

## ON ALTHUSSER'S IMMANENTIST STRUCTURALISM

Reading Montag Reading Althusser Reading Spinoza

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### Spinoza, our contemporary: immanence

For some time now we are becoming aware of what we could call (borrowing from Antonio Negri) “*le présupposé spinoziste*” of recent radical theory, the fact that an important current of contemporary critical thought is Spinozist, in the double sense of the word, which means both a scholarly reading of his texts and an affiliation with his thought. And if we wish to track down the nodal point of that particular Spinozism, we should doubtless first consider the idea of *immanence*, understood as the most consistent, affirmative and offensive statement of materialism, as the radical opponent of *transcendence* and therefore of idealism: if for radical thought Spinoza is “the prince of philosophers”, it is because “he is perhaps the only philosopher never to have compromised with transcendence and to have hunted it down everywhere” (Deleuze and Guattari 1994, 48). The new critical Spinozism is based on the growing recognition of the vital political and theoretical significance of the *Spinozist* notion of immanence for modern and contemporary liberating movements, for their ‘bodies’ and their ‘minds’, and for the understanding of their (our) history. As a most recent example, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, in a few fascinating pages of their *Empire* (2000, 69-92), go as far as to define *modernity* as the perpetually precarious counterrevolutionary restoration of the “transcendental apparatus” against the revolutionary discovery of the “plane of immanence”; it is as if modernity were constituted, politically and theoretically, as the ‘fear of immanence’, against which Spinoza’s thought of absolute immanence stands as a “savage anomaly”, continuously signaling a virtual alternative to the actual modernity that we have witnessed during the last centuries.

Now, transcendentalism can be defined, in a very general and broad way,<sup>1</sup> as the continuously dominant and pervasive mode of thinking, which presupposes, necessitates, entails or implies, one way or another, explicitly or implicitly,

consciously or unconsciously, a 'spiritual', 'immaterial' dimension of being, ontologically different from the world of human/social action and knowledge, which it nevertheless determines --a second reality, 'deeper' or 'higher', 'internal' or 'external', 'behind' or 'beyond', in a word *transcendent*, to the one that is opened up to the social practices, ontologically and epistemologically prior to the latter, the source of its meaning, of its teleological organization, of its essential determination, of its rational synthesis, and the aim of the true knowledge of it. Transcendental thought, in that sense, is the matrix of all idealism, in that it separates, and defines by separating, the ideal from the material in all of their instances, while sublimating the former and asserting its primacy and dominance over the latter.

Against that general dualistic pattern of transcendent determination, the Cartesian version of which framed at large the modern philosophical paradigm, Spinoza's thought opens up a world cast along the lines of a specific *immanent* or *expressive causality*, where immanent cause is *equally and exhaustively* expressed in its effects; between the cause and the effects, between the expressed and its expressions, there is no ontological gap or hierarchy, no loss, deficit or degradation of being, no priority, logical or chronological: the cause has no existence outside or before the effects, "each expression is, as it were, the existence of what is expressed" (Deleuze 1990, 42).

Spinozist immanentism represents thus the most uncompromising negation of the equivocation of being: there is a sole, absolutely infinite and infinitely productive universal substance, which exhausts all being. Substance is not concealed in the depths of being and known only through its attributes and modes. Substance is the *immanent* cause of all "things": substance is *expressed* in its infinite attributes (of which only extension and thought are accessible to us); attributes are ontologically identical, qualitatively distinct and irreducible forms of being, equally expressive of substance; thought can no longer be conceived as transcendent to and somehow determinant of extension (or matter), but also, very significantly, the former cannot be conceived as reducible to or emergent from the latter. Attributes are in turn expressed in their modes, ideas in thought and bodies in extension. For each body there is a corresponding idea, the body being the idea's object; between them there is no primacy, predominance or determination, but equality of being, based on their ontological unity: "a mode of extension and the idea of that mode are one and the same thing, but expressed in two ways" (*Ethics*, II, P7, Sc. [Curley 1994, 119]).

Human beings are not the privileged exceptions to the universe of immanence: each one of them is a mode of substance, immanently expressed as a body and an idea, a human body being the “object of the idea constituting a human mind” (*Ethics* II, P12 [Curley, 123]). Nothing can be transcendent to substance, not even God, which *is* (just the other name of) substance; thus, there is nothing to compel or obstruct, to permit or prohibit, substance’s power to be and to produce, to express itself; accordingly, there cannot be any normative principle ruling (or ruling out) what can be or can be done, any transcendent law forbidding anything to do what it can, expressing Substance; everything (including humans) has the right to do what it has the power to do. There is not any dualism between right and power, which renders meaningless any attempt to found power on right, but also, very significantly, right on power.

As an index of the subversive potential of that radical ontology and anthropology, it suffices to consider its political consequences, intolerable for the ethical, juridical and political ideology (spontaneous or philosophical) of modernity, that is, the way it questions two crucial, strictly interrelated, notions of modern sovereignty: first, that of the individual as a free, sovereign subject, by reason of its transcendent mind, irreducible author of (and responsible for) his thoughts and actions; second, that of right and law, of political and ethical values and, finally, of state power (even, or perhaps especially, when its source is claimed to be ‘the people’), as transcendent to the field of social forces. Spinozist immanence dismantles the susceptible to unlimited variants system of the three instances, three realms or three kingdoms of transcendence (a kingdom within a kingdom within a kingdom: Man, Society, Nature) and the relevant three kings, the Soul, the Sovereign and, in the last analysis, regardless of His many dissimulations, God...

