

Translator's Introduction to Louis Althusser, *Philosophy of the Encounter: Late Writings, 1978-1987* (London: Verso, July 2006)

In memory of Constance Coiner, 1948-1996

I

Philosophy of the Encounter collects nearly all the philosophical work that Louis Althusser produced from late 1977 to the year he stopped writing philosophy, 1987. The main texts in it, 'Marx in his Limits' and 'The Underground Current of the Materialism of the Encounter', date, respectively, from 1978-79 and 1982-83. Between them lies an abyss, in one sense – in 1980, overtaken by the psychosis that stalked him down to his death a decade later, Althusser killed his wife Hélène Rytman – and nothing, in another: 'The Underground Current' (rather, the amorphous manuscript out of which François Matheron has skilfully carved it) was the first piece of any note to come from his pen after he laid 'Marx in his Limits' aside.

A remark of Lenin's that Althusser last invoked in 1975 pinpoints the premise of his philosophical project until then: 'if Marx did not leave behind him a "Logic" (with a capital letter), he did leave behind him the *logic* of *Capital*'. Marxist philosophy's task was to retrieve this coherent logic, contained in the 'practical state' in Marx's *chef d'œuvre*, a model of 'conceptual rigour' and 'theoretical systematicity' marred only by an inconsequential flirt with Hegel. 'Marx in his Limits' revises the premise and subverts the project, for a reason encapsulated in another Leninist pronouncement that Althusser once dismissed as an enigmatic exclamation: 'it is impossible completely to understand Marx's *Capital*, and especially its first chapter, without having thoroughly studied and understood the *whole* of Hegel's *Logic*'. Althusser now contends, in sum, that Lenin was right about the relation between *Capital* and the *Logic*, and, therefore, wrong about the logic of *Capital*: Marx did not leave behind him *a* logic, but, rather, clashing idealist and materialist logics. Consciously, he espoused the former. *Capital* is 'an essentially Hegelian work' whose 'method of exposition ... coincides with the speculative genesis of the concept'. It aspires to reducing the history of capitalism 'to the development, in the Hegelian sense', of the 'simple, primitive, original form' of value.

One whole side of Marx's thought proceeds from this speculative geneticism. *Capital*'s Hegelianism has its pendant in a teleology of history exemplified by the 'famous comments' in *The Poverty of Philosophy* 'on the hand-mill, water-mill and steam-mill, which justify the reduction of the dialectic of history to the dialectic generating the successive *modes of production*, that is, in the last analysis, the different production *techniques*'. The 1859 Preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, which draws from this principle of the primacy of the productive forces a universal theory of human history characterized by its avoidance of 'all mention of class struggle', thus attests, not a rare Marxian lapse into pre-Marxist idealism, but the centrality of a persistent idealist strain in Marx. As for his *magnum opus*, it is not a *purely* idealist work only because the simple form from which it would deduce all else proves, in actual theoretical practice, to *result* from the historical process supposed to proceed from it: Marx cannot account for capital without taking account of class struggle, which the deduction of history from the value-form, like that of each mode of production from its predecessor in a hierarchy, 'requires him to bracket out'. Whence Althusser's deconstructive solution to a classic problem: in the 'true heart' of *Capital*, its historical chapters, Marx's materialist logic exceeds the idealist ideo-logic of his overarching scheme, shattering the 'fictitious unity' of the whole. The book owes its success to its failure. A 1982 interview draws the general conclusion: 'one cannot be both a Marxist and coherent.'

'The Underground Current' takes that conclusion as its premise. Rather than try to derive a philosophy from Marx's incoherency, Althusser now undertakes to produce a philosophy *for* Marx – that is, against the idealist Marx, and in the (aleatory) materialist's stead. He seeks the 'premises of Marx's materialism' where he noted, in 1975, that they lay buried: in a tradition binding 'Epicurus to Spinoza' and the Hegel to whom 'Marx was close', the reluctant Spinozist of a

philosophical current that is 'hardly ever mentioned'. 'The Underground Current' reconstructs the history of this repressed 'materialism of the encounter' (renamed 'aleatory materialism' by 1986), ignoring Hegel while including Nietzsche, Heidegger, Derrida and others. His survey, Althusser announces near the end of it, is 'just a prelude' to what he 'wanted to call attention to in Marx'. He did not produce much more than the prelude. 'Marx in his Limits', however, has already distilled the essence of what he would have said if he had: 'that Marx's thought contains, on the question of historical necessity', both 'extremely original suggestions that have nothing to do with the mechanism of inevitability' – and just the opposite.

It is not hard to show that Althusser's exposure of Marx's incoherencies exposes his own. Indeed, our summary of his 1978 indictment of the idealist Marx has done precisely that: it is a patchwork of indignant Althusserian *rebuttals* of the charge that Marx was a Hegelian. From *For Marx* (1965) to the 1975 'Is it Simple to Be a Marxist in Philosophy?', one finds dozens of similar earlier-Althusserian denials of Marx's Hegelianism, easily convertible, through negation of the negation in Freud's sense, not Hegel's, into later-Althusserian proofs of it. Manifestly, this is evidence of a startling reversal of position. The question is whether it does not also betray an underlying continuity.

