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Louis Althusser, *On the Reproduction of Capitalism: Three Reading Strategies*

Trans. GM Goshgarian. London: Verso , 2014

Mateusz Janik

Althusser's interpretation of Marxism has been often criticized for its apparent obscurity, elitism, and detachment from the actual currents shaping the social realm of capitalism (not to mention accusations of stalinism or mere insanity). For many, Althusser has been considered either a fighter of a lost cause – struggling for a revolutionary reorientation of the French Communist Party at the moment of the political collapse of the European Communist movement – or an “ivory tower” intellectual, burying real struggles under his ultra-theoretical discourse. *On the Reproduction of Capitalism*, translated by GM Goshgarian (originally published posthumously in France in 1995 as *Sur la Reproduction*) is a book which challenges these widespread views, revealing an Althusser who not only observed changes in the political conjuncture, transformations in class composition, and the emergence of new social movements, but one who intervened in this conjuncture with his own political-theoretical apparatus. Indeed, *On the Reproduction* is one of the foremost examples of such an intervention, more extensive in fact than his famous “left critique of the personality cult” after the Twentieth Congress and Khrushchev's report, or the dramatic attempt to turn FCP from the reformist course in “Marx in His Limits.”

As we know from the opening of *Reading Capital*, to read is to undertake a peculiar practice of reproducing a text both in its declarations and omissions. There is no neutral approach to a text and thus a reading is always a strategy either acquired spontaneously or critically but always from a certain position. *On the Reproduction of Capitalism* is not an exception.

I. Philosophy

All of the accusations (Stalinism, a positivist fixation, academicism, or even madness), despite their differences, may be traced to a single theoretical moment of Althusser's oeuvre which would become a passkey for almost any controversial position held by him – antihumanism. In fact, what is hidden beneath this term is a set of theses and arguments that compose an attempt

to invent and elaborate a Marxist philosophy able to overcome the classical distinction between theoretical speculation and practice, a philosophy that is a truly productive concept of materialist thought. It might be argued that nearly everything written by Althusser is at some instance an attempt to produce the paradoxical philosophical position of a Marxist philosophy which questions purity of philosophical thought and abolishes its abstract form.

On the Reproduction not only is not an exception but – and let’s take Althusser at his word here – an attempt to answer the question: what is philosophy? It is, however, very easy to overlook the fact that the book’s opening is in fact a question that, at first glance, has nothing to do with reproducing the capitalist mode of production. Indeed, a reader may take this as an excuse (as Hegel said “we all have to start at certain point”) or an unnecessary introduction which does not bear any theoretical significance, since Althusser does not return to this question anywhere else in the book. This is because *On the Reproduction*, as are so many of Althusser’s other works, is incomplete. Written as the first part of two volume study, it leaves the reader in a contradictory (yet productive) feeling of incompleteness forcing her to produce some of the essential answers on her own.

But we should nevertheless take Althusser at his word, according to which all the concepts presented in this book are merely preliminary or inadequately developed ideas incapable of answering the question posed in the first chapter.

This question is important for Althusser for many reasons. One of the most crucial ones is the fact that philosophy, far from being a truth-grasping discursive practice, constitutes a field of theoretical expression proper to a given moment and a position taken within the class struggle¹. Systematic forms of philosophical thought, its orientation towards truth or its subject-centered conception of rationality are marked by different struggles undertaken on the terrain constituted by theoretical practice of philosophy. What characterizes possible Marxist philosophy (or a “Marxist position

¹ Only recently we have gained an opportunity to investigate Althusser’s argument concerning place of philosophy in relation to ideology, class struggle and different forms of social practice, thanks to publication of *Initiation à la philosophie pour les non-philosophes* (Paris 2014). This “text book” may be read – as the book’s editor G. M. Goshgarian notes – as a second volume of *On the Reproduction*. Althusser elaborates there his concept of philosophy and philosophical practice in relation to ideology and class struggle. More importantly, he also provides an explanation of a “Marxist position” within philosophy – a problem he struggled with virtually all his life.

