucial event because it is within this critique that Althusser recognizes the emergence of the humanism he comes to analyse and ultimately reject. The questionable existence of the dictatorship of the proletariat had passed, opening up new possibilities for the beginnings of a form of humanist 'liberation'. This liberation, perhaps better termed a liberalizing movement, was understood in communist intellectual circles as a struggle against Stalinist dogmatism, undergirded by a renewed interest in and adoption of the works of early Marx, using a philosophy of man all but abandoned by Marx as his work matured.

The theme of the alienation of man rests upon the theoretical humanism of the works of the early Marx. Alienation, as a concept, is one gleaned from both Hegel and Feuerbach, and is generally understood as the mystification of man from his true nature or essence, preventing self-actualization and self-knowledge. The *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts* of 1844 establish the rudiments of a system built around a theory of alienation. In *For Marx*, Althusser includes a glossary of terms, presenting

the specific definitions he operationalizes in his work. Alienation is included in this section, and is defined specifically as a state in which the true nature or essence of man is present only in the form of a malformed or distorted God, which is created in the image of human species being, and perceived as “an external, pre-existing creator” (Althusser, 1969). This is this same conceptual mechanism that undergirds Marx’s political and economic critique. The State and its economic infrastructure, in and through the confiscation of “real self-determining labour” (Althusser, 1969) from the proletariat, function as alienating forces that mask people from themselves, pushing any knowledge of a Spirit-Being to a ‘beyond’, out of reach and distorted. Alienation becomes the category under which estrangement, lack, and absence of worth and meaning fall, producing a mystification of the self from the Self. The Spirit-Being of the writings of Young Marx could never be self-actualised, could never recognise itself while existing as an alienated being.

Necessary to any notion of alienation is this Spirit-Being, or essence of man that is mystified from itself in the form of a conceptual proletariat. Althusser maintains that under the lens of the mature Marx’s work, the concept of alienation becomes incoherent as the humanism and idealism of his Young Hegelian work falls away and gives ground to Dialectical and Historical Materialism. Althusser’s claim is stronger than that alienation qua humanism is an ideological category and can and should be abandoned within Marxist discourse. His claim is that by the time Marx embarked on *Capital*, alienation, like the theoretical humanism it rests upon, is no longer present in Marx’s work outside of ironical usage or an entirely different theoretical content.

Althusser’s critique and subsequent rejection of alienation as a rigorous category is hinged upon this rejection of humanism in total. His reading of Marx, and of Marxism in general, divides the work of the philosopher into two parts centered on the writing of *The German Ideology*, which represents a total *coupure épistémologique*, an epistemological break. Prior to this break Marx was not yet a Marxist ; his work remained firmly within the terrain of ideology. The early Marx is mired in humanism, committed to a philosophy of man, which includes work on his alienation. For Althusser, this fissure indicates the inherent idealism of these early theoretical commitments, noting their ‘haunting’ by Hegel and Hegelian principles. By the time of the writing of *The German Ideology* with Friedrich Engels in 1845, Marx had turned away from his earlier philosophical commitments, finally adopting the scientific stance that would be the foundation of his later work.

The epistemological break Althusser illuminates is the critical moment and cannot be overlooked for Althusser’s rejection of alienation. More than just recognition of his being mistaken or unsound, the claim is that after 1845, Marx leaves these theoretical strands out of his work entirely as the nature of his work

transformed. He has abandoned a philosophy of man, under which alienation is a rigorous category, as the foundation of his work. The later Marx has settled accounts with his former theoretical humanist and idealist tendencies, and while there is the possibility of certain vestiges remaining, these early philosophical forays are no longer the basis or engine of Marx's philosophy or politics. The Young Hegelian has been inverted, and replaced by the Marxist and all that was abstract philosophy turned to science.

In his analysis of this epistemic break, Althusser locates three elements that cannot be delinked from each other. Firstly, the later Marx forms a new theory of politics and history based on new structures and categories. These emergent categories include productive forces, relations of production, ideologies, superstructures, and others that have come to be central to the theoretical apparatus of Marxism. Secondly, this new theoretical apparatus discarded any philosophy of man, presenting "a radical critique of the theoretical pretensions of every philosophical humanism" (Althusser, 1969) Thirdly, and critically, in this radical critique, to follow Althusser, humanism itself is rendered an ideology, and thus, subsumed under the new categories that define the work of the later Marx. With these three elements functioning together in Marx's work, any (bourgeois) philosophy was confined to and bounded by the assumptive logic of a philosophy of man. The ethical, aesthetic, economic and political convictions—and their concomitant projects—that flowed from a philosophy of man hinged on the coherence and rigour of such a theoretical structure.

There was a commitment to thinking via humanism within Marx's early work, and in the complementary and competing discourses of Marx's contemporaries. However, despite the use of a philosophy of man as theoretical and discursive scaffolding for ethical, aesthetic, economic, and political logics, humanism as a structure and structuring logic, its internal mechanisms and its theoretical results were rarely, if ever, interrogated. The epistemic break that separates the early from the late Marx for Althusser inaugurates the sustained interrogation of humanism as one of various competing ideologies and relegates notions like alienation to the realm of ideology, among superstructural outpourings that flow from the economic base of capitalism.

Like Marx himself, Althusser does not accept the notion that the recognition or knowledge of an ideology entails its collapse. The knowledge that humanism, despite its theoretical cohesion and rigour, is itself an ideology – not a given and wholly transparent epistemological basis – does not lead directly to its destruction, as is clear in the revival of the work of young Marx. Because Marx's works are so frequently taken in total, with the early works understood as direct precursors to the later works, the ideological problematic of humanism, and thereby alienation, is still present and at

work in communist political and philosophical discourse. In denying even the presence of these ideological concepts in the works of the later Marx, Althusser can and does utterly reject alienation as integral and crucial to the continued project of really existing communism.

### III. Outlines of Lyotard's Intervention

So how, then, does the Lyotard of 1969 propose to retain the concept of alienation as a keystone of Marxist thought, while remaining within an antihumanist framework – that is, without falling purely and simply into Hegelianism and/or some variant of Marxist humanism? How, in other words, does he take Althusser to task from within a broadly similar orbit?

Lyotard prefaces his analysis by claiming Althusser's discourse is critical in terms of its *content*, but non-critical relative to its current *situation* (or *position*) in historical reality (Lyotard, 1994). In failing to put alienation in its proper place, there is a blind spot in the signified of Althusser's discourse and it is therefore non-critical and edifying (Lyotard, 1994). In order to demonstrate how Lyotard arrives at this conclusion, we will first provide an exegesis of his long text, comprising a) close but wherever possible concise English paraphrases of the original French, and b) minimal interjections and glosses, where pertinent. We follow this in the next section by an argument summary. Lyotard himself divides his argument into three sections and thirty-three numbered sub-sections, to which we cleave below. All page numbers refer to the 1994 Galilée edition of *Dérive à partir de Marx et Freud*.