### **Althusser: the immanent structure**

In his recent work, Warren Montag investigates the Spinozism involved in that particular tradition of contemporary critical thought which is (adequately or not) “categorized as structuralist or (in the Anglophone world) poststructuralist” (1997, ix). Montag’s writings on that topic suggest a kind of symbiotic relation between a distinct tendency of (mostly French) structuralism and a genealogy of major Spinozist studies, a symbiotism whose origin can be traced back in the rebellious years of 60’s and 70’s and signalled by the names of Louis Althusser, Michel Foucault, Martial

Gueroult, Gilles Deleuze, Alexandre Matheron, Etienne Balibar, Pierre Macherey, Antonio Negri and many others.

In particular, Montag (1997, 1998b, 1999) describes perceptively the multifaceted role of Louis Althusser as a catalyst for the opening up of that theoretical space, which we could call ‘Spinozist structuralism’. Although Althusser himself, in his *Essays in Self-Criticism* (1976), would later underrate his involvement with the structuralist movement as a simple “flirting” with structuralist terminology (which veiled his real philosophical endeavor, the theoretical detour, *via* Spinoza, towards the philosophy of Marx), the fact remains that, at least in the first period of his intervention, structuralism and Spinozism were much more closely interrelated than that. In fact, Althusser resisted the tendency of a vague use of the structuralist jargon and tried rigorously to define the *concept of structure* and its proper causality, *structural causality*, having constitutively recourse to Spinozist *immanent causality*. I am referring primarily to *Reading Capital* and, especially, to the section where Althusser investigates “Marx’s immense theoretical revolution”, which induces us to think of the economic field as *structured*, that is, as “a region determined by a regional structure and itself inscribed in a site defined by a global structure, therefore as a complex and deep space, itself inscribed in another complex and deep space” (against Political Economy, which, supported by the anthropology of the *homo oeconomicus*, thought the domain of economic phenomena as a given, homogeneous, planar space, where individual actors interact according to their ‘economic’ essence) (Althusser 1979, 182). According to Althusser, this requirement, which of course can and must be generalized for every social “region”, poses the urgent philosophical task of forming the concept of a new type of *causality*, where the *totality* of the phenomena of a given social region is determined by the structure of that region, which, in its turn, is determined by the global social structure; in a word, the concept of *structural causality*.

For the shake of our discussion, let us distinguish two aspects of the philosophical task suggested by Althusser. First, the issue in question is sketched from the outset in an apparently traditional *holistic* manner: Althusser explicitly stipulates the required concept as a *specific* concept of *effectivity of a whole on its elements* (1979, 186), that is, as a *specific* concept of whole. Against the individualism of Political Economy, where the only conceivable notion of whole is that of the combined effect of the ‘elements’ that compose it, it seems that we have to do here

with a reverse causality, directed from the whole towards the elements, where the whole stands (somehow) for the cause and the elements (somehow) for its effects. The issue seems to fit in the philosophical *locus communis* according to which *atomism* (of which individualism, economic or other, can be thought of as a version) asserts the priority (logical and/or chronological) of the elements to the whole, whereas, according to holism, it is the whole which is prior to *its* elements. The *specificity* of the concept in question is determined by the intervention of a third term, besides those of the elements and the whole, namely *structure*, the whole's structure. Our required concept of causality is now restated as that of the "determination of the elements of a whole *by the structure of the whole*" (187) and we are in search of a specific concept of whole, namely that of the *structured whole*. That kind of determination seems to be repeated as, according to Althusser, the *regional* structure that determines the economic phenomena is itself determined by the *global* structure of the mode of production, that is, the regional structure is presented in its turn as an element of the global structure. It is like a second degree of the same type of causality; the philosophical task we have to deal with is to investigate "with what concept are we to think the determination of either an element or a structure by a structure?" (188)

That task "posed an absolutely new problem in the most theoretically embarrassing circumstances, for there were no philosophical concepts available for its resolution. The only theoretician who had the unprecedented daring to pose this problem and outline a first solution to it was Spinoza" (1979, 187). That solution was, of course, *Spinozist immanence* --and this is the second aspect of our topic: the Spinozist detour consisted in the conception of structure as "a cause immanent in its effects *in the Spinozist sense of the term*", in a relation where "[structure's] effects are not outside the structure, are not a pre-existing object, element or space in which the structure arrives to imprint its mark", but, on the contrary, where "*the whole existence of the structure consists of its effects*", in short that the structure, which is merely a specific combination of its proper elements, is nothing outside its effects" (189; translation modified).

Now, Montag forcefully suggests that this node between the notions of whole, structure and immanence opens up a fertile field of problems, in which can be posited anew the necessary question of the significance of Althusserianism today and, in particular, of his structuralist Marxism. His own contribution to that includes, among other things, a critical examination of the possibility of grasping structure in terms of

