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On Genesis

Louis Althusser

Translated by Jason E. Smith

I would like to be more precise on one point, which no doubt was not very clear in my letter.

In the schema of the “theory of the encounter” or theory of “conjunction,” which is meant to replace the ideological (religious) category of genesis, there is a place for what can be called linear genealogies.

To take up again, then, the example of the logic of the constitution of the capitalist mode of production in *Capital*:

1. the elements defined by Marx “combine” -- I prefer to say (in order to translate the term *Verbindung*) “conjoin” by “taking hold” [*prenant*] in a new structure. This structure cannot be thought, in its appearance, as the effect of a filiation, but as the effect of a conjunction. This new Logic has nothing to do with the linear causality of filiation, nor with Hegelian “dialectical” logic, which only says out loud what is implicitly contained in the logic of linear causality.
2. And yet, each of the elements that come to be combined in the conjunction of the new structure (in this case, of accumulated money-capital, “free” labor-power, that is, labor-power stripped of the instruments of labor, technological inventions) is itself, as such, a product, an effect.

What is important in Marx’s demonstration is that the three elements are not contemporary products of one and the same situation. It is not, in other words, the feudal mode of production that, by itself, and through a providential finality, engenders at the same time

the three elements necessary for the new structure to “take hold.” Each of these elements has its own “history,” or its own genealogy (to take up a concept from Nietzsche that Balibar has used very well for this purpose): the three genealogies are relatively independent. We even see Marx show that a single and same element (“free” labor-power) can be produced as the result of completely different genealogies.

Therefore the genealogies of the three elements are independent of one another, and independent (in their co-existence, in the co-existence of their respective results) of the existing structure (the feudal mode of production). Which excludes any possibility of a resurgence of the myth of genesis: the feudal mode of production is not the “father” of the capitalist mode of production in the sense that the latter would be contained “as a seed” in the first.

3. This said, it is still necessary to conceive the types of causality that might, concerning these elements (and, in a general manner, concerning the genealogy of any element) intervene in order to account for the production of these elements as elements entering into a conjunction that will “take hold” in a new structure.

We should, it seems to me, distinguish here between two distinct types of causality:

a. structural causality: an element can be produced as a structural effect. Structural causality is the last [*dernière*] causality of every effect.

What does the concept of structural causality mean? It signifies (in crude terms) that an effect B (considered as an element) is not the effect of a cause A (another element), but is instead the effect of element A insofar as this element A is inserted into relations that constitute the structure in which A is situated [and caught up].¹ This means, in simple terms, that in order to comprehend the production of effect B, it is not enough to consider cause A (immediately preceding, or visibly related with effect B) in an isolated manner, but cause A instead as an element of a structure in which it assumes a place, therefore as subject to relations, specific structural relations, that define the structure in question. A very basic form of structural causality appears in modern physics, when it uses the concept of a field [*champ*], and puts into play what can be called the causality of a field. In the case of the science of societies, if we follow Marx’s thought, we cannot understand this or that economic effect by relating it to an isolated cause, but only by relating it to the structure of the economic (defined by the articula-

¹ [The text in brackets was added in Althusser's handwriting in the margins of the manuscript -- JES]

tion of productive forces and relations of production). We can presume that in psychoanalysis such an effect (such a symptom) is, in the same way, only intelligible as the effect of the structure of the unconscious. It is not this or that event or element A that produced an element B, but the defined structure of the unconscious of the subject that produces effect B.

b. This law seems to be general. But structural causality defines, as structural, therefore as structural effect, rigorously defined and delimited zones or sequences, where structural causality is carried out in the form of linear causality. This is what happens, for example, in the labor process. Linear, mechanical causality (even if it assumes complex forms, as in machines, these forms remain mechanical, that is, linear, even in feedback and other cybernetic effects) is in play in an autonomous and exclusive fashion in a defined field, which is that of the production of products in the labor process.

In order to hammer in a nail, you hit a nail on the head, in order to work a field, you exert force on a plough which in turn acts on the earth, etc. This linear-mechanical causality (what Sartre calls “analytical reason” . . . but, be careful, what Sartre calls dialectical reason is, whatever he might say, only a complex form of analytical reason, is only analytical reason) acts then in producing the same effects, by repetition and accumulation. It is what is found in Hegel when he speaks of quantitative accumulation, of the logic of the understanding. Hegel tried to think properly structural effects in the form of a “qualitative leap,” that is, tried to pass from linear to structural causality by engendering the second from the first (and this is why his “dialectic” remains caught up in empirical categories of the mechanical and linear understanding, despite his declared surpassing of them, this “surpassing” -- *Aufhebung* -- being the concept that, despite itself, admits and acknowledges this captivity.)

There are then entire sequences, but always defined within rigorous limits, fixed by structural causality, which are subject to the autonomous play of analytical or linear causality (or, transitive causality). This is seen quite clearly in certain sequences of economic, political and ideological phenomena. This should also be seen in psychoanalysis (for example, in certain sequences belonging to secondary

processes. It seems to me that what are called “secondary formations,” such as defense mechanisms [*formations défensives*], take part in this).

In the example of our three elements, the accumulation of money-capital involves this mechanism, as do certain productive sequences of other elements.

But in all of these cases, the limits and the “play” of mechanical causality as well as the type of object it produces are determined in the last instance by structural causality. We can even go farther, and say that (mechanical) effects of accumulation can be observed between structural effects (such as Marx says when he says that the existence of “free labor-power” is the result of many different, independent processes, whose effects are added to and reinforce one another through addition) but these effects, one of which is the instituting of the play of mechanical causality, are, taken in isolation, structural effects.

I won't develop this further. I only want to indicate the principle of this double causality and its articulation, where structural causality determines linear causality.

September 22, 1966