within philosophy” to be more precise) is the fact that it challenges the philosophical tradition elaborated within the bourgeois perspective of class domination in order to provide conceptual unity between political, economic and ideological struggles² - a task impossible without simultaneous attempt of transforming political and ideological apparatuses, to say nothing of the social relations of production. As Althusser argues, such a Marxist position taken on the philosophical terrain (which is always already given and never invented, that is, it is always occupied by other discourses) should conduce struggle by “*Imposant les règles de son combat, elle peut dérouter l’adversaire en refusant la plupart des règles traditionnelles, car elles ne servent que la domination de la classe au pouvoir: par exemple, la règle du << système >>, et bien d’autres règles encore, celle de la Verite, du Sens, de la Fin, celle de la Garantie etc. Bref, elle doit imposer, en pregnant son initiative, une nouvelle pratique de la philosophie à son adversaire*”³. What seems to be absolutely unique in Althusser’s approach toward philosophical struggle is the fact that he underlines the importance of the conjuncture. Philosophical practice always takes place in concrete, material conditions, and has at its disposal concrete concepts and forms of its own practice, which have yet to be deployed in battle. As such, it is ultimately combined with struggles undertaken at the level of political and economic practice and, as Althusser seems to argue, it is impossible to practice revolutionary philosophy without encountering other struggles on their terrain. This explains why we must take a “detour” to answer the question posed in the first chapter. We must understand that a mode of production is a unity between productive forces and social relations of production (chapters 2-3). We have to understand the imagery of base and superstructure, elaborating its *theoretical* (and not simply descriptive) explanation (chapter 4). It means we must ask how the mode of production establishes its own conditions of reproduction, analyze in detail the elements of the superstructure, investigate how the law establishes its own non-legal externality (chapter 5) and explore the nature of the relation between the state and its ideological apparatuses (chapters 6-8). Only then may we return to the concept of the relations of production, that is, the mechanism that allows them to reproduce their own conditions of existence and the limits of such reproduction (chapter 9-10). Finally, we may investigate how ideology not only conceals exploitation but also produces real material subjective

² See, *Initiation à la philosophie*, pp. 355-359.

³Ibid., p. 375.

positions of this exploitation (chapters 11 and 12, as well as the two appendices, the latter of which is the ISAs essay originally published in 1970).

II. Ideology

It is also possible to read *On the Reproduction* not as an introductory remark to Althusser's concept of philosophy but as the theoretical background of his theory of ideology. The famous essay *Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses*, published originally in *La Pensée*, is in fact part of the *On the Reproduction* manuscript, and as such it draws heavily from the argumentation presented in other parts of the book. Fortunately, Etienne Balibar's preface allows us to restore the extracted portions to the theoretical goal that pushed Althusser to write a work concerning the mechanisms of the reproduction of capitalist formation. According to Balibar, the idea for the book was inspired by both a collective research project on the French educational system, and the political meaning of new student-based political movements ("The May 1968 events" are the most important but definitely not the sole point of reference). This may explain the importance ascribed by Althusser to the scholastic ideological apparatus⁴ as a successor of the Church in its determinant function of reproducing social conditions of production (i.e the subjective position toward material conditions of social existence). In reference to the ISAs essay (*On the Reproduction* contains both, the original version of the text and the version from *La Pensée*, translated by Ben Brewster), it might be noticed that the concept of the subject does not play as essential a role as it may appear without referring the interpellation thesis to the theoretical background presented in the book. To say that the critique of the subject is not essential does not mean that it is not important. But what becomes visible when it is placed within a wider context is (the often neglected fact) that its importance is derived from the complex mechanism of reproduction of conditions of production⁵.

Another interesting theme clarified by replacing the ISAs essay in the wider context of *On the Reproduction of Capitalism* is the notion of

⁴ "We think that the Ideological State Apparatus that has been elevated to the *dominant* position in mature capitalist formations, at the end of violent political and ideological class struggle against the old Ideological State Apparatus, is the *scholastic* ideological apparatus", L. Althusser, *On the Reproduction of Capitalism*, trans. GM, Goshgarian, London/New York 2014, p. 143.