Spinoza's immanence, on the basis of an argument concerning the discrepancy between the two aspects mentioned above. In particular, Montag sees an antinomy between the holistic and the immanentist conceptualizations of structure, between the notions of the structured whole, effective on its elements, and that of an immanent cause, that has no existence before or beyond its effects, a cause that is "nothing outside its effects". According to Montag, if holistic logic necessarily involves the claim that the whole is 'something more' than the sum, the mutual coexistence and interaction, of its elements, then the concept of the structured whole cannot but invalidate the thesis that structure is "nothing outside its effects". By that concept, Althusser has posited "quite the contrary of the existence of the structure in its effects; he has instead posited a whole or structure that not only exceeds its effects, is not exhausted in them, but leads a latent existence beneath or behind the manifest content" (Montag 1998a, 71). Under this light, structure represents the unifying principle of a manifold field, which "totalizes its parts or its elements", and constitutes "the hidden order of a manifest disorder" (1998b, 6-8). The holistic character of that concept of structure confers upon it an, ineradicable in the last analysis, *transcendental* meaning, which involves the distinction between structure and the structured field and renders structure the equivalent of an essence, of a transcendent determining principle, "latent in the field it defines", behind or beyond the phenomena thereof, from which they derive their coherence, their reciprocal function, their rationality and intelligibility. In this way, the multiplicity and diversity of the structured field is deemed only *phenomenal* and is reduced to its deeper unity that "has interiorized difference and diversity" (1998a, 70). Spinozist immanence, on the contrary, according to Montag, amounts to "a world without transcendence, a world in the pure positivity of its being" (1998a, 69), a "surface without depth", in which "(against any notion of a whole or a totality) every individual thing is composed of individual things, themselves composed of individual things, *ad infinitum*", a world of sums or assemblages, which is itself "an infinite sum, that is a sum which does not totalize its own elements" (1998b, 7).<sup>2</sup>

In that context, Montag considers inadequate the distinction, advanced by Althusser in the same pages of *Reading Capital*, between his own concept of the structured whole and an alternative notion, that of the "spiritual whole", exemplified by the thought of Leibniz and Hegel. This, as Montag reminds us, is a kind of whole "in which the difference or singularity of its elements is only 'phenomenal', each

being the expression of an inner principle or essence to which it is therefore reducible” (1998a, 70). But the structured whole, too, Montag claims, in so far as it is precisely a kind of whole, does not really constitute an alternative to the spiritual whole: because he holds that the notion of the whole is inherently *spiritualist*, imposing upon the diversity and differentiation of the real a transcendent unity, and thereby transforming the existing singularities into parts or elements of a totality, Montag claims that structure, conceived as structured whole, stands for “an origin and a centre of a given field, the principle of its order” (Ibid.). In other words, “structure is the deep unity behind surface diversity and is therefore a ‘*spiritual*’ unity in which difference is only a matter of appearances and therefore a failure for knowledge...” (1998a, 72; emphasis added). So, “it is not enough to make a distinction between the spiritualist and non-spiritualist conceptions of the whole or structure” (1998a, 70), because, I may add, the problem is in the *whole* itself.

I think that Montag tackles here indeed a critical point, on which I will focus in what follows. My approach will deviate from his in that I will propose that Althusser’s explicit, though undeveloped, bringing together of holism and immanence, in search of an adequately Marxist concept of structure, is not to be understood negatively, as a “conjunction of utterly opposed meanings between which there is no possibility of reconciliation” (1998a, 69), but rather positively, as the inevitable *tension* which is always the cost of a radical theoretical position. If Althusser is right, and the non-availability of that concept within the framework of traditional thought is a necessary, and not a contingent, lack then it can become available only in the form of an awkward concept, malfunctioning in that very framework, marked by a constitutive disharmony between its elements. Furthermore, that very tension could not but traverse even the first “outline” of that concept by Spinoza himself: I will try to indicate that the question here is not one of external antagonism between immanence and holism, but of the *internal, constitutive tension of Spinozist immanence itself*, which is *necessarily holistic*, on condition that a *radically new holism* --that is, a novel notion of *whole*-- is involved, and that Althusser’s concept of structure, as a structured whole, is consistently immanentist by having constitutively recourse to that *specific* form of holism, which I propose to term *immanentist holism*, opposed to the traditional alternative concepts of whole. I will claim that immanence is inextricable to that ‘strained’ holism, which seems impossible of being formulated and maintained in the context of the still prevailing

system of philosophical categories, dominated by the alternatives of transcendence and transitivity, *which are its target*.

### **Immanent structure against transcendence and transitivity**

It is important to stress, returning to Althusser's text, that he determines structural causality *a contrario* by contrasting it with the *two* ("and only two") systems of concepts that enabled classical philosophy to think causality and the whole. The first of those is "the mechanistic system, Cartesian in origin, which reduced causality to a *transitive* and analytical effectivity: it could not be made to think the effectivity of a whole on its elements, except at the cost of extraordinary distortions" (1979, 186). This is an *atomistic* (as opposed to holistic) conception, in that it conceives of the real as an one-level, homogeneous, "planar space" which cannot accommodate but a trivial, *non-holistic*, notion of whole as some kind of coexistence, assemblage and mutual adjustment of *pre-existing* and *pre-given* elements; the relation of the whole to its parts is thought as the relation of a *composite* entity to the already given, 'simple' ones that compose it. It is precisely the non-holistic nature of that conception, its impossibility to think the effectivity of a whole on its elements, which makes it inadequate for structure. The other classical conception of causality and the whole is indeed the Leibnizian-Hegelian spiritualist one, "in which each element is expressive of the entire totality as a '*pars totalis*'" (187). But this notion "presupposes in principle that the whole in question be reducible to an *inner essence*, of which the elements of the whole are then no more than the phenomenal forms of expression..." (186). This is in fact a *holistic* conception, grasping the effectivity of the whole over its elements, but it represents an *essentialist* holism, in which all the relevant categories of *transcendence*, of interiority and exteriority, of the essential and the inessential, are operating. This is why, *despite its holistic nature*, that conception is still contrasted with structure: "Leibniz and Hegel did have a category for the effectivity of the whole on its elements or parts, *but on the absolute condition that the whole was not a structure*" (187; emphasis added).