#### Section 1

##### 1. *Le schème* (p.36-38)

Lyotard begins with a text of great importance to Althusser, the third, methodological section of the Introduction to Marx's 1857 *Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (Marx, 1971). Marx therein denounces the Hegelian illusion confounding a) the way in which thought appropriates the concrete and b) the actual process of the genesis of the concrete itself. Put more plainly, he denies that theory and reality are coextensive. He attempts rather to establish the true nature of the link between the genesis of reality and the construction of theory. Contra Hegel, for Marx theory maintains a certain independence from reality; it is not reality's (self-)expression, but rather *signifies* it within a semantic field that is, ideally, as complete as possible. But Marx goes further in reflecting upon the possibility of elaborating the genesis of concepts and categories, from simple to more concrete (hence, more complex). He rejects the notion that this "genesis" must be couched in history. Rather, he gives really existing capitalism an epistemological and methodological privilege, which he illustrates with the

concepts of money and labour. Concerning the latter, Marx explains how the *concept* of abstract labour – labour in general – requires for its emergence the rich and complex social substrate of modern capitalism. The latter acts as a schema (a Kantian term that is not Marx’s own) in which workers circulate, in an indifferent way, between different types of work. Theory retains its independence, but is not in a position of radical rupture with the social; it articulates the schema, which is a “concrete abstraction”. The schema is, differently put, a *symptom* that indicates where the “mole” of criticism is to dig for true universality.

## 2. *Le double présent* (p.38-40)

Lyotard claims that this relation Marx establishes between the theoretical and the concrete carries a great many implications, but restricts his attention to those concerning alienation and critique. The Introduction of 1857 clarifies, for Lyotard, Marx’s comments in the Afterword to the second German edition of *Capital*, according to which “The mystification which dialectic suffers in Hegel’s hands, by no means prevents him from being the first to present its general form of working in a comprehensive and conscious manner. With him it is standing on its head. It must be turned right side up again, if you would discover the rational kernel within the mystical shell” (Marx, 1999). This “turning right side up” is precisely the notion of reversal or “*retournement*” which Lyotard herein reconstructs in its relation to alienation. And the rational kernel to which Marx refers is certainly not, Lyotard claims, contradiction, conceived as a moment in a substantial dialectic of reconciliation. Rather, it is the *conceptual* dialectic, conceived as the historically static or atemporal ensemble of relations obtaining between mutually intelligible terms making rational sense of the socio-economic field to which they are linked. Crucially, the notion of a rational kernel also covers the relation between the terms of the theoretical ensemble and the reality it describes. As such, we may speak of a “double present”: a) *the temporal present of a historical reality* which is the object of intuition and of representation, and in which is indicated b) an *atemporal possible theoretical present* or rather a *possible universality*. This further clarifies Lyotard’s claim that for Marx, there is an epistemological privilege of capitalism. In suggesting that capitalism was a necessary condition for the writing of *Capital*, Marx meant that only a particular historical present could indicate the theoretical present comprising Marxist theory. The relation between the two presents is *not* a dialectical mediation. Rather, Lyotard conceives of it metaphorically as the *right angle* of a horizontal plane (the “real” process of historical development) with a vertical plane (the atemporal “process” of conceptual elaboration from intuitions and representations). The meeting of these two planes – the striking of this right angle – can of course be missed, blocked, and so on. But there remains the inherent *possibility* of an intelligible present in the referential present of really

existing capitalism (or: the possibility of the theoretical present in the historical present, or perhaps more problematically: the possibility of the subject in the object). There is always the possibility of some measure of communication or promiscuity between the two presents, and in this sense Marx is no Kantian. But the proper measure of this communication must be taken; Marx is no Hegelian either. The Hegelian dialectic is a dialectic in and of reality – necessarily historical – whereas the Marxist dialectic is atemporal and as such, does not *express* diachronic reality but rather works apart from it, beneath it, *reverses it* in rendering it intelligible. As such, the Marxist dialectic cannot but be *critical*, since it stands in an antagonistic relationship – but a relationship nonetheless – to the concrete.

### 3. *Le redoublement et le retournement* (p.40-41)

Lyotard further illustrates the distance that Marx takes from Hegel by expounding on the distinction between *redoubling* (*redoublement*) and *reversing* (*retournement*). The problem is that for Hegel, the two presents described above ultimately coincide in the unfolding of the Absolute. The theoretical thereby *redoubles* the real, which is to say, repeats or reproduces it in a conceptual form, and therefore *justifies* it; it resigns it in order to resign us to it (Lyotard's pun). This operation is a sophisticated version of what religion and myth already do (and Hegel himself would concur, but with a different inflection: myth and religion express in picture-thinking what philosophy thinks conceptually). For Marx, by contrast, the task of theory is to *reverse* the concrete, not to redouble it. It must treat the historical present as the *inverted form* of its underlying rationality while reconstructing that rationality. Granted, in writing *Capital*, Marx repeats something of the “real”. But as we have seen, this is because there is a measure of communication, a right angle between the two presents. As opposed to Hegel, Marx *displaces* what he repeats in *Capital* through the operation of reversal. This allows him to criticize interpersonal relations and their institutionalization under capitalism, whereas Hegel's operation is inherently conservative.

### 4. *Déictique* (p.41-43)

Lyotard situates Marx with respect to Left-Hegelianism and humanism. He describes how Feuerbach, contrary to Marx, reproduces the religious, world-edifying function of philosophy even while trying to escape it. Feuerbach privileges the *deictic* – any word like “here”, “now”, “I”, “you” or “this” which *designates* something of the concrete while failing to *signify* anything in the theoretical system. The deictic is not a concept, inasmuch as it cannot be given an equivalent extension in the theoretical system through other terms. As such, it points beyond theory to the non-linguistic, to the properly concrete and, importantly for Feuerbach – who lets the Cartesian, humanistic implications of the deictic resonate

– the relation between interlocutors. To comprehensively redouble the real, Hegel must absorb the deictic into his system, to transform it into a moment of the development of the concept. Feuerbach by contrast insists upon its intractability, its opacity to theory. But while his philosophy thereby ceases to be religious in the sense of a dialectical reconciliation, it remains so in what Lyotard deems a reformed or “protestant” sense, precisely by insisting on the anguished retention of absence in presence, or more specifically, of the transcendent I-you relation in the immanent field. This renders his discourse uncritical because it posits the “real” relation between interlocutors – their *position* – as innocent, unproblematic, and ultimately inter-subjective – which is not to say objective. In short, Feuerbach criticizes the *signified* of Hegelian discourse, the absolute mediation, while nonetheless mystifying relations between interlocutors. It remains to Marx to go further.