The last substantial item in *Philosophy of the Encounter*, 'Philosophy and Marxism' (accompanied by extracts from Althusser's correspondence about the text), suggests – or embodies – an answer to this question. First published (without the correspondence) in Spanish translation in 1988, this primer of the philosophy of the encounter poses as an interview. But it is not one. As the 'interviewer', Fernanda Navarro, has hinted by embedding in it, towards the end, a replica of the 'Portrait of the Materialist Philosopher' – Althusser's last philosophical text and the coda to the present volume – and, near the beginning, the portrait of the materialist philosopher that graces his 1965 introduction to *For Marx*, she has fashioned a picture of his thought out of passages or paraphrases of writing he produced in between, pieced together with material from their conversations of the 1980s. Far from diminishing the value of her 'pseudo-interview' (as Althusser unabashedly described her collage shortly before enthusiastically authorizing its publication), this cut-and-paste work grounds it. For 'Philosophy and Marxism' proposes, by way of its form, a thesis its co-authors surely wanted us to consider: that Althusser's late work does not refute his earlier work, even when it contradicts it, but reveals patterns once invisible in it – not by repeating, but by transforming them.

II

Althusser presents the materialism of the encounter under another name in a March 1976 lecture, 'The Transformation of Philosophy'. Its subject is a 'new practice of philosophy', defined against that of the 'party of the state'. The philosophical practice of the party of the state consists in fictitiously unifying the whole range of social practices under its hegemonic Truth; it does so on behalf of a ruling ideology, thereby helping it to dominate the distinct ideology of the ruled. To bring out its commanding position in the philosophical tradition, Althusser calls this state philosophy simply 'philosophy'. He calls aleatory materialism 'non-philosophy', a term patterned after Engels' description of the proletarian state as a 'non-state'. Thus he introduces aleatory materialism (a term we shall use from now on to designate its Althusserian variant) as the non-philosophy of the dictatorship of the proletariat.

Between 'The Transformation of Philosophy' and what the composition of *Philosophy of the Encounter* suggests was a turn or *Kehre* (Antonio Negri) – charted in the apparently prophetic letter placed at its head, initiated in 'Marx in his Limits', and negotiated in 'The Underground Current' – Althusser led a fight for working-class dictatorship, an idea the PCF was then retiring from its theoretical arsenal. 'Marx in his Limits' is a *summa* of his pleas for keeping it; this defence of the non-state leads on, in the present volume, to his plea for non-philosophy. The whole book can accordingly be read as the realization of the programme laid out in the 1976 lecture. In fact, Althusser's aleatory-materialist turn did not come with the passage from 'Marx in his Limits' to 'The Underground Current', which constitutes a record of the *Kehre* only in the sense that it stages a *re-enactment* of it. If Althusser's turn can be dated at all – that is, if his thought as a whole is

not traversed by an aleatory-materialist current countered by his own 'theoreticist' compromises with the philosophical party of the state – then it occurred not in 1983, but ten years before.

It was rung in by the 1969 manuscript *Sur la reproduction*, a theorization of the dictatorship of the bourgeoisie that is, unmistakably, a prototype of 'Marx in his Limits'. It was carried out in a pair of fragmentary unpublished books, *Livre sur le communisme* (1972) and *Livre sur l'impérialisme* (1973), which formulate basic concepts of the materialism of the encounter, and thus constitute a kind of prototype of 'The Underground Current'. When one adds that the 1972-73 manuscripts elaborate elements of a 'theory of the encounter' that Althusser sketched in 1966; that he undertook, around 1973, a study of the ancient atomists which soon saw them promoted to the rank of Marx's 'most important', albeit 'indirect', ancestors; and that he rehearsed his 1970s battle with the Party in the 1960s, it appears that the lesson of 'Philosophy and Marxism' can be transcribed in another, historical-philological key. The late work is, in many respects, quite literally a transformation of Althusser's philosophy, a critical rewriting of earlier – often much earlier – work. To mistake the years in which aleatory materialism took provisionally final form for its only context is therefore to endow it with a fictive genealogy – one the late Althusser, to be sure, helped to invent.

As for the creative transformation of Althusser's philosophy wrought by the Anglophone consensus to the effect that he countenanced or even welcomed his Party's rejection of working-class dictatorship, it would be uncharitable not to ignore it. But the record should be set straight.

III

From the early 1960s on, the PCF's leadership was wedded to the thesis that the French road to socialism ran through the ballot box. Because the Party had, since the War, never polled much more (or much less) than a quarter of the national vote, reason seemed to dictate that it forge electoral alliances with other Left parties; because it dwarfed them all, it could, the assumption ran, easily dominate its prospective allies. In 1965, this strategy spawned a Communist-Socialist electoral pact around the Socialist François Mitterrand's bid to unseat De Gaulle. Encouraged by his respectable showing, the PCF's leaders assiduously sought, in the years thereafter, to put the nascent Communist-Socialist 'Union of the Left' on the foundations of a common governmental programme. They succeeded in the aftermath of May 1968: the *Programme commun* was signed with the Socialists and another small party to their right in mid-1972.

Its history is a history of Socialist success at Communist expense. By 1977 at the latest, the cantankerous alliance had unmistakably turned to the advantage of the PCF's once junior partner; the Socialist Party was certain to emerge from the March 1978 parliamentary elections, which the Union of the Left was widely expected to carry, as the hegemonic Left force. Late in 1977, the PCF leadership therefore took a secret decision to sabotage the *Programme commun*, effectively handing the elections to the Right. For the millions who had been counting on them to ring in the final conflict with French capitalism, the defeat was traumatic. Moreover, it came at a time when Communist intellectuals and a section of the Party's middle-level leadership were in unprecedented revolt against the famously undemocratic methods of its ruling circle. For these and other reasons - among them the French mass media's timely 1975 discovery of the Gulag - the late 1970s saw thousands of voters desert the Party, initiating its precipitous twentieth-century decline. By 1981, when the Socialists swept the presidential and legislative elections, the PCF was already a distinctly minority force on the Left; the four secondary ministries it was allotted in Mitterrand's government reflected its subaltern place in the new political pecking order.

