

Contradictions of Aleatory Materialism: on Louis Althusser's later Writings

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is a critical appraisal of Louis Althusser's later writings, especially those dealing with what he described as a materialism of the encounter or aleatory materialism. After a short presentation of the basic philosophical positions of these writings, I proceed with my criticism. First, I stress their positive aspects: Althusser's insistence on the quest for a renovation of communist politics and the evolution of Althusser's original anti-teleological stance. Then, I try to highlight the main contradictions, both theoretical and political of these texts: The turn towards a more poetic and metaphorical writing, the problems of Althusser's philosophical genealogy of aleatory materialism, the emphasis on the singular and the concrete, the importance attached to contingent encounters and the inability to present a coherent notion of emancipatory politics. The abandonment of any notion of materialist dialectics is presented as the culmination of these contradictions.

Althusser's later writings refer to what he defined as a new conception of materialism, an *aleatory materialism* or *materialism of the encounter*. According to Althusser there exists an “*almost completely unknown materialist tradition in the history of philosophy: the ‘materialism’ [...] of the rain, the swerve, the encounter, the take*”¹, that had been “*perverted into an idealism of freedom*”².

This tradition is presented in the form of a philosophical genealogy, which includes Epicurus, Machiavelli, Hobbes, Spinoza, Rousseau, Nietzsche, Heidegger, Derrida, and Wittgenstein. The image of the epicurean atoms moving in parallel

¹ Althusser 2006, p. 167.

² Althusser 2006, p. 168.

directions in the void, until the moment of the *clinamen*³, the infinitesimal swerve that marks the beginning of the making of the world, is presented as the archetype of a radically anti-teleological philosophical stance⁴. Machiavelli is presented as the representative of a practical philosophy of the emergence of new political forms out of the inherently contingent and aleatory encounter of elements already existing –the *void* of the existing political situation, and at same time of the philosophy of the *political gesture* as constitutive aspect of this encounter. The notion of the void serves not only as an expression of Althusser’s redefinition of philosophy as having no object, but also in a more ‘ontological’ sense, which can be related to the image of the margin or the interstice⁵, where the possibility of alternatives and new social and political forms arises⁶.

Whereas in Althusser’s texts from the 1960s idealism was presented mainly in the form of the variations of empiricism and historicism (the latter being viewed as a variation of an empiricist conception of the theoretical object having the same – historical – qualities of the real object), here idealism is equated with all forms of teleological thinking. This anti-teleological conception makes the *encounter* the dominant metaphor.

³ On this notion, which comes from Lucretius’ presentation of epicurean philosophy in the *De rerum Natura*, see Long and Sedley 1987, pp. 46-52. It is also worth noting that although Althusser insists on distinguishing his reading of Epicurus from an ‘idealism of freedom’, the importance of freedom in the Epicurean swerve over the element of necessity in Democritus has been an important aspect of the history of Epicurean notions, including Marx’s reading of Epicurean philosophy in his doctoral dissertation (Marx 1841). On this subject see also Suchting 2004, p. 11.

⁴ “This is the negation of all teleology”: Althusser 2006, p. 260.

⁵ Which reminds of Marx’s references to trading nations of ancient times living in the intermediate worlds of the universe (Marx 1894, p. 225) or usury living in the space between worlds (Marx 1894, p. 412).

⁶ Althusser 1994; Althusser 2005a.

The encounter has primacy over being⁷, and over form and order. Althusser insists that the aleatory nature of every encounter is its possibility not to have taken place. We can discern causal series, meaning and determinism, but only *after the fact has been accomplished*. An emphasis on the singular, the concrete event and the factual supplement this rejection of teleology, in sharp contrast to the emphasis on structures and structural relations of his earlier writings.

The last important aspect of these texts concerns the redefinition of philosophy, in the line of the 1976 lecture on the transformation of philosophy⁸. This relation between philosophy and the mechanisms of ideological hegemony means that traditional philosophical form is inherently idealistic, and every ‘materialism’ that is pronounced as a system of philosophical truths, is also essentially idealist⁹. What is opened as a possibility is not another philosophy but a new *practice of philosophy*¹⁰, a “denunciation of philosophy produced as ‘philosophy’”¹¹.