##### 5. *À la fois un déictique et un schème* (p.43-46)

In opposition to Left-Hegelianism, Marx installs his discourse at a certain *distance* from its object. Take for example the fourth thesis on Feuerbach. Feuerbach correctly reduces the Holy Family to an ideological expression of the mundane, nuclear family – but uncritically accepts that the latter is real. He does not read the family as *itself* an alienation, an experiential inversion that remains to be theoretically and practically annihilated. His analysis therefore lacks the distance of a *science* to its field of reference. In this direction – concerning distance, the break, the cut in connection to science – it is possible to follow Althusser. But according to Lyotard, Althusser fails understand the precise nature of this distance when he dismisses or does not recognize a defining feature of Marxist discourse: that *the referential relation between Marxist speech and its object is an essentially critical one* (Pagès, 2011). Marxist discourse does not simply *reflect* nor even *reconstruct abstractly*, but rather *inverts* or *reverses* the given. This makes it, to quote Pagès, “a theoretical system which negates its object by inverting it,” and not “a structural system that gives rational shape to the reality under discussion” (2011). Put differently, the purely critical function of Marxist discourse is captured in the fact that it articulates and negates alienation in the social field; it theoretically inverts a “real” inversion, and this latter inversion is what is called alienation. There is thus an “epistemological distance” in Marxism that one does not find, for example, in structuralist discourse (Althusser perhaps, but most certainly Claude Lévi-Strauss). The theoretical system, to be critical, must indicate not only how “reality” can be conceptually reconstructed, *but also* how it might be theoretically annihilated

through reversal. This is precisely where we see the importance of alienation in Marx's system. It functions on the one hand, in the object-field, as a *schema*: it signals "real" abstraction, i.e. inversion, as well as the theoretical possibility of constructing a non-inverted relation and inverting the inversion. But it also appears in the theoretical register – only not as a *concept* in the mature Marx's system. To this extent, Althusser's analysis is correct. But Lyotard maintains that alienation is present "in another way," "negatively present"; it operates as a *deictic* or, more accurately, as a *quasi-deictic*. For example, the theoretical tableau plots out the co-presence of the use-value and exchange-value of labor, thereby designating capitalist "reality" – where exchange-value obscures use-value – as alienated. Alienation in theory is therefore a "deictic", a showing, but only a "quasi-deictic" because in showing, it also negates.

## Section 2

### 6. *Le hazard* (p.46-48)

It now falls to Lyotard to substantiate the claims of the first section. He turns his attention to the lived experience of the indifference of labor, and the "symptomatic privilege" this has in Marx's system. He claims that the recognition and the use of its indexing function is a "methodological constant" of Marx's work. Marx always affirmed the lived experience in capitalism of a schema indicating a possible theoretical and practical universality. As such, the real rupture between the period of 1843-48 and the Introduction of 1857 does not, as Althusser maintains, take shape in the banishment of alienation from Marx's system, but rather, the cleavage Marx establishes between alienation's phenomenal and theoretical registers. In the earlier period, Marx more or less identifies the experience of alienation with its concept, cleaving as he does to a notion of essence and appearance inherited from Hegel. Later, he retains alienation in experience as a *symptom* while maintaining that its theoretical elaboration annihilates it. To substantiate these claims, Lyotard examines how the rupture plays out in Marx's handling of the notion of "chance" (accident, contingency) from the earlier to the later writings.

### 7. *Un Faktum qui soit un Begriff?* (p.48-50)

Lyotard does not want to claim however that the young Marx was unproblematically Hegelian. Far from it; he identifies in the Parisian manuscripts of 1844 the "most remarkable" early configuration of the double present. Against Althusser he maintains that the text is not fundamentally Hegelian, inasmuch as its *method* is not Hegelian. Contrary to Hegel, who engenders appearance from essence (the concrete from the concept), Marx proceeds "inversely from appearances."

Take private property for example. Hegel starts from the false, abstract universality of property as such to engender its concrete “reality” (thereby identifying essence and appearance). Marx for his part demonstrates that, whereas in “reality” property appears to generate the alienation of labor, in theory, the relation is reversed: property is engendered by alienated labor. He is already engaged in *reversing* appearances, and as such he is already critical. Granted, the manuscripts are more or less sketches and are preponderantly concerned with the phenomenology, not the theory of labor; nonetheless, the methodology plotted out in the Introduction of 1857 is already operant.

#### 8. *Retournement de Hegel* (p.51-52)

Continuing the argument, Lyotard rejects Althusser’s claim that in the 1844 manuscripts, Marx takes bourgeois political economy at face value. To the contrary, Marx was therein engaged in overturning the problematic, concepts and system of the latter. To bring this out, Lyotard compares the manuscripts to the 1843-44 Introduction of the *Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right* (Marx, 2005). In the latter, alienation is not the index of something beneath appearances; it is the negative moment in a dialectic where subject and substance are identical. In the 1844 manuscripts Marx is already engaged in eliminating this identity, taking a decisive step forward by carrying the critique of mediation over to the Hegelian methodology itself. What is “alienation” in the manuscripts persists in the Introduction of 1857 as the indifference of labor; hence Marx is methodologically consistent.

#### 9. *Gare à l’Histoire* (p.53-54)

Lyotard cites the fourth notebook of the *Grundrisse* as a more direct proof of Marx’s methodological consistency. He claims that the remarks on alienation demonstrate in a striking way the notebook’s parentage in the 1844 manuscripts. Marx makes a claim of considerable methodological importance here: that the underlying logic of capitalism is not to be sought in its history. He declares that “In order to develop the laws of bourgeois economy ... it is not necessary to write the real history of the relations of production” (Marx, 1973). Far from suggesting however that there were no necessary or sufficient historical conditions for the formation of capitalism, Marx maintains that as such, they “leave the enigma of capital intact” (Lyotard’s phrase). As pre-capitalist conditions, by definition, they dissipate when they give way to capital. To this extent, the question of primitive accumulation, for example, is a red herring (a “false question” in Lyotard’s parlance) since plunder must be transformed into capital by properly capitalistic relations of production, and these are precisely what the history of plundering does not in itself explain. To this extent, Lyotard claims that historicism must be treated

as an “epistemological aberration” and that the Marxist theoretical system must be constructed as “entirely present.”

10. *Économie et religion* (p.54-55)

But Lyotard maintains that historicism is much more than a methodological error. It essentially amounts to bourgeois economics’ own perspective on capital, which is to say that it functions as “un-critiqued religion.” To liberal economics, capitalism is at once historical and eternal. This would be paradoxical but for the deeply Hegelian nature of liberal economics, as Marx understands it. For liberal economics capitalism is indeed historical, since pre-capitalist social formations are read as *leading* to capitalism. But it is also eternal, inasmuch as the pre-capitalist social formations are precisely that: *pre-capitalist*, i.e. moments on the road to capitalism. As such, capitalism has a history but it also figures as the natural – as opposed to the properly historical (i.e. contingent) – condition of economics. Lyotard reminds the reader of Hegel’s own forays into economics to show how he ceaselessly conceived of political economy in terms of a substantial dialectic.

11. *Critique de la plutodicée* (p.55-56)

To the uninitiated reader, Marx may appear to be confounding *eternity* with *becoming*. This is not so. First, he is opposing the *historical* character of capitalism in Marxist critique with its *ahistorical* (which is to say eternal or natural) character in the economic, speculative justification. Second, he is opposing the *atemporal* status of the critical system he intends to construct with the ontological *becoming* of the philosophical justification Hegel gives to Adam Smith. Hegel constructs a “plutodicy” (a theodicy of capital), justifying its present in the moments of the conceptual/historical path it has traced. Lyotard’s striking claim here is that Marx’s critique of political economy, precisely in seeking *reversal*, lines up with his critique of speculative philosophy. As such, “the methodological reversal of 1844 remains the nerve of the critique of political economy.” Just as Marx critiques the pretended justification of capitalism through the history of primitive accumulation (as *pre-capitalist* it neither explains nor justifies anything of capitalism, recall), he also reverses the subordination in capitalist production of living, creative labor to the dead labor that is accreted in the means of production. Just as speculative philosophy “bathes” in the death of the surpassed moment, capitalism’s alienation is the dominion of death over the living.