Althusser was theoretically in favour of a Communist-Socialist alliance, and ferociously opposed to paying the price at which he thought it would come: a swift retreat from class culminating in Communist rejection of the dictatorship of the proletariat (effectively accomplished in 1976). His verdict on the *Programme commun*, handed down in a 1973 conversation with a Communist potentate, Roland Leroy, reflected this opposition; the grail that, as Party leaders saw it, vindicated a decade of earnest questing was, he told Leroy, 'a lure, and a "paper" lure at that'. They spoke a year after the

agreement was reached. But Althusser had not waited until 1973 to decry his party's 1976 turn. In the first half of the 1960s, he and his co-thinkers had waged a preventive war against it, one the PCF's then 'official' philosopher quite rightly called a 'systematic attack on the Party's politics led by the group of philosophers influenced by Althusser'.

Concretely, the Althusserians targeted the Marxist-humanist and Hegelian-Marxist philosophies that, by glossing over the themes of class struggle and revolutionary rupture, facilitated a Communist marriage with the Socialists on the Socialists' terms. The theoretical jousting escalated into a (carefully controlled) inner-Party organizational battle capped by a landmark 1966 Central Committee meeting at Argenteuil, where the Althusserians' 'left-wing anti-Stalinist positions' were lengthily debated and roundly rejected. The outcome of the clash convinced the principal loser that the PCF, like the CPSU, was 'objectively pursuing reformist, revisionist policies' and becoming a 'Social-Democratic' party, that it had 'ceased to be revolutionary' and was 'all but lost.' The proof was that it must soon abandon the dictatorship of the proletariat.

Such, at any rate, was the burden of a set of texts that Althusser wrote in the wake of Argenteuil. The PCF had forgotten the lesson of Marx's *Critique of the Gotha Programme*, he warned in a 1966 letter that he resolved to hand to General Secretary Waldeck Rochet, and warned again in a 1967 polemic aimed at French Communism's Marxist-humanist intellectuals. 'For the sake of unity' with the party of reform, he complained, the PCF was preparing to strike an impossible 'compromise between Marxist theory and ideology'. But if the French Party was repeating the mistake the German Party had made at Gotha, its most prestigious theoretician was not about to repeat Marx's. To the PCF's re-edition of the Gotha Programme, he would oppose his re-edition of Marx's *Critique* – and, unlike his illustrious predecessor, see to its publication by the Party press before 1966 was out. Intended for an audience of Communist activists, the projected book, *Socialisme idéologique et socialisme scientifique*, develops a point crucial to Marx's text as well: the idea that compromise on the question of working-class dictatorship inevitably saps the very foundations of revolutionary socialism.

The PCF's rejection of this 'key concept of Marxist theory', Althusser would argue in the 1976 text *Les Vaches noires* – a projected book on class dictatorship intended for the Party press and an audience of Communist activists – 'crown[ed] a long-standing tendency'. He meant, at one level, that the decision to retire the idea had been in the making for a decade and more, as its partisans were happy to agree. But he also meant, as his 1966 evocation of Gotha indicates and *Socialisme idéologique* repeats, that it represented something like communism's original sin: an apparently congenital weakness for the deadly illusion that the state is above class, or could be or should be. Its susceptibility to this myth, according to *Socialisme idéologique*, stems ultimately from the inevitable immersion of the workers' movement in a sea of bourgeois and petty-bourgeois ideology, a situation that engenders the abiding temptation to transform the 'scientific notions of historical materialism' into their ideological travesties, and ensures that 'the struggle inside Marxist organizations' will 'last as long as the history of the workers' movement'. The 'decisive point at which this transformation makes itself felt', runs the decisive thesis of the projected book, 'is the class struggle and dictatorship of the proletariat', 'the critical point in the whole theoretical and political history of Marxism'. What happens when socialism closes its eyes to it? The sleep of revolutionary reason breeds the reformist dream of a 'true, classless democracy', the idea that it is possible to define 'democracy without taking its class content into account'. That dream, in turn, encourages the substitution of a politics of 'class collaboration' for a politics of class struggle. Class collaboration is the practical consequence of the theoretical delusion that the exploited can 'reform society while avoiding revolution' – or 'put bourgeois society in parentheses in order to create the future in its midst'.

Why can they not, at the price of a protracted war of position against their exploiters? Althusser's answer comes by way of his theorization of the ideological state apparatuses, proposed three years later in *Sur la reproduction*. The short form of it is that ideological state apparatuses are *state* apparatuses, and, as such, like courts, ministries, and death squads, part of the arsenal of the dictatorship *of the bourgeoisie*. The book contains, by the same token, his rebuttal of the PCF's

developing argument for ‘democratization’ of the capitalist state, later erected into an alternative to working-class dictatorship on the basis of a notion of ‘true democracy’ that the Party mobilized in a feeble *defence* of class dictatorship at Argenteuil. We shall glance at the theoretical premises of *Sur la reproduction* in a bit more detail later. Its main practical conclusion, restated in ‘Marx in his Limits’, speaks for itself: ‘If, one day in our future, the Communist Party and its allies find themselves in a position to win a majority in the legislative elections, they will need to bear in mind that ... without *seizing state power*, without *dismantling the state’s Repressive Apparatus* ... without a long struggle to smash the bourgeois Ideological State Apparatuses, Revolution is unthinkable.’

Althusser did not deliver his 1966 letter to the Party, or publish his other 1960s critiques of the developing Gallic Gotha Programme. The exception - the controversial 1970 paper on interpellation and the ideological state apparatuses culled from the otherwise posthumously released *Sur la reproduction* - was not really an exception, since the political intent of the book was lost on the vast audience of the paper, which seemed to most readers to plead the necessity of a long war of position inside the ISAs – that is, inside the capitalist state – not of smashing them along with the rest of it, in a long *post-revolutionary* struggle. Thus there was virtually no public record of Althusser’s post-Argenteuil bid to forestall French Communism’s seduction by the sirens of ‘true, classless democracy’. In English, this remains the case.