Althusser’s later texts have been presented as providing elements of a major theoretical turn, marking Althusser’s passage to a post-modern and post-communist perspective. According to Negri¹² there is no room for dialectical contradictions in social reality, only the possibility of new social and productive forms emerging as aleatory ruptures, and instead of a negative philosophy of structures and ‘processes without subjects’, we need a positive philosophy of the resistance and creativity of singular social

⁷ “For a being (a body, an animal, a man, state or Prince) *to be*, an encounter has *to have taken place*” Althusser 2006, p.192.

⁸ Althusser 1976a.

⁹ Althusser 2006, p. 272.

¹⁰ Althusser 1976a, p. 262. Althusser first introduced the notion of a new practice of philosophy in *Lenin and Philosophy* (Althusser 1971, p. 68)

¹¹ Althusser 2006, p. 275.

¹² Negri 1993

bodies. Yan Moulier Boutang has insisted that Althusser, faced with the crisis of Marxism, chose to abandon the theoretical apparatus of historical materialism in favour of the logic of the singular case and of a notion of the political practice as aleatory encounter¹³. Ichida and Matheron¹⁴ think that the *aleatory* has to be interpreted as the non-dialectic. Callari and Ruccio link aleatory materialism and the possibility of a post-modern Marxism and post-modern politics of the multiple and heterogeneous subjects and identities¹⁵.

On the other hand Tosel chooses a more balanced position, at the same time trying to stress an element of continuity in Althusser, basically in his effort to think communism in a non ideological mode¹⁶, and the open questions that mark the formulations of aleatory materialism. G.M. Goshgarian¹⁷ stresses the element of continuity in Althusser's work, tracing the notion of the encounter in all of Althusser's mature work and insisting that Althusser's rethinking in the 1970s of the non-accomplishment of socialism in the USSR already includes the basic premise of aleatory materialism that an encounter might not take place, or that it might not last.

In light on the above, we proceed to an assessment of the texts, their importance, but also their contradictions.

First of all, it is necessary to stress their *political* character. Despite Althusser's personal situation in the 1980s and his refusal (or sense of inability) to have any form of public intervention, he remained a communist in philosophy, trying to think the

¹³ Moulier-Boutang 1997, pp. 100-101.

¹⁴ Ichida and Matheron 2005.

¹⁵ Callari and Ruccio 1996.

¹⁶ Tosel 2005, p. 195.

¹⁷ Goshgarian 2006.

philosophical and theoretical aspects of revolutionary social and political practices, in contrast to most post-modern and post-Marxist trends.

Secondly, his effort to define a new materialist practice of philosophy is also important. Althusser's successive redefinitions of philosophy after the abandonment of any possibility of a 'theory of theoretical practice', and the linking of philosophy, ideology and the class struggle in the definition of philosophy as "class struggle in theory in the last instance"¹⁸, attest to a theoretical effort to think philosophy as both inescapable (the interconnection of ideological class struggle and theoretical practices leads inevitably to philosophical conflicts) and necessary (we have to intervene in a specifically philosophical way in order to battle the influences of dominant ideologies both in theory and politics). Althusser's references to a new materialist practice of philosophy, radically incommensurable with any form of idealism, a practice that can only work as an intervention, an effort to change the balance of force in the theoretical and political practices, and in no way as a philosophical system, have to be considered as the starting points for any critical evaluation of the possibility of a materialist philosophy¹⁹.

The notion of the encounter can also be read as the evolution of Althusser's anti-essentialist and anti-teleological conception of the transition between different modes of production. Most attempts to theorize the transition to capitalism tend to view a certain aspect or element of the process as playing the part of the self-development of an essence,

¹⁸ Althusser 1973.

¹⁹ Frederic Jameson has also described materialism in similar terms: "Rather than conceiving of materialism as a systematic philosophy it would seem possible and perhaps more desirable to think of it as a polemic stance, designed to organize various anti-idealist campaigns" Jameson 1997, p. 36. On the same point of the materialist philosophy being possible only as a materialist practice of philosophy and not as a materialist philosophical system see Macherey 1999, pp. 35-73.

making the emergence of capitalism the solution of the historical contradictions of feudalism. But it is very difficult to bring all the elements which are present in the expanded reproduction of the capitalist mode of production in the same narrative and treat them as aspects of the relation between an essence and its expressions. The emergence of English ‘agrarian capitalism’²⁰, the development of Italian banking and credit practices, the emergence of the absolutist state, the emergence of ‘bourgeois’ culture and mentality, were not predestined to be part of the reproduction of the capitalist mode of production, even though this is what effectively took place. In this sense, the notion of the encounter can help us see the crucial theoretical difference between the transition to a mode of production and its reproduction. In this reading the notion of the encounter marks the break with any form of historical metaphysics and does not preclude the structured character of the social totality.