Now, I claim that what is at stake in this delimitation of structure is simply *immanence*: the whole point of that double counter-distinction from both *transitive atomism* and *transcendent holism* is the notion of immanent causality, which was not allowed in either of the above general conceptions. As I just stressed, in full

agreement with Montag, the transcendent version of holism, represented by the notion of the spiritual whole, leaves no room for the concept of immanent causality; it is in fact overtly opposed to it, a *holism without immanence*. But on the other hand, too, the trivial, atomistic-transitive, *non-holistic*, notion of whole is able to accommodate at best *only a trivial conception of immanence*: everything here is reduced to “a planar space governed by a *transitive* mechanical causality, such that a determinate effect could be related to an object-cause, a different phenomenon; such that *the necessity of its immanence could be grasped completely in the sequence of a given*” (1979, 182; emphasis added). To interpret this rather elusive formulation in the context of our discussion here: in the first place, it seems indeed inescapable to suggest that immanence, understood in its anti-transcendent thrust, amounts to the affirmation of just a “planar space”, which makes no allowance for a genuine (holistic) whole, just a surface of individual singularities, external to each other, that ‘belong’ to nothing but to themselves, that are *‘nothing’s’ elements*, infinitely composing non-totalizable assemblages, a “surface without depth” of composite and composing things; but then *immanence is trivialized and reduced to (atomistic) transitivity*. And Spinozist immanence is essentially opposed *both* to transcendence *and* transitivity, in such a way that each opposition is essential for the other. Inversely, given that the crucial component of the above conception is the expulsion of any notion of whole or totality, it is possible to assume that for such a field to be thought in terms of immanence, *a* genuine concept of whole is required, a whole allowing for some “effectivity on its elements”, a whole irreducible to the relation between the composite and the composing (be it *ad infinitum*) --more accurately, I will try to show that the category of the composite, non-totalizable assemblage is not appropriate if we want, following Montag (1998a, 68), to avoid any form of atomism (Hobbesian or other) and establish the *ad infinitum* complexity of the singular, individual things, in the manner of Spinoza’s *res singulares*. A holism, then, proper to immanence, an *immanentist holism*, is required in order that the infinite “planar space” of finite things be the “plane of immanence” and not just the ‘plane of transitivity’.

Still, Montag’s main objection is that the (holistic) whole can only be an *instance*, distinct from the field of the singularities it totalizes, something like a ‘depth’ doubling the surface of the apparent world. But this is precisely the main point of my argument: for a genuine concept of immanence, it is not enough, though in a sense it is necessary, to posit just a “surface without depth”. I claim that Montag’s

objection touches upon the constitutive, necessary tension of immanence itself, which cannot dispense with *its proper holism*, the fact that immanence *requires* such a distinct instance, *the very instance it invalidates*, which is a totalizing instance, *proper to it*. Accordingly, there is no question of an antinomy *between* immanence and holism *in general*, but of the constitutive, *internal* tension of *immanence itself*. It is this tension that defines a concept of the whole irreducible to the seemingly obvious dilemma between the (trivial) transitive atomistic and the (genuine) transcendent holistic notions of the whole.

To explain myself, let me stress, first, that Spinozist immanence always refers to a kind of *causality*; immanence is always a *relation* of cause and effect. Consequently, it cannot denote the inert identity of the selfsame; it necessarily involves a liminal, yet inescapable, *duality*. Immanence, opposing transcendent dualism, is the concept of an *annihilated* but *non-eliminable duality*; thus, the position of Deleuze and Guattari that “whenever immanence is interpreted as immanent *to* Something, we can be sure that this Something reintroduces the transcendent” (1994, 45) is correct but incomplete: still, in immanence there must always be *something* immanent in *something* (*‘else’*). Hence the necessary, constitutive tension of immanence, of a notion that, in order to have content, has to affirm what it negates, that is, the ‘between’ between its poles;<sup>3</sup> hence the fact that immanence tends to be cancelled out by what seems to be one of its own war cries: “surfaces without depths”. Immanence, on the one hand, means the annihilation of the gap between substance and the universe of modes; but, on the other, the strict identification of the two would result in the elimination of immanence itself, because we would be left with a world of ‘substantial modes’, given self-subsisting entities; *immanent causality ‘between’ substance and its modes* would thus be absorbed by, and necessarily transformed into, the *transitive causality between modes themselves*.

My intention is not to reinstate some obliterated hair-splitting scholasticism, but to touch upon the long suspended novelty of Spinozism for materialist thought, from which Althusser tries to draw. The important point here is that Spinozist immanence, while opposing idealist dualism, does not succumb to its subordinate other: that truncated Cartesianism which is modern ‘materialist’ monism. Immanence, being the radical opponent of transcendence, is not its opposite; it indicates, and responds to, the fact that dualism is always a precondition of a corresponding monism: it is in the laboratories of dualism that pure ‘extension’, a ‘material’

substance from which ‘thought’ is abstracted (to which it is reducible or out of which it is emergent) has been elaborated. In general, Spinoza’s lesson (one not missed by Althusser) is that materialism does not consist in the mere reversal of primacy between the poles of the ever-present idealistic dipole, so as to assert, at every level of its application, the predominance of a material pole constitutively deprived of all the vital, cognitive, productive and organisational powers with which the relevant ideal pole is entrusted. Against the prevailing modern credo, the world’s disenchantment cannot be reduced to the conception of a universe exhaustively analysable to mere ‘efficient’, transitive causes. In fact, if Descartes has been emblematic for modernity, it is because he established the theoretical solidarity between synthetic-transcendent determination and analytical-transitive causality (and that is why Althusser characterizes *the latter* as Cartesian). Here lies the importance of Spinoza’s anti-Cartesianism (and what made it so indispensable for the theoretical struggles fought by Althusser’s structuralist Marxism): for instance, immanence, opposing the dualism between the biological automaton and the transcendent soul or mind, is in the position to criticize not only modern humanist anthropology, but also its inverted reflections of naturalism, behaviourism, empiricism and so on; opposing the transcendence of the juridical, ethical and political instances, it can confront not only the classical political philosophies of Natural Right, but also their mirror images of individualism, contractarianism, liberalism and so on.<sup>4</sup>