Why did Althusser duck a crucial political-theoretical fight? He ‘felt helpless in the face of realities like the Party’; he ‘felt even more helpless in the face of certain ideological misunderstanding-effects’ due to his status as ‘a very prestigious personage’; and, not least, ‘he was ill’, he says in explanation of Marx’s suppression of his *Critique* in ‘Marx in his Limits’ – which, like his previous decrials of his un-Marxist willingness to suppress his polemic, was also suppressed. Yet the later Althusser cannot fairly be accused of continuing to follow Marx’s bad example. Witness the second round of his fight for class dictatorship.

IV

In November 1977, a few months before the legislative elections that the French Communist Party and its allies were expected to carry, Althusser took the floor at a Venice conference organized by *Il Manifesto*, a far-left group pushed out of the PCI in 1969, to proclaim that Marxism was in crisis. He made his provocative thesis still more provocative by echoing a charge that Italian Socialism’s leading political philosopher, Norberto Bobbio, had been pressing the harder the closer the PCI and PCF came to power. Marxism did not ‘have ... a theory of the state, state power or the state apparatus’, Althusser declared before an audience of socialists and union activists from across Europe and even the USSR, repeating something he had been saying in private for at least a decade. The lack was partly to blame for Communism’s ‘tragic history’. One reason it had never been made good, he added, paraphrasing his abortive 1964 book on ‘the personality cult’, was that Stalin had murderously ‘snuffed out’ the theoretical crisis precipitated by his dogmatism, doing Marxist thought perhaps irreparable damage. Another was a baneful tendency to credit Marxism with a coherency and completeness simulated by *Capital*’s ‘fictitious theoretical unity’, but belied by the ‘contradictions and gaps’ that marked the book as they did the rest of Marx’s work.

This preview of ‘Marx in his Limits’ caused the predictable stir. The excitement was kept running at the desired pitch by a follow-up interview published in April in *Il Manifesto*’s daily of the same name. From then until September and beyond, in the context of a controversy over the state that had been agitating the Western European Left since 1973, Italian, French, and German-speaking socialists replied to Althusser in *Il Manifesto* and elsewhere. The proceedings of the Venice conference appeared in Italian, French and English; the interview and most of the replies were collected in books published in Italy and West Berlin, while a similar debate ran in the French Communist journal *Dialectiques*. Thus ‘Marx in his Limits’, if published in its turn, would have come as Althusser’s last word in a pan-European discussion kindled by a sampling of it and raging as he wrote it. In the event, his rejoinder was limited to a few pages on Marxism included in an Italian encyclopaedia in November 1978 – pages written before the fight had fairly begun. Its embattled protagonist

did not fully substantiate his 1977 charge about the rudimentary nature of the Marxist theory of the state until 'Marx in his Limits' appeared in 1994.

His defence of its rudiments was better developed, and already in the public domain. Moreover, he continued, as it were, to press the defence while pursuing the attack – consistently, since both advanced the same struggle against the party of the state. The Marx he defended was the one for whom the sole alternative to capitalist dictatorship was working-class dictatorship, and the state a set of apparatuses that maintained one to the exclusion of the other. This was the Marx who knew that 'the vocation of a Communist Party is not to "participate" in government, but to overturn and destroy the power of the bourgeois state'; indeed, that 'the Party, for reasons of principle, should ... keep out of the proletarian state as well'. But there was also the Marx who authorized the teleological historiography of the primacy of the productive forces, and, with it, a Stalinist or Social-Democratic negation or attenuation of class struggle. Where was *this* Marx's theory of the state? It lay in the blanks in the other's, the blanks that made his rudimentary theory rudimentary, the blanks partly filled in, notably, by those famous comments on the hand-mill, water-mill and steam-mill in *The Poverty of Philosophy*, the reductive treatment of the state in Volume Three of *Capital*, and the notorious 1859 *Preface*, but, above all, by the Marxian party of the state responsible for the tragic history of communism. It was materialized, no less, in the political practice of the putatively post-Stalinist Communist parties, whose attempts to distance themselves from their tragic history were hobbled by the ties that firmly bound them to it. One, from Althusser's standpoint, mattered more than all the rest: their rejection of working-class dictatorship; in positive terms, their adhesion to the bourgeois ideology of the (at least potentially) class-neutral state, viceroy of His Apolitical Majesty, the Economy. It was from this 'hyper-Leninist' standpoint, as his Communist adversaries saw the matter, combined – in their view, paradoxically – with an 'anti-Party movementism' bordering on anarchism, that Althusser led the combat *for* Marx's position on the state which alone makes his denunciation of its limits intelligible.

Hostilities were opened with Georges Marchais's January 1976 public confession that, in his 'personal opinion', talk of class dictatorship was 'outmoded' in democracies such as modern France. The PCF soon discovered that it was of the same mind as its General Secretary: its February Twenty-Second Congress duly approved, by the usual unanimous vote, his recommendation that the Party statutes be purged of all mention of the idea. Formally, execution of the modification was left to the Twenty-Third Congress. In the event, this gave opponents three years in which to pursue a quixotic attempt to persuade the rank-and-file not to take the step. Althusser bent himself to the task. In 1976-77, he pled the case for the dictatorship of the proletariat not just in the open, but in the limelight, in France and abroad, orally and in print. By mid-1976, his opposition to the turn was public knowledge from Barcelona to Berlin. In Paris, it was *common* knowledge – and front-page news.