12. *Distance non dialectique* (p.56-58)

It is important to emphasize however that Marx offers no philosophy of “life” to recuperate the negativity of this dominion of death. Methodologically speaking, “The separation he introduces between the movement of reality and the

movement of the cognizance of reality is not dialectical.” As such, the reversal is not a *moment*, in the speculative sense, wherein through the labor of the negative, the concept or substance is reconciled to itself at last; rather, Marx’s thrust is purely critical, which is to say both demystifying and revolutionary. And inasmuch as it constructs the present “reality” as in some manner entirely self-sufficient – we might say, entirely self-present – the question is posed of a force which actively and at all times sustains it, operating at its heart in the production of wealth; a “puissance de richesse” as Lyotard puts it. Marx’s answer to this question is the concept of labor power. Lyotard notes that the language changes from “puissance de travail” (*das Arbeitsvermögen*) in the *Grundrisse* to “force de travail” (*die Arbeitskraft*) in *Capital*. This indicates that in the preparatory text especially, Marx views labor power as a creative energy internal to the capitalist system, a “puissance” or potential, propping it up and allowing it to reproduce (the shift undergone in *Capital* by contrast is to view it from the perspective of capital itself, i.e. as a constituent of capital and an element, a “force” in the general apparatus of production). With this note of caution in mind, Lyotard claims to have identified the third aspect of Marx’s critique. It has already a) emphasized the methodological untenability of explaining the present on the basis of the past, and b) shown how the historicization of capitalism is really a naturalization and therefore a justification. Now it must c) draw the practical political implications of this non-dialectical reversal. These are not easily missed; if Marxism was indeed a substantial, dialectical critique, wherein knowledge was (or was to be) homogenous with its object (the aforementioned Hegelian illusion), then the contradiction between knowledge and “reality” – i.e. its “alienation” – would have to engender a “mediating instance” to “bandage and to think” it (“la panser et la penser”). Here we have hit a nerve: “Any dialectical philosophy of the relation of knowledge to experience gives birth to a ‘bureaucracy of the spirit’” operating on behalf of the dialectic. But the struggle against bureaucracy characterized Marx’s political engagement from the very beginning. As Lyotard puts it, “Any practice conforming to the critical reversal is non-dialectical. The question of revolutionary organization must be posed on the basis of this conclusion.” Contemporary Marxist parties – read, Althusser’s PCF – repeat the alienation of “reality” and of speculative discourse when they claim for themselves the bandaging-thinking prerogative.

### 13. *Le deuxième tour est le retournement* (p.58-60)

Lyotard now pinpoints the double present within Marxist discourse. The methodological reversal happens when, having plotted out all of capital’s present (i.e. properly capitalist) metamorphoses, theory follows it through the process of reproduction, i.e. the point at which it starts anew to expand. It is in this second

pass that theory becomes critical, taking its distance from its object and deducing therefrom the alienation of the worker – thus reversing the social given. In the *first* pass – the phenomenological, “naïve” tracking of capital’s present – capital appears as totally exterior to the worker. On the *second* pass, having gone through the M-C-M cycle, and having avowed that production is only possible on condition that its disparate elements are organized under living labor, theory unravels the tensions between capital’s elements and the occulted but decisive role of the worker in the production of value. What appeared as totally exterior to her is, theory demonstrates, the worker’s own product; hence, theory has demonstrated that “reality” is an inversion. “The veil has fallen” over the social given that philosophy has heretofore sought to justify, but theory now seeks to negate.

#### 14. *L’aliénation en façade* (p.60-61)

Granted, it is from the perspective of labor, under the veil of the social given, that alienation is explicitly discussed. But far from having disappeared, it is precisely in 1857-58, in the *Grundrisse* that alienation is given “its exact position with respect to theory.” As Lyotard puts it, “the immediate experience of exteriority indexes an inversion of the other side of the tableau.” Hence, the phenomenology of labor power which persists even in the *Grundrisse* necessitates a shift to the *dispositif* of *Capital*, which passes almost entirely to the substrate of the “things in themselves.” But Lyotard cautions us to remember that at the moment of writing the *Grundrisse*, Marx conceived of *Capital* as the first book of a larger work, the third volume of which was to have been devoted to salaried work. Here Lyotard makes a bold claim: it is “certain” that the analyses of the alienation of labor in the *Grundrisse* – *not* those of the 1844 manuscripts – would have been taken up again in Volume III.

#### 15. *Le retournement est fait de deux déplacements rectangulaires* (p.61-62)

Lyotard cautions us that theory does not *redress* what is inverted in alienation. There is no real symmetry between the “real” and the theoretical; their relation is better envisioned as perpendicular – theory being at a right angle (or a left turn!) from “reality”. Recall that Lyotard in no way claims that alienation functions as a *concept* in the mature Marx’s theory; rather, it emerges in how theory operates, what it does – i.e. it is implicit in the critical right-angle that is taken on the second pass of the analysis of capital. Retrospectively, theory ascertains that alienation was already present in the first pass; hence the trajectory of critique passes by two rectangular displacements.

16. *Le faux déplacement ou « progrès » (de l'aliénation)* (p.62-63)

Critique is never accomplished from *within* alienation, i.e. from within capital's regime of exteriority, indifference and abstraction (compare the Lyotard of *Libidinal Economy*, who exhorts us to abandon critique, to "be inside and forget it") (Lyotard, 1993). Granted, capital dissimulates "growth", "development", and "progress" – indicative of a certain critical traction if not a self-critique. But in reality, capital *repeats itself without displacing itself*. What occurs under capitalism is actually the perpetual expansion of the reproduction of capital, which is to say the extension of alienation over the entire social field. "Progress" under expanded alienation indexes the disappearance of the creative act of labor from more and more sectors of life, rendering it increasingly present only by its felt absence.

17. *Critique de la critique de la dialectique substantielle* (p.63-67)

Alienation is therefore indeed a "trace", indicating that something has been lost. But this something is not a "good" negativity ("that of the spirit, or labor") that has been obstructed by a "bad" one ("that of capital, of commodity fetishism, of reification"). Such a reading would be religious, Hegelian (the Marxism of Herbert Marcuse, popular at the time Lyotard was writing, serves as an example). Lyotard reads the 1844 manuscripts as an expression of Marx's struggle against this tendency, pinpointing the principle of "the creation of Man by Man" as a complement to the method of reversal. Essentially, the young Marx is prefiguring the method of the *Grundrisse*, which "refuses to engender the world from the non-world (God) just as it refuses to engender capital from non-capital." He draws therefrom the distinction between communism and socialism – communism being to socialism what atheism is to "real life", i.e. a negation of an alienation (private property or religion, respectively). Lyotard grants that with this notion of "real life", Marx has not quite left philosophy – but the way out is clearly indicated. If in 1844 his critique of religion results in a Feuerbachian Protestantism of the sensible, by 1845 in the *Theses on Feuerbach* he realizes that such a discourse is *itself* religious. One cannot simply pass from a discourse *of* mediation to a discourse that *is* mediation without redoubling and edifying "reality". All discourse, even that of 1844, is "outside" of reality in some sense; the point is to ensure that its *position* on the outside is critical, reversing. To properly reverse "reality", to treat it critically, requires a double operation: 1) the reversal of what is alienated, i.e. inverted in "reality", and then 2) construction of theoretical system rendering alienation and the possibility of its reversal intelligible.