Immanent causality, then, cannot be caught up “in the sequence of a given”, in an infinite, one-level space of linear and external cause-and-effect relations, where a cause is always another cause’s effect. *In* that level reigns a transitive causality of *pars extra partis*, where nothing can be immanent in anything; furthermore, nothing can be immanent in anything, if that level is all there is. Immanent cause cannot be *part* of that level; if anything, it can only be referred to that level taken as a *whole*. Immanent cause cannot be *atomistically* related to its effect, but *holistically* to its effects --still better, to *all* the things of “the field it defines” that are successively cause and effect, which is to say that all the causes/effects are immanent cause’s effects. The immanent whole is the immanent cause of its elements; the latter are the former’s immanent effects.

In short, immanence’s requirement of an unsuppressed duality goes together with its requirement for a notion of whole: if the one pole of this necessarily dual concept is the field of individuation, the field of singularities, the other corresponds to

a non-eliminable instance of totalization. And, I believe, this is one of the major aspects of Althusser's theoretical undertaking in *Reading Capital*: the thesis that immanence necessarily involves a holism, *another* kind of holism, opposed to the classic, spiritualist and transcendent, holism --in short, an *immanentist holism*. This novel holism is the very object of the Althusserian elaboration of the concept of structure, which necessarily brings together *the effectivity of structure on its elements* and *the exhaustive existence of structure in its effects*; the concept of whole that corresponds to this immanentist holism is precisely the concept of the *structured whole*.

### **Structure: an infinitely complex whole without parts**

Trying to substantiate these interrelated concepts of structure, structured whole and immanentist holism, let me return to the passage where Althusser posits structure as an immanent cause. There we have seen that structure does not have existence before or beyond its effects; structure then is not transcendent to its effects and, accordingly, it cannot be thought of as their essence. And, by the same token, the field of structure's effects, too, has no existence prior to structure; if structure is the immanent cause of its effects, then the latter, too, are immanent in their cause: they always-already 'remain' in the structure, the structure 'contains' them completely and 'contains' only them. In a word, the structure is exhaustively, without 'remainder' or surplus, in its effects.

Thus, we can say that *structure's effects are its elements*, are *all* its elements and, in that sense, structure is the *whole* of its elements/effects; it is in that way that we should understand Althusser's statement that structure is nothing but the configuration of its elements *and* nothing outside its effects: the conception of structure as an immanent cause implies that the pairs whole-element and structure-effects coincide; or, to put it in another way, structure does not have *its own elements*, as it were, distinct and different in kind from the whole's elements. This is extremely important because it indicates that, despite all appearances, the concept of structure in question breaks with the formalism and essentialism of what we could call 'mainstream structuralism', according to which the structure is a combinatory of *abstract*, pre-existing and unalterable elements, as opposed to the *concrete* phenomena of the structured field, the entities, relations and events that constitute the structured whole's elements or the structure's effects.<sup>5</sup> The phrase structured whole

does not denote the whole's latent structure, but the structural character of the whole itself.

On the other hand, the structured whole cannot be thought of as *composed* by its elements, according to an atomistic process of linear, transitive causality that would proceed from prior, pre-existing and pre-given *parts* towards the whole. Inversely, structure cannot be exhaustively *analyzed* to its parts; there cannot be the *last* analysis of structure. Structure then is *infinitely complex*. That is, we have to draw a sharp demarcation line between the *complexity* that characterizes the structured *whole* and any notion of *compositionality* from pre-given, 'simple' entities, prior to the whole that they would compose; only the former makes possible a consistent rejection of any form of atomism. In short, structure's elements are not *parts*, in the proper sense: they are not characterized by *partialness* in relation to the whole. Consequently, immanent structure is not divisible to its elements, is not apportioned or distributed among its elements. Structure, *in its entirety*, is (immanent) in every of its inexhaustible elements.<sup>6</sup>

Counterintuitive as this may sound, we should insist that it is inextricable to one of Althusser's major contributions to Marxist theory, the same one that he has previously attempted to account for with the concept of *overdetermination*. To the extent that the elements of structure are its effects, they are *not* identifiable independently of structure itself. Thus, Althusser says that, whether for a regional or for the global structure, the concept of its elements must be defined each time anew: for instance, he says that "the concept of the economic must be constructed for each mode of production, as must the concept of the other 'levels' that belong to the mode of production: the political, the ideological, etc" (1979, 183) --which, of course, in turn, holds for the elements of the regional "structure constituting and determining economic objects: the unity of productive forces and the relations of production" (Ibid.). But this, in its turn, means --and we know it to be a central thesis of "structuralist Marxism", as it can be reconstructed from the most important relevant works (by Althusser and some of his followers --Balibar, Poulantzas, Betheleim, and others)-- that *all* the elements of the social structure, *in their structural configuration*, are 'present' in the economic element (and, in particular, the ideological and political ones, which are always-already active in its constitution): "the unity of productive forces and the relations of production", to the exact measure that they are not an abstract structure but ontologically identical with the concrete entities and relations of

the economic field, *involve*, in their ‘materiality’, the particular ideological and political relations of the corresponding mode of production. Therefore, we can say that the whole structure of that mode of production ‘is’ (immanently) in this particular element of it, the economic element. It is in this sense that, against the inverted Hegelianism of economism, the economic element is the effect of structure (and not *vice versa*): the former presupposes the latter *in its entirety*.<sup>7</sup>