The riposte to Marchais was launched, before the Twenty-Second Congress, by Etienne Balibar, acting, the opposing camp not unreasonably assumed, as the avant-garde of a small Althusserian-Communist army. Its presumed General unequivocally confirms, in *Les Vaches noires*, that he wholeheartedly approved of his younger colleague's forward defence. The public appearances that he began making shortly after the Twenty-Second Congress loudly broadcast the same message, captured in a quip with which he seems to have garnished all of them: disagreeing with the idea of class dictatorship, ran the one-liner borrowed from a stand-up comic, was like disagreeing with the law of gravity. The first of these talks, if we do not count his 1976 lecture on 'non-philosophy', delivered in Barcelona and Madrid, was given in Paris in April. Prevented by interference from the Party's upper echelons from speaking on the Twenty-Second Congress at the invitation of the Sorbonne's Communist Student Organization, the PCF's best-known philosopher capitalized on an invitation to its April book fair to present, along with his new book *Positions*, his position on the dictatorship of the proletariat; he shared the podium with Lucien Sève, the Party's quasi-official philosopher and a leading proponent of its turn. A year later, at a presentation of *Les Communistes et l'Etat* - a semi-official apology for the PCF's move by Sève

and two others - he presented it again, this time in a reply to the authors that he made from the floor, to wild cheering from a throng of young supporters. In the interim, in July 1976, he had returned to Barcelona and Madrid to deliver a long lecture on the theory of working-class dictatorship, inspiring a hostile Spanish commentator to reflect on the inordinate indulgence that the PCF was showing in not expelling him. He even managed, after stubborn effort, to deliver his Sorbonne lecture to the Communist Student Organization in December, despite the Party establishment's last-ditch effort to foil this 'veiled factional attack' by announcing its cancellation, and after braving a hail of leaflets unleashed by stalwarts of 'the line of the Twenty-Second Congress'.

Althusser was a 'theoretical personage whose every word counted', as 'Marx in his Limits' says of Marx; the events just mentioned drew crowds thousands strong. What he said at the first was reported in detail in the PCF's daily, which printed a surprisingly full, fair account of his argument to the effect that no socialist revolution could succeed without 'smashing the bourgeois state apparatus and replacing it with a revolutionary one'. (The book-fair talk also provoked an oral assault by Marchais, unleashed after Althusser had left - 'Do you want to abolish elections? Why cling to dogmas that are dead in our eyes?') A revised version of his Sorbonne lecture was issued as a short book in May 1977; more diplomatically worded than his other indictments of the Party's move - probably so as to seem a little less like a veiled factional attack - it, too, makes no secret of its author's conviction that the object of revolutionary politics is to seize state power and then 'democratize' its apparatuses by *dismantling* them. His July Madrid-Barcelona lecture, for its part, yielded a long text placed at the head of a 1978 Spanish collection of his writings; the main lines of his discussion of class dictatorship in 'Marx in his Limits', down to the concluding analysis of the antinomies of Gramsci's theory of hegemony, are all sketched in it.

In a word, by the time he sat down to write 'Marx in his Limits', Althusser had said and published enough against the prevailing PCF line to convince observers such as the sociologist Alain Touraine that he had become 'the leader, perhaps despite himself, of a left opposition at the heart of the PCF'. He had *written* enough to justify the same judgement two years earlier. Had *Les Vaches noires* been published as planned - early in his campaign around the dictatorship of the proletariat - it would have sufficed to set him up as what Touraine believed he had become towards the end of it: 'the source and potential leader of an "alternative" to the PCF's present politics'. So, at any rate, thought Balibar, who advised against the text's release on the grounds that it would thrust Althusser into an oppositional role which he lacked the 'means' and inner-Party support to sustain. He might fairly have said the same thing about 'Marx in his Limits' - or, for that matter, *Socialisme idéologique*.

Every thesis is a counter-thesis, Althusser affirms, which suggests that, before we say a word about the positions he was defending in 'Marx in his Limits', we should touch on those he was defending them against. The better known require no summary. Denouncing the 'trick theatre' of the theorists of 'force, pure and alone', 'Marx in his Limits' is manifestly replying to a *certain* Foucault, and, especially, his protégés among the then newly prominent *nouveaux philosophes*. The thesis that the political apparatus of the bourgeois state should be the object, not the *terrain*, of working-class class struggle, is advanced against Nicos Poulantzas and a still closer comrade-in-theoretical arms, Balibar, who had by 1977 begun defending a version of the Poulantzian position that he had only recently been storming: the idea that the capitalist state can be democratized from within - even, as he puts it in a later summary of his nascent disagreement with Althusser, that the very 'existence of a social movement "outside the state" is a contradiction in terms', so that the 'development of democracy beyond its class frontiers' does *not* imply 'the dismantling of the state apparatus'. The closing critique of Gramsci calls for a longer gloss, since it names only one of its targets. The others are the Italian Communist thinkers who had, since the mid-1960s, been engaged in an attempt to present the Gramscian notion of hegemony as an alternative to class dictatorship, and their French disciples, notably Christine Buci-Glucksmann, who criticized Althusser in the light of the Italians' reinterpretation of Gramsci.

The more obscure, and more central, polemic in 'Marx in his Limits' assumes a familiarity with odd debates on such

matters as the revolutionary potential of the French anti-riot police, and now forgotten arguments that made their way from *Les Communistes et l'Etat* into the discussion documents for the PCF's May 1979 Twenty-Third Congress. Since Althusser did not consider such material too humble for extended, if scornful, notice in 'Marx in his Limits', we should review it briefly here.