18. *Une question* (p.67)

Theory does not ultimately stand in a dialectical relation to the symptomatic reality which is its referent, at least if we take “dialectical” in the religious (Hegelian or hermeneutic) sense. The Marxist canon does not of itself tear the veil of alienated consciousness away from workers. On the contrary, “Marxist theory” can be successfully deployed in the perpetuation of alienation; witness on this count official Soviet *diamat*, and the history of Bolshevism after the revolution. The question therefore arises: does the worker have to descend *herself* to the substrate of alienated production, to learn from scratch and *in situ* the truths articulated in theory? If so, where and how can this be achieved? Above all, the practical reversal (i.e. the reversal in practice) clearly rules out mediation. But this entails a Marxism with no Party, and Lyotard must now reckon with the Party’s leading theoretician.

### Section 3

#### 19. *Un marxisme apolitique* (p.68-70)

Thus we hit upon the point of Lyotard’s reflection: to identify Althusser’s mishandling of alienation, and the theoretical and practical consequences that ensue. Althusser’s intervention regarding alienation was in response to the publication of the nineteenth volume of the *Recherches internationales à la lumière du marxisme*, devoted to the young Marx. His indignation at the journal’s “future anterior” method of reading the young Marx – according to which the early writings find retroactive theoretical justification in the mature works – is understandable, since this is precisely the method of Hegelian idealism. But as Lyotard points out, Althusser’s tracing of the epistemological break has *de facto* the same consequences, negating the theoretical value of the early writings. This has far-reaching effects on Althusser’s Marxism: he leaves the theory of practical politics largely untouched. And for Althusser, the rejection of the Hegelian dialectic goes hand in hand with the rejection of the concept of an organic social totality and its expression. This means that the superstructure never organically expresses the contradiction in the economic base, and in fact maintains a certain autonomy with respect to it. As such, a change of the economic base – a revolution in the structure – in no way guarantees a comparable revolution in the superstructure. It can even, to the contrary, reactivate atavistic elements; hence, Althusser theorizes the possibility of Stalinism. Lyotard detects here a Hegelian residue, a discourse of the redemption of the negative moment of Stalinism – and hence, a “bureaucratodicée” (a bureaucro-theodicy). In any case, Althusser forces us to choose between Hegel on one hand, and the permanent installation of politics in the bureaucratic and bureaucratizing superstructure on the other. Lacking Marx’s concept of alienation, he has installed Marxist politics – largely neglected – in a thoroughly alienated terrain and handed it over to a thoroughly alienating mediator.

20. *La théorie et l'arme* (p.70-72)

But what of Althusser's *theory*? One mustn't forget that Marx's work – including the theoretical – is not just a text, but *also a weapon*. When Althusser invites us to “read *Capital*,” the risk is that we read *capitalism*, leaving the referent intact – and indeed the question hangs over his work of *who* will annihilate it, and *how*, and *why*. This speaks to Althusser's segregation of theory from politics, which produces the very periodization in the preface to *For Marx* according to which Marx matures by passing from ideology to science. Lyotard argues, against Althusser, that Marx indeed *starts* in political critique, but in fact *never leaves this start*; the State persists in the theoretical field, in the mature sketches, as an object of future critique. But inasmuch as it was *only ever* a start, Marxists must move on from the provisional terminology of superstructure and atavism. To be a (politically active) Marxist today is to go beyond the text and to track so as to reverse the role of the State in the expansion of alienation, not to perpetuate it by situating politics in the superstructure.

21. *Marx enragé* (p.72-74)

Lyotard turns to the young Marx's critique of the Prussian bureaucracy to substantiate the preceding claims. Though remaining ideological (passing from a liberal to a Left-Hegelian mode), the critiques of 1842-43 position the State as an exteriorized and exteriorizing apparatus of mediation. Thereby, regardless of their ideological trappings, the early critiques hit upon something essential about bureaucracies: rather than truly *suppressing* or *resolving* the contradictions they are called to mediate, they *repeat* them without *displacing* them. One detects in the words of the young, enraged Marx the desire to escape from the Hegelianism trapping him and holding back the critique; the violence of the *form* of his discourse strains towards a properly critical violence of *position*.

22. *La médiation, c'est-à-dire l'Église, c'est-à-dire l'État* (p.74-77)

While Marx's early critique remains mired in the Hegelian text and the phenomenal social field, it nonetheless latches onto objectivized and alienated “mediation” as its target – going so far as to attack the very essence of mediation itself. Marx indeed undertakes a critique of Hegelian “contradiction” as such, but devotes particular attention to the Prussian intellectual bureaucracy – for example the censors. He asks: if the State is the truth of society, then why must it secrete a distinct intellectual class to safeguard society from press writers like him, and thus moderate between society and its own supposed truth? Lyotard suggests that the weak point the speculative system – the necessity of the negative moment and of mediation – is here incarnate. But Marx goes even further: inasmuch as the censor

is not immediately the State, but rather a mediator, the censor-State relation presumably requires its own speculative guarantee – i.e. a super-censor. But this raises the same problem anew, and the need for mediation stretches on *ad infinitum*. Marx has here hit upon a defining feature of bureaucracy: it grows both peripherally, permeating ever new areas of the social surface, as well as “pyramidally”, deferring the “anarchy” that threatens it to ever higher levels of management. The mediator can never really mediate its contradiction, being foreign to both elements, so the next best thing is to *repeat* the contradiction – without thereby *displacing* or *reversing* it – at a higher bureaucratic level. It remains to Marx, in 1843, to a) draw the explicit link between bureaucracy and religion, and b) displace the *position* of his own critique. He begins to learn that Hegel is not to blame for the “absurdity or immorality” of bureaucratic repetition, but rather, that “reality” is. Hegel does not justify the Prussian State so much as the latter achieves its own justification through Hegel’s theory – and this necessitates a methodological shift of focus.

### 23. *Position (de pouvoir) du discours de savoir* (p.77-80)

Marx thus engages in “exiting the text”, or rather, turning from the texts of the philosophers to the “text” of immediate, “material” practice. Turning Hegel on his head is insufficient, and in fact perpetuates mystification as we saw with Feuerbach. If in *The German Ideology* Marx turned our gaze from the sky to the Earth, in *The Critique of Political Economy* he insists we plumb the Earth for the basement. The idea is to first turn from Hegelian and Left-Hegelian discourse to the “reality” that it really speaks, but then to turn from this “reality” to what is really undergirding it. The second turn is, properly, the reversal sought by Marxist theory. But how then does *politics* figure into this new program of reversal – the critique of bureaucracy in particular? Here Marx and Engels “hesitate”.

### 24. *L'État du XIXe siècle et les survivances* (p.80-81)

The hesitations of Marx and Engels on the State flow from the evident “hesitations” of actual nineteenth century states. The properly political analyses of Marx and Engels took place in a situation of long transition. They witnessed the destruction of pre-capitalist forms of political power and authority, but also the need, on the part of the new ruling capitalist class, not to sweep the old order away too quickly or radically and thus throw the landed classes, the guilds and the peasantry into the struggle on the side of the burgeoning proletariat. In this conjuncture of conflict (which is not to say contradiction), the State functions as a compromise formation. The (nineteenth century) State is at once superstructural,

and overdetermined: obeying capital “in the last instance” but tarrying with pre-capitalist atavisms (“survivances”). Lyotard reminds us of the need for patient, precise “phenomenological” readings of “real” situations, and in particular, the need to reconstruct alienation as it functions *today*, so that our theoretical present constitutes the theory not of the nineteenth century but of the present moment.