Structure, then, is an infinitely complex *whole without parts*. The relevant holism, immanentist holism, is a radical holism, in that it radicalizes the traditional holistic assertion of the priority of the whole over its parts, but in the sense of the always-already, all the way down, primacy of complexity over simplicity, where “from the first to the last instance, the lonely hour of the ‘last analysis’ never comes” (Althusser 1977, 113). It is a radical holism, in the sense that it allows only for wholes or structures, and not of parts; there are no ‘absolute’ parts, every ‘part’ being a whole or a structure in its own right; there are only wholes, wholes of wholes or, in an Althusserian manner, “structures of structures”, and there is the “(global) structure” of all the “(regional) structures” (1979, 182-188).<sup>8</sup> In short, “there is no longer any simple unity, only a structured, complex unity, ... the ever-pre-giveness of a structured complex unity” (1977, 197-199).

But we should not misleadingly take this “structure of structures” as analogous to the scheme of the circle of circles, by means of which Althusser describes elsewhere the Hegelian totality. If the elements of the infinitely complex structured whole are not parts, in the strict sense (‘partial’ parts, if I may say), they are not total parts either, *pars totalis*, in the sense that is proper to the spiritual kind of whole, which is “in principle reducible to an *inner essence*, of which the elements are then no more than the phenomenal form of expression, the inner principle of the essence being present at each point in the whole, such that at each moment it is possible to write the immediately adequate equation: *such and such an element* (economic, political, legal, literary, religious, etc., in Hegel) = *the inner essence of the whole*” (1979, 186-187). We should not confuse structure’s immanence with the interiority of an essence, as opposed to its outer phenomenal manifestations; we should not conceive structure in terms of a distinction between “the ‘intimate essence’ of things and their phenomenal ‘surface’” (1979, 189). The essence is *transcendently* interior (and, for that matter, we could equally well say exterior) to the field it determines, nowhere found *in person* in it, a “spiritual” cause that exerts its effectivity from beyond, while the ‘materiality’ of

the elements is only responsible for their *inessential* or *phenomenal* differences. But, by definition, no equivalent of the distinction between essence and phenomenon, between the essential and the non-essential dimensions of the real, can be applied to the immanent structural causality: structure *is* its effects/elements, without residue or excess; there is no component, aspect or dimension of the structure's effects that is non-structural. They are completely *structural*, in both senses of structure's effects and structure's elements, without sharing structure as a quasi-essential core, without participating in a common essence. Thus, just because structure is entirely and exhaustively immanent in each one of its elements, we cannot write the spiritual equation that Althusser mentions. The difference or *singularity* of the elements of the structured whole is not phenomenal but real; they are genuinely *diversified* and *differentiated*, to the extent that the structural relation is not that of the subsumption of existence to essence, of the particular to the general. Structure's infinite complexity, then, is correlative with the genuine differentiation of its elements. Immanent structure is infinitely diversified in its elements.

So, to be structural, that is to be structure's effect/element, means to be singular. But this means in turn that structure itself is always singular too: it is always the singular configuration of its singular effects/elements, always affected by its differentiating effectivity. In strict consistency with the refusal of the formalism and essentialism of mainstream structuralism, structure does not exist 'somewhere', as the "invariant under which the particular variations of a concrete object are subsumed" (Althusser 1999, 14), as an always identical and self-same abstract principle or essence, which governs its concrete effects and 'structures' their whole; to the extent that structure's effects are its own elements, structure is not independent and indifferent to them, it is not immune to its proper effectivity. In other words, the concept of structure, defined according to the above, makes possible not only to think singularity, but also, for the same reasons and contrary to a widely-spread misunderstanding, *historicity*: the singularity of the effects/elements permits us to think the possibility of a historical fact, that is, of a structurally determined fact that "causes a mutation in the existing structural relations" (1979, 102). Indeed, and despite the precise wording of Althusser's own formulation at this point, that very singularity blurs the distinction between the 'exceptional' historical facts and "all the other phenomena that occur in historical existence", that is, the 'regular' effects of

structure which construct and re-construct the whole, which (re) produce the ‘existing structural relations’.

### **The tension of immanentist structuralism**

The immanentist concept of structural causality implies, then, on the one hand, the ontological identity of cause and effect (the identity of their being) and, on the other, the infinite diversification of the cause in its effects. This fact has important consequences regarding the *identity* involved: it is an identity that, contrary to its formal logical function, forbids us to identify its terms. We cannot conceive this identity in terms of a formal mutuality: as Macherey points out (1997, 80-81), referring to the immanence of Spinozist substance in its effects, there is no question of a simple, abstract and empty equation, of a formal identification, that would allow us to substitute one of its terms for the other, that is, to omit or to *eliminate* one in favor of the other: there is not an “indifferent unity”, but a “unity in difference”. Thus, a difference ‘intervenes’ in the workings of immanent causality, inscribed in the null distance, in the non-existent gap between the terms of an identity, the term of the cause and that of the effects, a difference expressed in the (infinite) differentiation of its effects: a liminal difference, a liminal non-identity within an identity.