But there are also important contradictions, both theoretical and political in these texts:

The first problem concerns Althusser’s use of philosophical metaphors in an extent greater than his earlier writings. It is true that metaphors are in a way an essential aspect of philosophy²¹ and are consistent with the difference in theoretical status between philosophy and scientific theory that Althusser proposed. But this turn towards a more metaphorical and even poetic thinking can also be considered a retreat compared to Althusser’s own insistence that the relation between Marxist philosophy and historical materialism as a science of history, results to materialist philosophy having a better awareness of its theoretical status and purpose.

²⁰ Brenner 1976; Brenner 1982.

²¹ On the question of metaphors in Althusser’s later writings see Suchting 2004.

The second problem concerns Althusser's genealogy of aleatory materialism: Take for example his emphasis on the notion of parallelism in Spinoza. This is a rather strange theoretical choice, since parallelism in Spinoza is not an ontological proposition on the emergence of the world (such as Epicurus' rain of the atoms) and has much more to do with the relation between thought and reality (in fact the relation between thought and reality as part of the same reality or ontological level, and the rejection of any form of dualism) and with the fact that the order and connection of ideas is the same as the order and connection of things²². In fact, the very notion of "parallelism" comes from Leibniz, who tried to incorporate Spinoza to his own dualist perspective.²³ It seems as if Althusser is trying to fit Spinoza in the whole imagery of the encounter, something made evident by his linking of the formation of "common notions"²⁴ to the notion of the encounter. There is also the lack of satisfactory explanation of what is included in this genealogy (especially ontologies traditionally considered alien to Marxist materialism such as Heidegger's) and what is excluded (a large part of Marx's own writings)²⁵.

The third problem concerns Althusser's effort in his later writings to rethink the possibility of transformative political practice, the possibility of a radical commencement and the emergence of new political and social forms, which results in radical aporias and a difficulty to present a theory of the political. Althusser for the most part does not turn to his original formulations of a materialist conception of the conjuncture in a structured and over-determined social totality as the starting point of a theory of the political practice,

²² Spinoza 1954, p. 121 (*Ethics*, Part II, proposition VII).

²³ Macherey 1997, pp. 71-81. See also Gueroult 1974, p. 64.

²⁴ An important aspect of Spinoza's second kind of knowledge (Spinoza 1954, pp. 157-160, *Ethics*, Part II, proposition XL, scholia I and II).

²⁵ On the contradictions of Althusser's genealogy of aleatory materialism see Tosel 2005.

conceived as a complex combination of knowledge of the field and the balance of force and transformative intervention. On the contrary, he tends towards a conception of the solitary and unstable political gesture that more often than not fails to bring around the desired encounter and leaves no other choice apart from either some form of voluntarist decisionism or just waiting for the unexpected (which can be the inverse version of a messianic conception of revolutionary politics). If Althusser's theoretical trajectory can also be read as an effort to provide a non-historicist and non-idealist interpretation of Marx's suggestion (in the third Thesis on Feuerbach) that *revolutionary practice* (*Revolutionäre Praxis*) is the key for a materialist conception of theory, then Althusser's final movement seems as a theoretical retreat to a pre-Marxist conception of practice.

Althusser's use of the notion of the void is also contradictory, especially in its more ontological conception. On the one hand, there is the possibility of reading the recurrence of void in Althusser's writings as a metaphor for a relational conception of social reality according to which what exists are fundamentally relations²⁶, a conception which was at the basis of Althusser's theoretical innovations of the 1960s (social totality as a decentred whole, structural causality, 'absent cause'). On the other hand, in many of his later writings Althusser tends towards an image of social reality as having the necessary empty spaces (margins or interstices) that enable the emergence of new social forms and new combinations of social elements. But this image of the void has more to do with an Epicurean rain of atoms, where new forms emerge only as swerves *ex nihilo*, and less with an historical materialist conception of social emancipation being possible because social relations and structures are inherently contradictory, always amidst uneven

²⁶ A position also expressed by Macherey (1979, p. 218).

processes of reproduction and transformation, and in this sense constantly open to change.