25. *L'intégration* (p.81-84)

Alienation *today* describes a much greater number of “local social experiences” than it did in Marx’s time. The schema of a “realized abstraction” now extends beyond productive labor to the fabric of everyday life, and the individual now finds herself an outsider even in those relations to which she nominally belongs (think here, to bring Lyotard’s analysis up to date, of Facebook and the like.). But since the false universality of alienation extends further than it did previously, so does the possibility of theoretical construction. In fact the possibility (the necessity) of more comprehensive and wider-reaching theoretical elaboration is already indicated in the *Grundrisse*, where Marx explains how the expanded reproduction of capitalism incorporates, transforms and eliminates non-capitalist atavisms. He demonstrates therein how the expansion of reproduction entails the efflorescence of new social symptoms, a superficial diversity indicating and demanding the articulation of a generalized alienation keeping step with capital. Marx is guided by the theme of alienation in tracking capital’s “progress”. And today, we might continue – retaining the concept of alienation in our analysis of a sociological condition wherein knowledge, in the form of information, has become a productive force in its own right.

26. *Déplacement de l'État* (p.84-87)

Here the reader glimpses an embryonic version of Lyotard’s *The Postmodern Condition* more than a decade before its publication. Expanding reproduction now annihilates atavistic social forms rather than striking a compromise between them at the superstructural level. Favoring abstraction, it models science upon the general schema of alienation, scuttling the scientist to the margins or specialized ghettos of her vocation while externalizing and accreting knowledge in scientific instruments (and, as Lyotard will emphasize in 1979: data banks). The political sphere undergoes the same general process. Whereas the State once struck an uneasy compromise between atavisms and the new capitalist class, its function has utterly changed. It now manages a “synchronous, simultaneous complexity”, an opaque, alienated social mass subordinated to the needs of expanded reproduction. The State’s role becomes quite simply to manage and ensure capital’s expansion, subordinating through its organs the various social spheres and submitting them to instrumental reason and the law of value. The political class becomes an expert

class, i.e. an increasingly specialized management class. Its allegiance to expanded reproduction trumps even the “sacred” institutions of bourgeois capitalism, such as private property. If the latter obstructs the expansion of reproduction, it is possible that the political class may regulate or abolish it as in actually existing socialist regimes. Through a kind of ruse of capitalist reason, “socialist” bureaucracies accomplish precisely the logic of expanded reproduction (Lyotard speaks of the USSR, but think here especially of China since the 1980s). In sum, we see the main outlines of Lyotard’s later analysis of sociological postmodernity: the hegemony of instrumental reason (what he later terms “system”, “complexity”, “development”, “technoscience”), the utter transformation of science and knowledge, and the shift from antagonistic politics to perpetual development-management.

27. *Ce que cet État médiatise en principe* (p.88-89)

Lyotard adds precision to this critique of the modern capitalist state. The latter has undergone a double transformation since Marx’s time. First, it has become increasingly conflated with the dominant class. Recall that the latter is essentially a management class, and therefore its legitimacy is grounded in its ability to facilitate expanded reproduction. This “State-class” however, to the extent that it successfully unfetters reproduction through the elimination of atavisms, also comes increasingly to resemble the society it ostensibly governs. First, the new bureaucracy is a moment of the reproduction of capital, obeying the same imperatives and the same general laws. To this extent, the contradictions of the latter come to characterize it as well. An expanding alienation characterizes the bureaucracy and its labor *dispositif* through and through, and this generates the paradoxical need for an in principle limitless set of meta-bureaucracies. But second, the particular relation in which the bureaucracy stands with respect to the society it manages is itself an alienated one. It poses itself as capable of the management it cannot effectuate without reproducing itself at ever high levels, adding the figure of a “strange, impotent mediator” to the alienated landscape of late capitalism. Marx already said as much in his early critique of the Prussian bureaucracy, essentially describing a situation in which the difference between state and “civil society” tended to disappear.

28. *L’aliénation et l’exploitation* (p.89-92)

But does the expansion of alienation, the penetration of capitalism into activities heretofore “relatively independent” from infrastructure entail that these have become proletarianized? That is, not just salaried but producing surplus value as well? Note that exploitation is a concept of the theoretical system; we don’t “see” it in the social field (though Lyotard will admit, in section 30 below, that it can

subsist as a “diffuse feeling” in bureaucratic capitalism). Far from becoming more visible with the expansion of alienation, exploitation actually becomes more and more hidden (in order to be charitable to Lyotard here, we must allow that we can “feel” exploitation without ever “seeing” it). An important ideological function of the State becomes apparent: to further mediate between the worker and her product, obscuring the exploitation that was more brazen (yet unseen) in the free market. Noting that capital is indifferent to the “material” or “immaterial” nature of the product, Lyotard turns to the teaching profession for an exemplary illustration of how exploitation emerges but is obscured under capital’s expansion – which is to say, under the expansion of alienation.

29. *Apparition et occultation simultanées de l’exploitation de l’enseignant* (p.92-95)

Education becomes wage labor under capitalism. But when, subsequently, it becomes a free and universal public service through “nationalization” or “collectivization”, does this mean that the parasitic middle-man – the capitalist – has been cut out of the equation? Is the pedagogical relationship now unmediated? The answer is no; it remains alienated and exploitative, though the level of exploitation, even to an approximation, cannot be quantified. Recall that in the advanced bureaucratic capitalism Lyotard describes, the classical boss gives way to the State-boss. In education, the dominant State-class, rather than the individual capitalist, comes to appropriate the surplus value created by teachers (i.e. for the purpose of the state or national budget). Effectively, the State-boss sells a product to families, though the sale is masked (as taxation). Owing to this dissimulation, and added to the immateriality of the teacher’s product, it is “impossible” to pin down exactly how much the teacher has produced (and therefore how much she has been exploited), but two (unquantifiable) relations broadly characterize her labour: a) the educational infrastructure stands as constant capital and b) the educated student is what she produces. The analogy with industrial production, with its alienation and its exploitation, is firm – except that the “material” shaped by the teacher – students – may temporarily and locally enter into cooperation with her to challenge the economic norms of the pedagogical relationship (e.g. Lyotard organizing at Nanterre).

30. *Brouillage de l’exploitation dans la hiérarchie* (p.95-98)

Not only the *rate* but the *place* of exploitation becomes blurred under bureaucratic capitalism. Exploitation comes to permeate the bureaucracy itself. To continue with the example of the educational sector, the emergence of a fine-grained salary hierarchy contributes to the impossibility of discerning, phenomenologically speaking, between redistributed surplus value and the remunerated value of labor power. All that remains is a “diffuse feeling of exploitation” and no one knows

where to discharge it, since the clearly defined capitalist boss is gone and everyone in the hierarchy seems similarly if variably exploited. In a society tending increasingly toward the expanded reproduction of capital this becomes the norm, since more and more social labor time is expended in the production of the instruments of production by multiple, specialized and variously salaried laborers.