⁵ It is true that Althusser begins his ISAs essay with the explicit contextualization that explains the role that ideology plays in the reproduction of the conditions of production. But it is also true that it is the most often ignored, almost invisible chapter of this essay.

repression, which has caused a lot of confusion within the various receptions of Althusserianism. As is well known, Althusser distinguishes the Repressive State Apparatus from the Ideological State Apparatus (without denying that both types have repressive and ideological properties), even though he uses a more or less obscure construction according to which the “repressive apparatus is primarily based on repression” while the ideological apparatus “is primarily based on ideology”. In *On the Reproduction*, we may see that such a distinction is itself relative as both ideology and repression are functions of the exploitation which is a basic form of relation connecting productive and labour forces. “Everything that happens in a capitalist social formation, including the forms of state repression that accompany it, is rooted in the material base of capitalist relations of production, which are relations of capitalist exploitation, and in a system of production in which production is itself subordinated to exploitation and thus to the production of capital on an extended scale”⁶.

At first glance, it may seem that such a remark brings no significant clarification nor does it explain the singularity of the distinction proposed by Althusser. But its importance becomes visible as soon as we place it next to the anti-authoritarian discourse of the student movement of 1968 or to the whole post-war tradition of thought which tends to center its focus on power relations instead of the division of labour and relations of production⁷. Thus two distinctions have to be made in order to posit the concept of interpellated subject in the right place. The first is between exploitation and repression and second between repression and ideology. Not only are different genealogies produced by these instances, but also different effects. As for exploitation, it is an effect of establishing a productive relation between (privately owned) means of production and (wage) labour-power⁸. As such, exploitation is another name for the capitalist relations of production and requires repression in order to secure the form of these relations (this is, by the way, why the state and legal system are considered to be part of the repressive apparatus by Althusser). Ideology is not simply a

⁶ L. Althusser, *On the Reproduction*, op. cit., p. 32.

⁷ It is worth recalling that very similar critique (however from a different position) has been proposed by Gayatri Spivak in her famous essay *Can the Subaltern Speak?* Spivak's direct attack at poststructuralist discourse of power and desire has been based -among other references - on her reading of Althusser's *Ideology* essay which recalled exactly this position often omitted in discussions concerning the character of the state apparatus.

⁸ See, *On the Reproduction...*, op. cit., pp. 29-30.

form of a more sublimated violence (a “cop in our heads”) and even less a lie (which is itself a form verbal violence), but rather a set of material practices through which the recognition of the “necessity”, “obviousness”, and “natural character” of given form of relations of exploitation (i.e. historical and imposed by dominant class relations of production, constitutive for capitalist mode of production) and the system of social relations which guarantees their duration. Thus, the subject is not a central point of discussion in Althusser’s work but an element of much wider structure which is determined directly by the class struggle (and relations of production in the last instance – of course).

III. Class Struggle

Pierre Bordieu’s well known accusation of Althusser’s concept of the Ideological State Apparatus as being the “Trojan Horse of pessimist functionalism” is but one example of the way that the ISAs essay, as a result of being published separately from the full (however incomplete) discussion of his theory of reproduction, has itself been a source of confusion among its readers. Althusser’s responds to this critique by indicating the central role of the class struggle in forming the ideological apparatuses. As he argues in the “Note on ISAs,” “[T]he dominant ideology, which exists in the complex system of Ideological State Apparatuses, is for its part the result of a very long, very harsh class struggle through which the bourgeoisie (to take that example) can achieve its goals only on the twofold condition that it struggle *simultaneously* against the old dominant ideology, which lives on the old apparatuses, and the ideology of the new exploited class, which seeks its own forms of organization and struggle.”⁹ From this it follows that reproduction is a dynamic process of which the main *effect* (and not the function) is the reproduction of “material, political, and ideological” conditions of existence of a given class as the actual historical agent of the class struggle. Moreover, this perspective, which not only excludes a strictly functionalist understanding of the ISAs, introduces the possibility of articulating a more complex understanding of the class struggle, since the ISAs and RSA are both the effect and in fact a medium (immanent causality) of the class

⁹Ibid., p. 219.

struggle. While this might be less obvious in the case of the repressive apparatus (since it is a more visible expression of class domination), the ideology and “Ideological State Apparatuses in which it exists, bring *social classes* ‘on stage’: the dominant class and the dominated class (...)”. By this Althusser means that “*class struggle unfolds in the forms of the Ideological State Apparatuses*” (although, as he add, it goes far beyond these forms).