And this brings us to another contradictory aspect of Althusser's later writings, namely his turn towards the singular case, event, and fact. It is true that one can describe aspects of Althusser's materialism as a nominalism²⁷, mainly in the sense of a radical distinction between real objects and theoretical objects, but in most of his writings we are dealing with a nominalism of relations, not of "things". In these later writings there are elements of a turn towards a nominalism of singular facts and cases, which in a sense is in accordance with the conception of the solitary (and therefore singular) political gesture. This atomistic empiricism is made very evident by his reference to constants and sequences of events and also by his positive appraisal of Hume. It is true that Althusser tries to bring this atomistic conception close to the Marxist notion of the tendential law, but the latter refers to the contradictory co-existence of tendencies and countertendencies as a manifestation of the contradictory nature of social reality²⁸ and not to the perception of sequences of relations between singular facts as a result of human imagination and reasoning²⁹, a position quite far from the original conception of Althusser's materialism as anti-empiricism *par excellence*.

It is this emphasis on the singular case, this search for some tangible form of facticity that is at the basis of Althusser's inability to think, in these later writings, in terms of social forms. Although Althusser's insistence on the primacy of antagonistic

²⁷ And in the later works there are positive references to nominalism (for example Althusser 2006, p. 265).

²⁸ Marx 1894.

²⁹ This is the difference between a materialist position and Humean empiricism (Hume 1964).

productive relations over productive forces was very important and helped the theoretical break with forms of economism and technological determinism and facilitated the recognition of the importance of struggles and movements against the capitalist organization of production, at the same time it tended to underestimate the importance of social forms. This emphasis on the antagonistic character of social practices tended to underestimate the fact that class struggle does not take place only within antagonistic class relations but also under the weight of historical social forms that also induce their effects on the class struggle. In this sense capitalism must be defined not only in terms of capitalist relations of production, but also in terms of the importance of the value form (as an historically specific result of the hegemony of capitalist relations of production without reference to some form of simple commodity production³⁰) and all the forms of social (mis)recognition and fetishistic representations it brings along, which is exactly the reason for the contradictory complexity of the first volume of Marx's *Capital*, an aspect missed by Althusser.

Perhaps the most important contradiction of Althusser's later writings is his rejection of any notion of dialectics, not only in the sense of a choice of vocabulary (which could have been interpreted as a "bending of the stick" to the opposite of any form of historical teleology) but also in a more profound sense: Althusser's use of the

³⁰ On this reading see Milios, Dimoulis and Economakis 2002. This is the problem with Bidet's effort to think the relation of capitalist productive relations and the value form in terms of the articulation of capitalism (capitalist productive relations) as a structure and the market (commodity production and exchange in general) as a meta-structure (Bidet 1990; Bidet 1999). And although a great part of recent and important work on the theory of the value-form has been rather Hegelian in its philosophical debts (for example Arthur 2002), I think that only a reworking of these questions in terms of a non-metaphysical and non-historicist materialism such as Althusser's can help bring forward Marx's immense theoretical revolution.

notion of the encounter (in its more general ontological sense) seems to reject the dialectical character of social contradictions, dialectical in the sense that the primacy of the relation over its elements (and of the contradiction over its poles) means that the contradiction is in a way internalized in each element of the contradiction in a complex process of mutual determination, each pole of the contradiction being in a sense the result of the contradiction itself³¹.

Althusser's rejection of the notion of the dialectic leads to an underestimation of the 'labour of the negative', not in the sense of a self-development of an historical essence or *Weltgeist*, but as the recognition of the constant effectivity of social antagonism, which constantly prevents social reality from becoming a closed system and creates possibilities of social change. At same time this rejection of dialectic can also be read as an underestimation of the complex and uneven character of social contradictions and the way they are articulated and overdetermined. And this is important since, as Althusser himself showed, in his original reformulation of Marxist dialectics in the 1960s, it is exactly this contradictory, uneven and overdetermined³² character of social reality which also makes possible a 'labour on the "labour of the negative"', that is revolutionary politics as transformative social practice.