31. *Éliminer la médiation pratique* (p.98-101)

In sum, the economic bureaucracy under expanding reproduction a) redistributes a part of the total surplus value and b) exteriorizes production to itself through mediation (i.e. management). It remains to discuss how c) workers' own organs of struggle become bureaucratized, which is to say alienated. Labor unions are well known to be more or less alienating structures, but it is in the revolutionary political party that the inversion of worker self-organization into bureaucracy finds its fullest expression. In fact, the thoroughgoing alienation of the worker from the Party bears all the hallmarks of Prussian bureaucracy critiqued by Marx in 1842-43. Here we return to Lyotard's distinction between the *content* of a discourse and its *position*: the "real" position from which the communist parties speak belies the inverse of what they actually say. This is rendered possible when the distance of reversal, i.e. critical distance, is not maintained between speech and its object; bureaucratization and the abandonment of practical critique go hand in hand. A revolutionary party which installs itself in the "reality" of capitalism buys into the reality principle of expanded reproduction and the law of value; witness on this count the many contemporary "Leftist" parties running on platforms of *managing* the neoliberal crisis, creating jobs, etc. Even in invoking its status as the party of the workers, the Communist Party betrays its alienated status; nothing is to be hoped for from the worker on the terrain of "reality", i.e. as a registered voter, and the invocation of "the proletariat" is in this sense a religious residue. The claim to "represent" or "express" the will of the working class, in an alienated "reality", amounts to a blandly statistical, non-critical claim. What is missing in this flat political space is the properly critical practice of plumbing the layers of Party-worker hierarchy to provoke reversal.

32. *La critique pratique et la provocation* (p.101-103)

What then *is* the practical critique? From the first, fourth, eighth and third theses on Feuerbach, Lyotard reconstructs a double relation between theory and practice. On one hand, revolutionary practice "constitutes the truth of theory." On the other, practice and theory are "parallel," doubling each other. That theory *doubles* practice while practice *resolves* theory may sound paradoxical. But as we have seen, the theoretical substrate indicates privileged "regions of reversal", or "critical regions" on the social surface. In other words, theory uncovers reality's alienated

nature while mapping relations of production; critical practice, for its part, “provokes ... the basement [substrate] into rising to the surface,” i.e. accomplishes in the social sphere the reversal that theory maps out. Lyotard gives three examples (“real or imagined”) to illustrate this practical-critical function. One of these echoes his organizing at Nanterre: the student movement attacks the university and the “culture” it promotes, goading the intellectual bureaucracy into showing its true colors and thereby reversing it in practice. Supposedly a neutral, non-partisan institution, the university becomes repressive in the face of student-professor contestation, thereby demonstrating its true place in the system: an ideological alibi for capitalism, and a workshop for the self-perpetuation of the bureaucracy.

### 33. *La sobriété pratique* (p.103-105)

There is no question of *building upon* such practical interventions, since this would imply a memory-in-the-“real”, embodied in a mediating-edifying revolutionary Party. Any such organization, however novel it appears, is always the same (and reproduces the same). As such, Lyotard counsels abandoning hope in overcoming, through the mediation of a Party, the contradiction between the law of value and the creative power of labor. Strictly speaking, there *isn't even any contradiction* between “reality” and its substrate, since the two orders are radically distinct (i.e. inversions; the presence of “reality” entails the occultation of the substrate, not a tension between them). The only real contradiction – which is far from substantial, Hegelian – is that of “a system which counts everything in terms of labor time, and which reduces this time as much as it can to raise the rate of relative surplus value.” And while this produces symptoms all over the social surface, and indeed many an opportunity for practical-critical reversal, it offers no guarantee of a final catastrophe that could do away with capitalism. In practice, all this means that practical critique of the system undertaken by workers and students rests neither upon a substantial dialectic, nor upon knowledge or know-how accumulated and safeguarded outside of itself. Lyotard rejects here the religious tendency of putatively Marxist organizations that aim to resolve the alienation at the surface through textual study and the formation of a community of believers; in this sense, true faith in Marx entails the adoption of his critical “temperance”, which always and everywhere warns against the collapse of revolutionary practice into religious modes of congregation, hierarchy, and text-worship. Texts, even Marxist ones, should only ever be used critically; Althusser’s “return to Marx,” too bookish, is implicitly targeted here. Revolutionary pedagogy is critical – which is to say practical – or it is nothing.

#### IV. Summary

Let us recapitulate, paring down the preceding exegesis to the bare essentials.

Althusser does not grasp, or suppresses, the critical nature of the discourse-object relation in Marx's theory. That is, he fails to see that it is not a positive knowledge, but rather negates its object through reversal. Discounting alienation as a Hegelian holdover in the young Marx, Althusser does not see that it persists in the mature works as a schema and a quasi-deictic. But alienation is in fact essential to Marx's theory (and properly Marxist practice) because of its indexing function in the theory-object relation.

Liotard does not dispute alienation's absence, *qua* explicit concept, from Marx's mature works. Nonetheless, he maintains that it is operant if tacit throughout. Prefigured in the early works and sketched in the *Grundrisse*, it is operant and readable precisely in *the way that the later critique of capital proceeds*. Marx digs through layers of ideology to articulate the "reality" of the social given (starting finally in *Capital*, as is well known, with the phenomenon of the commodity) in order to suss out its immanent negation. Metaphorically, he passes from sky, to earth, to basement. Or: he reverses ideology to uncover "reality", which must be reversed by theory (and critical practice). Against Althusser's periodization of Marx in terms of epistemological breaks, Lyotard paints the real shift in Marx's handling of alienation as a shift from its location at the level of philosophy and the phenomenological subject to the level of "real" social relations. In other words, if "alienation" designates something which happens in discourse and/or to the phenomenological subject, a concept that is at once an experience, then it is indeed absent from the mature Marx. But that's not to say that alienation *per se* is absent. For Lyotard, Marx's retention of an operant notion if not an explicit theoretical concept of alienation boils down to the practice of articulating-negating certain indices, certain over-determined nodes in the structure of the social given, which point to the immanent (if by no means dialectically guaranteed) possibility of a reversal.

Althusser's error – his failure to acknowledge the essentially critical function of Marxist discourse and the persistence of alienation – has immediate practical consequences: namely, his support for the alienated and alienating "bureaucracy of the spirit" against the spontaneous critical-practice of workers and students. Because he does not take the proper measure of alienation and its relation to critical practice, Althusser remains mired in a dialectic of mediation, still too Hegelian, wherein the Party reserves for itself the role of scientific and political vanguard. Lyotard, in 1973, chalks Althusserianism up to a "resurgence of Stalinism" and a brandishing of scientificity as a guarantee of infallibility "exactly as in Jdanov's day" (Lyotard, 1973). He suggests that this bureaucratization of the revolution is, precisely, an alienation;

building itself upon the ground occupied by capital, repeating without displacing the alienation of workers, Althusser's PCF is doomed at best to manage the expanded reproduction of capital better than the openly capitalist parties would,<sup>5</sup> and at worst – but this goes hand in hand – to brazenly obstruct practical-critical uprisings.<sup>6</sup> The Party can bluster all it wants about the overthrow of capitalism, but its very *position* is non-critical, counter-revolutionary, playing into the hands of capital. Failing to take the proper measure of alienation, Althusser perpetuates it. Note however that to his credit – in 1969, the very year of Lyotard's critique – Althusser will identify the PCF as an Ideological State Apparatus (ISA), and thus as to some extent complicit in the reproduction of capitalism (Althusser, 2014).