The way in which Althusser stresses the central position of the class struggle as that which produces the factuality of a given system of state apparatuses reveals his debt to Lenin. *On the Reproduction* may be read (and this is the third reading strategy) as an attempt to articulate in theoretical terms what has been articulated politically in *State and Revolution*: namely, an attempt to explain what it means that the state is an institution of class domination, and its relation to the class struggle aimed against this domination. At least two things seem to be important for Althusser in this respect. Since there is no such thing as the state in general but only a given set of apparatuses that are in concrete relation with relations of production, the class struggle cannot be limited to one of the spheres (i.e. it cannot be a struggle conducted only by political means or only on the economic level). Further, the struggles conducted in different apparatuses and on different levels have separate logics, temporalities, and visibility. This is one of the most original elements of Althusser’s understanding of revolutionary politics, which allows him to produce a concept of history which does not slip into a determinist model of historical development, while at the same time never turning the very concept of the class struggle into a liquid contingency. In fact, what can be observed in the passages devoted to underground “trench warfare“ of workers’ economic struggles,¹⁰ or vivid encounters between the communist party and parliamentary politics of bourgeois state¹¹ is the logic of aleatory materialism applied directly to the political conjuncture at the dawn of neoliberal policy.

The political conjuncture in which Althusse wrote *On the Reproduction* is marked by the growing break between the politics of PCF (trying to survive at the political scene) and the workers’ movement. It is also moment of the violent explosion of tensions accumulated within the ISA during the “Fordist” epoch of Capitalist mode of production. Finally, it is a moment of rethinking the strategy of the workers’ movement at the level of the social

¹⁰Ibid., p. 128.

¹¹Ibid., p. 125.

relations of production and economic struggle¹². Althusser has grasped very accurately this transformative tendency by attempting to think this very transformation without the ineluctable guarantee of a given political outcome. The whole concept of an apparatus as a contradictory and “fragile” yet “very strong” institution shaped by class struggle and not by the function or goal of a dominant class is a backbone for a concept of a systematic theory of revolutionary practice which does not put a political goal in the place of actual, theoretical explanation. This Leninist line of reading is most visible in Althusser's attempts to make sense of a peculiar encounter between students and workers' movements that took in 1968, as well as the following years. In the case of France, as Althusser' notes, it was a brief encounter, which did not last and thus did not produce a new conjuncture able to impose new modes of struggle, political organization or ignite a revolutionary situation able to threaten the bourgeois state¹³. This is also the line of thinking through which Althusser approaches dilemmas of the communist movement in France at the moment of political crisis which led to integration of French Communist Party with the system of liberal democracy¹⁴.

Thus. *On the Reproduction* allows us to rethink traditional interpretations of Althusser's ISAs essay by showing how it depends on a much more comprehensive and complex theory of reproduction. On the other hand, however, it contains one of the longest theoretical detours taken by Althusser in order to answer a question that haunts his entire body of work: what is philosophy? Due to the fact that he asks this question “from the Marxist position,” it produces theoretical effects that exceed the philosophical realm. Only after confronting Althusser's understanding of philosophy and the position which philosophical practice occupies in the

¹² It is interesting how Althusser attacks –indirectly – the operaist theories of collective worker, that is, its understanding of immaterial labour or importance of changes in the “class composition”. While he does not confront these notions directly (attacking them mainly in footnotes; see for example *On the Reproduction...*, op. cit., p. 23) it is possible to read the thesis concerning growing importance of scholastic ISA as an alternative attempt to interpret the new cycle of struggle which for Antonio Negri or Mario Tronti has been strongly marked by re-assemblage of the traditional base-superstructure approach.

¹³ However, Italy seems to present a different outcome of this encounter, which not only lasted but also produced series of shifts within the capitalist mode of production (despite the fact that these shifts were by any chance a victory of workers' movement would be a rather bold thesis).

¹⁴ For a more direct confrontation with this issue, see “Marx in his Limits” and G.M. Goshgarian's introduction to *Philosophy of Encounter* (L. Althusser, *Philosophy of the Encounter*, London/New York 2006).

class struggle, one may notice that it is in fact a bold attempt to provide a unity between radically different orders of practice: a philosophical intervention in politics as much as political intervention in philosophy. It is not only a matter of confronting *On the Reproduction* with *Initiation à la philosophie*, but also with Althusser's life-long struggle to understand, however equivocally, his position as a Marxist philosopher.