V

The tendency that Althusser had fought in the PCF since the 1960s was common to most West European Communist Parties. By the mid-1970s it had acquired a new name, Eurocommunism. Eurocommunism's distinguishing feature was the one Althusser had assigned 'ideological socialism': rejection of the idea that a state was necessarily the lynchpin of the dictatorship of a particular class in favour of the claim that it was possible to change the class character of certain states. In particular, the proletariat and its allies could use certain parliamentary democratic states – notably those in which the biggest Eurocommunist Parties, the PCI and the PCF, hoped to help form governments – as tools for establishing truly democratic rule. It could then use those democratized states to replace capitalism with socialism.

The Eurocommunist argument rebutted throughout most of 'Marx in his Limits' was thus not that the existing French state was not a class state. Quite the contrary: according to a theory on which the PCF had put its imprimatur in the mid-1960s, it was dominated by the boards of some thirty monopolistic firms that exploited most of the rest of the population in league with international capital. But, because these 'state monopoly capitalists' were numerically insignificant, they could be isolated by a 'Union of the French People', virtually all of whom shared an interest in chasing them from their state fiefdoms. This would be accomplished, after a Left victory at the polls, by 'pushing democracy to its limits' or transforming it into an 'advanced democracy' or a 'new democracy' (the formulas varied). There was no need to establish a violent class dictatorship to do so, or a power unrestrained by law: such forms had been mandated by specific historical conditions, notably those of the Russian Revolution, where only a minority had been for socialism and the Bolsheviks had confronted an armed dictatorship. Conditions in France were infinitely more auspicious. Thanks to a century and more of working-class struggle, representative democracy had imposed decisive legal constraints on state power. The monopolies respected them even under bourgeois democracy. Why should they respect them less under *advanced* democracy, where a large majority would see to their enforcement? Under such conditions, an absolute majority could be rallied to socialism before its construction began. There would then be no need to destroy the state, that of an already socialist populace; it could, rather, be continually democratized and 'revolutionized' from within, and thus transformed into an agent of the new order. Had Gramsci not shown that 'the conquest of state power is far rather the consequence than the cause of a class's dominant role'?

'Marx in his Limits' takes particular issue with two corollaries of the idea of 'democratizing' the state. That the actually existing democratic state served special interests because it had been commandeered by monopoly capital suggested that, by nature, democracy had a universal vocation. The suggestion had its Communist *locus classicus*, for Althusser, in an 'openly rightist, bourgeois' essay by François Hincker later dissolved into *Les Communistes et l'Etat* and distilled back out in 'Marx in his Limits', where it does yeoman's service, anonymously, as the archetypal bad example. The French state, Hincker said, albeit 'bourgeois', was also 'social'. It exercised 'genuinely democratic functions', and, as such, had authentic 'universal content'; 'smashing' it was in fact a matter of liberating its universal social functions from their bourgeois prison. Witness the fact that it rendered services which, 'taken separately', possessed 'universal use-value'. It 'built schools, roads, and hospitals', and ran courts which, while they *tended* to favour the dominant, also 'ensured, like it or not, a certain security, order, and calm'. Moreover, if the state exercised a 'political class constraint', it did so, 'first of all, by law', which by no means necessarily implied the use of violence. As for the officials who applied this essentially non-violent constraint – civil servants, magistrates, court officers, police – they were increasingly troubled by

the glaring, 'unbearable' 'class character' of their state, which thus harboured potential enemies in the 'very heart of its apparatus'. The last theme was a Eurocommunist shibboleth: the righteously indignant, even rebellious state agent, the riot policeman included, was a stock figure in the folklore of Eurocommunism, the short form of its argument against the orthodox Marxist thesis of the indivisibility of the class state. The space 'Marx in his Limits' devotes to minimizing it is an index of its popularity.

For certain Italian Eurocommunist theorists, 'democratizing' the state meant saving it from itself. Pitting, on Gramsci's warrant, the idea of a gradual conquest of power against the thesis that a revolutionary class had to destroy the existing state, they argued that the Party had, in its quest for hegemony, to work 'profound strategic transformations' in its relation to it. On Biagio De Giovanni's version of the argument, to which 'Marx in its Limits' pays conspicuous if anonymous attention, the task of the 'proletariat's party of government' was no longer 'to detach major sections of the ruling class from the state', let alone to smash it; it was to 'build democracy on state terrain', *recomposing* the society and state which the dominant class's 'political forms' tended to '*disaggregate*'. It was *within* the new, recomposed state that a 'transformation of the relations between classes' would commence. The passive support the PCI had already lent a Christian Democratic government was presumably proof that the beginning had already been made.

VI

The reader will find Althusser's response to these arguments in 'Marx in his Limits'. Rather than summarize it, let us outline the principles that found it. They are the founding principles of aleatory materialism as well. For it is by virtue of Marx's discovery of the necessity of class dictatorship – his main contribution to knowledge, he wrote in 1852 – that he belongs, according to Althusser, to the 'underground current'. Since Althusser's anti-teleological reconceptualization of it as the discovery of 'the necessity of contingency' grounds his own aleatory materialism, a glance at his thirty years' reflection on class dictatorship will provide us with the elements of an aleatory-materialist primer.

'The Underground Current' closes with a discussion of the two Marxian conceptions of the mode of production. The first, aleatory-materialist, has it that a mode of production originates in an 'aleatory encounter of independent elements'; it 'culminates in the theory of *primitive accumulation*'. The second, rooted in 'the necessity ... of the accomplished fact', is 'totalitarian, teleological and philosophical'. This discussion breaks off after a few pages. It is pursued in Althusser's first book, the 1959 *Montesquieu: Politics and History*.