We can now return to what I have tried to indicate as the constitutive tension of the immanentist concept of structure, which, as I have already suggested, lies in the fact that the concept in question, being precisely the *immanentist* concept of structure, necessarily involves a specific holism, proper to it, an *immanentist holism*. We can see why, although (or rather, as I will try to explain, just because) the Spinozist concept of structure is meant to abolish the transcendent *dualism* between the abstract, formal or essential, in short, the spiritual, structure and the concrete, material, existent entities and events that it ‘structures’, does not completely eliminate the *duality* between structure and its effects/elements. It was precisely this peculiar identity in difference, this uneliminable insinuation of difference into identity, the non-identity of the identicals, that I proposed to conceive in terms of the category of an *annihilated but non-eliminable duality* between unity and diversity, between the pole or ‘level’ of the immanent cause, the structure or the whole, and that of its effects (or elements). Such a structure seems to be searching its locus between a “surface” and a “depth”, since it is not transcendent to the field of the diversified elements or singularities which it

totalizes, while these elements do not represent “given” entities, which would compose, by their coexistence and interaction, “a world in the pure positivity of its being”, or which would be combined, by the laws of an abstract combinatory, to form the latent essence of a field of existences.

It may seem that this persistent duality restores a remainder of transcendence, inconsistent with the pronounced immanentist character of that concept. Montag’s discussion, at least as I read him, seems to adopt this approach, as he sees in the Althusserian use of the notion of structure the “unthought conjunction of utterly opposed meanings”, the holistic (and, thus, transcendent) and the immanentist, (which implies that they could and should, on reflection, be disjoined). For my part, and this is my divergence from Montag’s reading, the slightly differentiated vocabulary that I am using is meant to propose a reinterpretation of that very problem, which Montag indicates, not in terms of an ‘external’ antagonism between the immanentist position and a transcendent residue, which has surreptitiously contaminated, as it were, the former by way of the holistic structural logic, but in terms of the ‘internal’, necessary and constitutive, tension of that concept, which is imposed by its consistent *opposition* to the “transcendental apparatus”, of which the conception of a world of pure transitivity is a subordinated instance.

Let me try to gain access to this necessity by way of the notion of the “absent cause”, which Althusser famously used in order to treat structure adequately as an immanent cause. Here, the tension I am speaking about is overtly legible in the very terms of that notion: an ‘absent cause’ is literally antinomic, if not contradictory: the cause has to be somehow present in order to be a cause, in order to produce or to induce its effects. The only way to explain that contradictory category is, I think, once again in terms of the double counter-distinction that, according to my reading, organizes the whole issue: against both the transitive-linear-mechanical and the transcendent-expressive-spiritual general conceptions of causality. In the first case, obviously, the cause must be present and *in the very level of the effects*, a cause ‘inside’ (or a part of) the field of the effects; in the second, the cause still has to be present, but *not in the same level*: it has to be *transcendently* present, from ‘outside’ the field of the effects, which is the mark of all teleology, including the spiritual conception of the whole discussed above. These two notions have a very important feature in common: both of them presuppose or imply that the cause is distinct and distanced from the “object, element or space” which is the *recipient* of its effectivity;

in either cases, the cause has existence before or beyond the effects (and *vice versa*), the effects do not exhaust the existence of the cause (and *vice versa*). In that common feature we can detect the mechanism of theoretical *solidarity* between transcendence and transitivity,<sup>9</sup> which makes them mutually complementary within “classical philosophy” and, in parallel, tends to expel from it every thought that does not obey their dilemmas, banishing to the unthinkable the possibility of an alternative notion; it is the same mechanism that forced Spinoza (but also Spinozist structuralism) to pay the price of an inexorable conceptual tension in order to defy it.

The concept of a cause immanent in its effects is such an ‘unthinkable’ alternative, a cause that is *immanently present* to its effects, a cause that exists only in (and through) its effects. Against the two available notions of presence sketched above, the presence-in-person of the cause amongst its effects and the transcendent presence of the cause from beyond, it is indeed an absent cause, meaning both “the *absence in person* of the structure in the effects considered *from the mundane (rasante) perspective of their existence*”<sup>10</sup> and the absence of structure “as an essence *outside* the phenomena which comes and alters their aspect, forms and relations” (Althusser 1979, 188). But an absent cause, strictly speaking, would be no cause at all, and we be left once again with the two (and “only two”) available, intelligible notions --a fact that confirms their theoretical solidarity. That is why Althusser insists that, in order to save it as a cause, that is, to save “the modification of the effects by the efficacy of the structure”, “it is necessary to insist on the other aspect of the phenomenon, which is that of the *presence*, of the immanence of the cause in its effects, otherwise known *as the existence of the structure* in its effects.” Summarizing all this in a blatantly contradictory formulation, Althusser will maintain “*at once both the absence and the presence*, i.e., the existence of the structure in its effects” (188, emphasis modified). It is obviously the same tension of a concept that, in order to oppose the perennial transcendental thought, has to posit something like a transcendent remainder,<sup>11</sup> that is, the presence of a cause, holistically determining a field, which is not present (is absent) *in* that field, in its existential surface.

### **More work to be done...**

But, of course, substituting the vocabulary of an ‘internal’, ‘necessary’, etc., ‘tension’ for that of antinomy, contradiction, etc., does not render the concept in