Like Althusser, Lyotard is no believer in the historical necessity of communist revolution; capitalist social formulations are pregnant with their own dissolution only to the extent that we can hit upon the right moment (as per Lenin). But this moment is *made*, rendered possible precisely through the a-chronological work of theoretical elaboration. And it is not made by a Party, but by the workers and students themselves.

## V. Deeper Continuities

It remains then to draw up a succinct balance sheet of interest in Lyotard's dispute with Althusser, from the perspective of an ongoing reassessment of the place of Lyotard's militant writings in the larger corpus.

Pagès's text on Lyotard and alienation, which McLennan has reviewed elsewhere,<sup>7</sup> tracks the changing fortunes of the concept through his corpus. While largely mute on the connection between alienation and Lyotard's use of the sublime, the picture she paints is overall compelling. Up to and including the Althusser dispute, as Pagès reconstructs him, we see Lyotard striving to *overcome* alienation. In the Althusser dispute, at any rate, he seeks to do so by means of *reversal* – and for reasons we have already seen, never cumulatively, nor once and for all, but rather tactically and perpetually. But by the end of his life, Lyotard is *anchoring* his political practice (minimal and formally negative though it is – see McLennan, 2013) on a constitutive, irremediable alienation couched in linguistic, affective and Freudian terms. What is fascinating about the dispute with Althusser is its hinge function. In our interpretation

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<sup>5</sup> In this connection, the reader might be interested in Jean Baudrillard's recently translated *The Divine Left: A Chronicle of the Years 1977-1984* (Semiotext(e), 2014).

<sup>6</sup> See Jacques Rancière, *Althusser's Lesson* (London and New York: Continuum, 2011).

<sup>7</sup> *Journal of French and Francophone Philosophy - Revue de la philosophie française et de langue française*, Vol XX, No 1 (2012) pp 134-137.

it is *here* that Lyotard clearly begins to anchor his politics in an antihumanistic account of alienation.<sup>8</sup>

The account of alienation in the Althusser dispute is “antihumanistic”, on our reading, on account of how it decentres (without abolishing) the phenomenology of labor. As in Althusser, the theoretical, broadly construed, is detached from the human – i.e. it is not coextensive with it; it neither defines it, nor is it achieved by it. Alienation is not, to repeat, an experience that is simultaneously a concept; it is, rather, a schema and a quasi-deictic that more properly takes shape in the *activity* of theory and critical practice. The human subject is not *achieved* through alienation; it is, rather, seized by it, perhaps even constituted while undone by it in the painful possibility of reversal.

The later Lyotard will variously construe *precisely this seizure/undoing of the human* in various terms: “differend”,<sup>9</sup> “passibility to the event”,<sup>10</sup> “affect-phrase”<sup>11</sup> and the like. Compare for example the account of alienation in the Althusser dispute with the following description of the differend, in the book of the same name: “The differend is the unstable state and instant of language wherein something which must be able to be put into phrases cannot yet be. This state includes silence, which is a negative phrase, but it also calls upon phrases which are in principle possible. This state is signaled by what one ordinarily calls a feeling: ‘One cannot find the words’, etc.” (Lyotard, 1988). While shifting to a linguistic-pragmatic register, the concept of something that is negatively present, troubling to the surface from some non-place persists. Following Pagès, it is therefore by no means a stretch to construe the differend in terms of alienation. What shifts however is the notion of reversibility. The postmodern and late Lyotard favours the *intractability* of the differend, of the affect-phrase and the like; it is no longer a question of reversing alienation but of bearing witness to it, of insisting upon its capacity to jam, however ephemerally, the cogs of instrumental reason.<sup>12</sup>

The critique of Althusser is therefore instructive because it articulates alienation as the conceptually independent – read antihumanistic, not subject-dependent – index of a reality in need of reversal. But who – or what – “needs” this reversal? Certainly not reality itself; too Hegelian. The subject, then? If not her worn-out organization, then the worker herself? Lyotard has one foot in his past, inasmuch as alienation retains a properly critical function; he is still to the left of Althusser, accusing him of Stalinism from a nominally Marxist perspective. But he has one foot in the future, to

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<sup>8</sup> There also being glimmers in his recently published 1964 lectures, *Pourquoi philosopher?*

<sup>9</sup> Cf Lyotard, *The Differend*.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Lyotard, *The Inhuman*.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Lyotard, *Misère de la philosophie*.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. McLennan, 2013.

the extent that alienation's force – its capacity to trouble, to demand reversal – resides not in the consciousness of the worker, or the workers' instantiation in the Party, but rather in the objective (dis-)economy of a practical/theoretical *dispositif*. In a word: alienation is a signal of the differend, the radical misfire between pragmatic registers. In later writings, the force of this signal is not such that it can demand, in good conscience, a theoretical and practical reversal. But it persists as the index of where the smooth, post-political functioning of what he variously calls “system”, “technoscience”, “development” or “complexification” breaks down.

In this connection, finally, it is worth noting how Lyotard's later anchorage in something like an intractable, non-reversible alienation bespeaks the Freudian influence that was already at play in the Althusser dispute, indicated by the language of indexes, symptoms, over-determinations and compromise formations. The manifestation of this influence persists, episodically, until Lyotard's death, and perhaps the seeds of his later conservatism – his militancy of intractability rather than reversibility – are already planted in the Althusser dispute. Recall that throughout his career, Freud himself was basically conservative with respect to the therapeutic possibilities inherent in psychoanalysis;<sup>13</sup> it is essentially a palliative, and in spite of the efforts of later interpreters on the Freudian Left like Reich and Marcuse, he sketches no erotic utopia. While no utopian himself, Lyotard takes a key departure from Freud in the Althusser dispute; symptoms speak to underlying blockages of energy which *must* be set off, conducted, ignited (rather than interminably worked upon, “worked through”, *Durcharbeitung* to use the terminology Lyotard will later borrow from Freud). There is a normativity absent in Freud, but which Lyotard struggles to articulate and never does manage to articulate (McLennan, 2011). It is a short step from here to the purely voluntaristic, unashamedly capitalistic accelerationism of *Libidinal Economy*, which eschews the normative question. As is well known, Lyotard took a step back from the libidinal philosophy, calling it a “façon de parler” – a “way of speaking” (Lyotard, 1977) – and returned to the normative question. But when Freud returns in the later writings, it is not as a philosopher of energetic possibility, but of intractability.<sup>14</sup>

The dispute with Althusser, then, is instructive because it displays Lyotard's struggle to articulate the proper relation between theory and practice on the basis of alienation, and an early staging of a Freudian politics of intractability. For the later

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<sup>13</sup> As Freud puts it to an imaginary interlocutor in the early *Studies on Hysteria*: “No doubt fate would find it easier than I do to remove you from your illness. But you will be able to convince yourself that much will be gained if we succeed in transforming your hysterical misery into common unhappiness. With a mental life that has been restored to health you will be better armed against that unhappiness.” (Breuer and Freud 1978: 393)

<sup>14</sup> Cf. *Heidegger and the Jews* and *Misère de la philosophie*.

Lyotard, theoretical (as well as e.g. artistic) intervention *is* political practice; however it retains a certain militant if not critical function in its insistence upon endlessly jamming the system of technoscientific development, in rear-guard and melancholic struggle, by bearing witness to the irremediable intractability – the alienation, perhaps – of the human.

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