It is true from the beginning that there was a certain tension in Althusser's conception of the dialectic, depending on whether the emphasis was on conjuncture or structure, a tension Balibar describes³³ as the tension between the more 'leninist' or

³¹ To formulate this point we are in fact applying elements of Balibar's criticism of Foucault (Balibar 1997, pp. 298-299).

³² It is also worth noting that the notion of overdetermination is relatively absent in Althusser's later writings.

³³ Balibar 1993a, p. 94.

‘machiavellian’ emphasis on the singularity of conjunctures and the more structuralist critique of simple and expressive conceptions of the totality, a difference that Balibar thinks marks the two articles that introduced Althusser’s conception of the dialectic, “Contradiction and Over-determination” and “On the materialist dialectic”³⁴. But the fact remains that even this tension was within the scope of the search for a materialist dialectic. In this sense Althusser’s references in the later writings to constants and sequences of events marks a theoretical retreat compared to his path-breaking earlier effort to rethink, in non-metaphysical ways, contradiction as the basis of a materialist conception of social causality. And although the search for a refoundation of communist politics and the insistence on a break with any form of teleology is in continuity with his early works, this abandonment of the possibility of a materialist dialectic represents a clear break with his earlier work.

It is in the light of the above that we must choose a critical approach against the very notion of the *aleatory*. Although Althusser tries to distinguish between the aleatory and the contingent, in many cases he seems to opt for a conception of the chance encounter, an emphasis on historical contingency and surprise, a wait for the unexpected. But in his return to the contingent Althusser in a way forgets a basic theoretical premise of both Marx and Spinoza, his main theoretical references, namely their conception of the dialectics of freedom and necessity, of freedom as necessity³⁵: Social change and the emergence of a just society is not the outcome of a chance encounter, but presupposes the

³⁴ Both in Althusser 2005.

³⁵ It is worth noting that Slavoj Žižek has suggested that the classical position of freedom as conceived necessity (Hegel 1873 § 147; Engels 1987: 129) must be complemented with its ‘reversal’: ‘necessity as (ultimately nothing but) conceived freedom’ (Žižek 1999, p. 44).

intelligibility of social reality, it is the result of the society being determined and us being able to have a knowledge of this determination (especially if we view determinism in the open sense of the contradiction being the basis of social causality) and not indeterminate. In Spinoza's terms, freedom is a consequence of an intelligible necessity³⁶, and in Marx's terms it is knowledge of the objective conditions of the class struggle that makes possible the political direction of the class struggle. This is why we must say, using Althusser's own metaphors, that although a materialist philosopher indeed jumps on a train on the move and he/she is always-already within a particular historical conjuncture, he/she does not just simply travel along: On the contrary he/she tries not only to discern which way the train is going, but how the train moves, what other routes are possible, and finally tries to turn the train towards the direction he/she thinks best, something that Althusser, faced with a profound political, theoretical and personal crisis, thinks impossible.

But in order to render justice to Althusser we can also say that his oscillations are a result of an oscillation which transverses any attempt to formulate a materialist practice of philosophy. On the one hand we have the effort to bring forward the materiality of the social practices themselves as a rejection of any form of ontological dualism and any metaphysical beyond, an effort that runs the risk of empiricism, positivism and misrecognition of the mechanisms which produce social phenomena. On the other hand there is the necessity of criticizing ideological misrecognitions, of theoretically producing the real as opposed to the obvious of the ideological surface, an effort that runs the risk of theoreticism and a foundationalist approach to knowledge. In a sense there is no exit from this oscillation, only the successive bending of the stick to the opposite side. But the

³⁶ On the relation between knowledge and emancipation in Spinoza see Matheron 1988 and Tosel 1994.

question is: towards which side? I think that although Althusser thought that the main theoretical danger came from a metaphysical conception of the historical possibility of communism³⁷, today the main danger comes from neoliberal ideology's pre-emptive denial of any form of intelligibility of history apart from social reality as an aggregation of individual social transactions. In this sense a return to dialectics is more than necessary, for which Althusser's theoretical adventure, even in its contradictions and failures, remains an indispensable theoretical reference.

³⁷ Which led Althusser to a position similar to the one held by non-Marxists such as Foucault and Deleuze that proposed a politics of the singular, the fragmental, the nomadic.

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