Politics and History claims that Montesquieu anticipated the materialist Marx. One reason is that he rejected 'the problem of origins as absurd', and thought 'history without attributing to it an end'. He was 'probably the first person to do so before Marx'. What was gained thereby is demonstrated in the book's conclusion, which applies Montesquieu's anti-teleological principles to Montesquieu.

The Marquis de la Brède did not work his 'theoretical revolution', says this lesson in aleatory-materialist historiography *avant la lettre*, because he was a prophet of the revolutionary bourgeoisie. Contrary to the usual claim, precisely the bourgeoisie's, he was a man 'who looked towards the past'. Indeed, there *was* no revolutionary bourgeoisie to which he *could* have looked. Althusser makes the last point in a passage about evading the 'appearances of retrospective history' that unmistakably anticipates a famous warning in *For Marx* about writing history in the future anterior. Just as unmistakably, it rehearses the conclusion to 'The Underground Current'.

The most 'delicate point' in *Politics and History*, says its author in a 1959 letter, bears on a 'singular encounter' of two ideas about the late feudal French bourgeoisie: that the 'primary conflict' of the day pitted it against the nobles; and that, in this conflict, the king 'sided with' it, or 'should have or could have'. We shall return to the king. Let us first consider the 'difficult problem of the nature ... of the bourgeoisie'. It had to do with what Althusser calls, in 1983, the historiography of 'the accomplished fact', exemplified by the anachronistic tendency to think the early bourgeoisie as 'an *element predestined* to unify all the other elements of the mode of production'.

‘The biggest danger’, he goes on in 1959, ‘is to project onto the “bourgeoisie” of this period the image of the later bourgeoisie’. One has to ‘lend the *bourgeoisie* of absolute monarchy the traits of the later bourgeoisie in order to think it in this early period as a class radically antagonistic to the feudal class’. In reality, ‘nothing is more doubtful’ than that ‘the mercantile economy’ on which its ‘most advanced elements’ were ‘essentially dependent’ ‘was foreign to feudal society in principle’. Not only was the mercantile bourgeoisie not alien to the feudal order, it was an integral part of it: ‘the whole cycle of its economic activity ... remain inscribed *in the limits and structures of the feudal State*’. The 1959 letter goes so far as to suggest that one cannot here ‘speak of a bourgeois class’ at all, at least ‘as fundamentally antagonistic to the feudal class’. ‘The mercantile economy on which its power and pretensions are based is not radically at odds with the economic category of feudal production in the period’.

Who sowed the illusion that it was? *Montesquieu* names accomplices; ‘The Underground Current’ unmasks their ringleader. It is the author of the discussion of the mercantile economy in *Capital*, where ‘we encounter the great question of the *bourgeoisie*’. Here Marx forgets that he was the second person, after *Montesquieu*, to undertake to think history without attributing an end to it. He reverts to the ideology of the 1859 Preface, and, thus, the notion ‘of a mythical “decay” of the feudal mode of production and the birth of the bourgeoisie out of the midst of this decay’. ‘What proves’, Althusser asks in 1983 as he does in 1959, that the feudal bourgeoisie ‘was not a class of the feudal mode of production, a sign of the reinforcement rather than the decay of this mode?... What if the bourgeoisie, far from being the contrary product of the feudal class, was its... crowning perfection?’

The history lesson is also a lesson in politics. Feudal society, *Montesquieu* knows, obeys a ‘necessity whose empire is so strict that it embraces not only bizarre institutions which last, but even the accident ... contained in a momentary encounter’. He may even know why: the feudal constellation of institutions which lasts is crowned by one which ensures that it will *continue* to last, its ‘limits and structures’ intact, to the very moment of its dissolution. This guarantor of the necessity of feudal society’s least contingencies is its ‘State apparatus’, embodied in the king.

Yet the king is not the state. The lonely hour of His Majesty never comes; the ‘king is never alone’. The absolutist state, *Montesquieu* understands, is one in which ‘eminences and ranks’ prevail. The absolute monarch who forgets it comes up against the ‘rock’ of the aristocrats’ idea of their aristocracy: their ‘honour’, on which the monarchy runs the way a motor ‘runs on petrol’. Honour, for Althusser’s *Montesquieu*, is an idea corresponding to a force ‘above any laws, not just religious and moral ... but also political’. Law is another translation of this force; the law of the realm preserves a force above the law from encroachment by the king, the people, or an alliance of the two. It preserves the king into the bargain, planting ‘the rampart of the nobility’ between him and the people. The people, the ‘fourth *puissance*’ banished to the other side of the twin ramparts of honour and law, is absent from the hierarchical alliance of their exploiters, and only allusively present in *Montesquieu* himself. Its absence is all but absolute: the fourth *puissance* ‘haunt[s] the alliance of the other three as a memory does its loss: by its censorship’.

One sees, then, the mirage of retrospective history once dispelled, why the encounter of the two received ideas about the late feudal period is dangerous. The idea that the conflict at its heart pitted bourgeoisie against nobility, and that, in this conflict, the king ‘sided with’ the former, breeds the illusion that the king played one off against the other in order ‘to raise himself above’ these ‘two antagonistic classes’ – or ‘should have or could have’. That is, it encourages a ‘notion of ... the State’ according to which ‘a political power can be established outside classes and over them’. Marx, too, once entertained this illusion, writing in *The German Ideology* that in eighteenth-century France, where ‘aristocracy and bourgeoisie [were] contending for domination’, ‘domination [was] shared’. But that, in Althusser’s view, was the tribute he advanced to the un-Marxist myth of the state. Class domination, he saw soon thereafter, cannot be shared.