question less problematic or more intelligible –no more than it does the distinction between (transcendent) dualism and (immanent) duality, or the assertion of a cause simultaneously absent and present to its effects; in that respect, Montag’s objections retain all their force and validity. The hegemony of transcendental thought still confers upon this concept an aura of something ‘unthinkable’; the necessary conceptual tension that I tried to outline indicates the *necessity*, rather than the full-blown existence, of a concept that is still (to us, as it was to Marx and Spinoza) ‘non-available’. But this, inversely, signals the urgent philosophical task to ‘produce’ that concept, that is, to make it available and to render it thinkable, which would be correlative with the contestation and the virtual subversion of that hegemony. The necessity of the concept in question is determined by the task assigned to it by the ongoing and long lasting theoretical conjuncture, the same task that Althusser has suggested some forty years ago: to confront the philosophical and ideological transcendental apparatus and provide the space of intelligibility required by the theoretical revolutions of Marx and Spinoza. It is a concept, which is not present yet, in ‘flesh and blood’, but it has (or rather, vindicates) its ‘place’ in a nevertheless exhaustively and suffocatingly full space, a concept that actually exists in a way that brings in mind what Althusser describes as the way of existence of the “new prince in a new state”, in the context (and by way of) the theoretical and political undertaking of Machiavelli: as a “certain *empty* place: empty in order to be filled”. “I say empty”, continues Althusser, “though it is always occupied ... because it is necessary for this place to be *filled*” (Althusser 1999, 20). Let me say, then, to conclude, that the still required immanentist concept of structure is a concept which exists only in and through its empty but, at the same time, occupied place, which exists only as its struggle to fill the place that is forbidden to it, against the system that allows no room for it, “unstable in its very being, since all its effort must tend towards giving itself existence” (21).

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> In the following discussion I will use the terms “transcendental”, “transcendentalism”, etc., simply in order to denote any philosophical (but also ideological) way of thinking governed by the notion of transcendence. That is, I intend to use these words as a verbal device, as an adjectival attribute, referring to the “thought of transcendence”. This use is not to be confused with the specific sense of the transcendental that can be traced back to Kant and its adventures since then. The relations between that sense of the transcendental and the former one (that is, the thought of transcendence) is a very broad, multifaceted and complicated issue that I could not address here.

<sup>2</sup> The last two quotations refer to a letter by Macherey to Althusser (1965), quoted by Montag, criticizing the notion of the structured whole. The second one is a citation from Deleuze’s *The Logic of Sense*, cited by Macherey himself, in that letter.

<sup>3</sup> I prefer to use the term ‘necessary tension’, instead of ‘contradiction’, in order to avoid two interpretations that would render the issue in question resolvable: first, that of a contradiction in the sense of a discursive inconsistency, bringing together extraneously two conflicting concepts, which is to be resolved by purifying the one from the other; second, that of a dialectical contradiction, produced and resolvable by the “labor of the negative”. Of course, the latter does not represent the only possible conception of dialectics, and it is well known that Althusser himself defended, precisely during the period of his work that concerns me here, an opposing, Marxist, one; but this would involve a discussion outside the scope of this paper.

<sup>4</sup> Here, perhaps more than anywhere else, it is clear how modern thought oscillates between transcendental synthesis and transitive analysis: “on the one hand, it abstracts the multiplicity of the singularities and unifies it transcendently under the concept of the people; on the other, it dissolves the ensemble of singularities (that constitute the multitude) in order to make of it a mass of individuals” (Negri, 2002).

<sup>5</sup> As far as the economic region is concerned, for instance, the latter would be the economic phenomena or “objects”, studied by the science of economics, and the

former to be found in “the structure constituting and determining economic objects: the unity of productive forces and the relations of production”.

<sup>6</sup> The same holds for Spinozist immanence itself. First, substance is not *composed* of its attributes (even though, or rather precisely because, these, as *substantiae unius attributi*, are its “constitutive elements” [Gueroult, 109]), just as every attribute does not constitute the sum of its modes, it is not “composed of finite parts into which one supposes it convertible” (Deleuze, 33). As a consequence, “substance is entirely in each of its attributes (since it is identical to them), just as all extension is also in every glass of water, or all thought is in every idea ... Indivisible substance is not the sum of all its attributes” (Macherey 1997, 85).

<sup>7</sup> A second example is the ideological element itself: in Althusser’s mature work, this element consists in the Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs). But, from the very definition of the ISAs, and their *non-exhaustive* enumeration by Althusser, it follows that every social apparatus, institution or “mechanism”, including those that are involved in the functions of the economic or political element, can also be considered as an ISA, so that the totality of the ISAs can be considered coextensive with the whole social structure, so that we could claim that the social structure ‘is’ *entirely* in that particular element of it, the ideological element.

<sup>8</sup> As Deleuze writes, in the context of the Spinozist conception of existing finite modes, “there is in the limit an infinity of infinite wholes, a whole of all the wholes, the whole, so to speak, of existing things both contemporaneous and successive” (Deleuze, 204).

<sup>9</sup> We cannot discuss here this topic. As a relevant index, though, let us remember that, in the *Ethics* (I, P18), immanence is introduced in opposition to transitivity, as long as the divine causation of all things is concerned; but a God conceived as the transitive cause of all things is clearly the transcendent creator, which is one of the most persisting Spinoza’s targets.

<sup>10</sup> The above is an --as yet unpublished-- translation by Warren Montag of a passage from the 1<sup>st</sup> edition of *Lire le Capital*, which was omitted in the subsequent editions

and, hence, not included in Ben Brewster's translation. I am indebted to Montag for pointing out the great importance, for the issue discussed here, of both the passage and its omission.

<sup>11</sup> We can read this seeming paradox in the puzzling, apparently antinomic formulations of Gueroult, by means of which he comments on the notion of immanence in the *Ethics* (Gueroult 299-300). Gueroult points out that while God, by virtue of his causality and his essence is immanent to his effects, he is inseparable from them and he is "one" with them, nevertheless, and again because of his causality and his essence, that is *for the same reasons*, God is distinct from his effects, to conclude that "*God's immanence to the things goes together, then, with some transcendence*". Inversely, "if the effect is different from the cause, [in immanent causality] the difference in question is alleviated (*atténuée*) due to the fact that it [the effect] is nothing but that very cause".

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