The reason lies in the very nature of domination. Grounded in exploitation, the ‘force above the law’ on which the state runs, says *Montesquieu*, is a *surplus* of force. This surplus measures the difference between the respective forces of ‘power and poverty’, between the violence of the exploiting classes on the one hand, and that of the ‘masses of the

exploited' on the other. Transforming it into laws that 'maintain and perpetuate' the domination of the exploiters, the State apparatus necessarily excludes the exploited – the 'force' of the exploited – from the force crystallized in the state. They are similarly excluded, or, better, 'made ... absent', by the force crystallized in the dominant ideology: for the ideology that provides the state's 'petrol' is *also* a realization of the excess violence that measures the ruling class's advantage in the struggle of the classes. This description, Althusser insists, applies to the feudal state as such, not, as might be imagined, to its more primitive forms alone. Absolute monarchy, according to *Montesquieu*, is the 'indispensable political apparatus' that the changing historical situation imposes on the underlying 'regime', a 'new political form required to maintain' the old 'regime of exploitation'. The regime itself would not change until the apparatus of domination that crowned it did – until 'certain *jours révolutionnaires*' smashed 'the limits and structures of the feudal State', shortening its royal representative by a head.

Whence the delicacy of the 'most delicate point' in *Politics and History*. It has to do with the "'bourgeois" contamination', Althusser says in his 1959 letter, 'of the Marxist idea of class relations'. Responsible for this contamination were the eighteenth century's 'reformists', the first to trade in the notion that 'absolute monarchy was set up *against the nobility*, and that the king counted on the *commoners* to balance the power of his feudal opponents'. What these early representatives of the long-standing tendency failed to see (along with a certain Marx) was that feudal society was, from first to last, a dictatorship of the aristocracy. What made their error delicate was the systematic transposition of it by their twentieth-century Communist heirs.

'Marx in his Limits' uses a term that Althusser introduced in a 1975 discussion of class struggle at the level of theory, 'conflictual difference', to name the concept that *Montesquieu* introduces, without the name, to think class struggle at the level of ideology and the state. It is the soul of Althusser's vision of class dictatorship or domination (the second word, the *Manifesto*'s, says 'Marx in his Limits', is 'a thousand times better' than the first, which Marx chose out of a 'taste for extremes'); it sums up, in a phrase, his quarrel with Eurocommunist visions of democratizing the state. Because the state results from the transformation of an *excess* of class force, the differential between the class struggle of the dominant class and all the others (friend or foe), it is by definition the preserve of the victors in the struggle. And it is such *whatever* the 'political form' through which the dominant exercise state domination: the dominion of the landed nobility persists under absolutism, that of the capitalist class is not necessarily diminished – the contrary generally holds – with the advent of parliamentary democracy. By the same token, dictatorship (in the usual political sense) and bourgeois democracy are both forms of capitalist 'dictatorship' (in Marx's sense). Reversing class domination is not a matter of changing such *forms*, but depends on securing a surplus of political, economic, and ideological force over a class adversary. Without that excess of force, there can be no question of springing 'structures and limits'.

An aleatory-materialist axiom affirms 'the primacy of the structure over its elements' 'once the encounter has been effected'. *Montesquieu* illustrates it. It asserts, against the teleological Marx or his stand-ins, that the feudal bourgeoisie is thoroughly *feudal*, not an embryo of bourgeois society gestating in a late feudal womb, because it is a subordinate element of a structure constituted by a feudal class dictatorship. Whether or not the latter idea was, in 1959, an element of a structure of thought that could be called aleatory-materialist is a question we shall here suspend.

VII

If an encounter is to give rise to 'a world', 'The Underground Current' affirms, 'that encounter must last; it must be, not a "brief encounter", but a lasting encounter, which then becomes the basis for all reality, all necessity, all Meaning and all reason. But the encounter can also not last; then there is no world.' *Politics and History* considers, from the standpoint of its result, the lasting encounter, such as the ones that gave rise to the worlds of feudalism or capitalism. But Althusser's overriding concern is the brief encounter: concretely, the one that engendered Soviet society, shakily based on a 'socialist

mode of production'. 'Socialism, too, can perish', he began warning in the mid-1960s, spelling out the thinly veiled thesis of his first books. The most important of the genealogies of aleatory materialism begins with it.

The brief encounter is symptomatic. Hegel, the idealist Montesquieu's heir, cannot properly account for worlds which *last* for reasons suggested by the fact that, as Althusser flatly affirms in the 1962 'Contradiction and Overdetermination', the 'logic of supersession' cannot account for Stalin's, or his successors', USSR. The materialist dialectic, the Althusserian-Marxist logic of 'overdetermination', *can*, because, like the materialist Montesquieu's dialectic, it conceives the social whole as a combination of relatively autonomous levels, one of which is determinant 'in the last instance'. Hence it need no longer dismiss Soviet 'terror, repression and dogmatism' as contingent 'survivals' superseded by a higher necessity, or, on Engels' variant, as negligible accidents 'between which' an imperious necessity 'picks its sovereign way'. Overdetermination can account for the 'necessity of these accidents' themselves, explaining how the 'terribly positive and active structured reality' bred by the 'circumstances' of a peculiar 'national and international conjuncture' managed to 'cling tenaciously to life ... after the Revolution and from then till now'. For 'tenaciously', let us read 'tenuously', since they are synonyms in the context. Why was this constellation of terribly bizarre institutions which had clung to life for decades in imminent danger of perishing?

The answer Althusser proposed in 1962, elaborated in *Sur la reproduction*, and never abandoned, was that the socialist state was running on capitalist ideological 'petrol'. It was an answer dictated by Montesquieu. He apparently knew – albeit 'blindly', Althusser said in his 1976 Barcelona lecture on class dictatorship – even more than that the feudal state was 'class violence transformed into law'; he knew it was violence transformed into *ideology* as well. One cannot comprehend the state, on Althusser's 1959 summary of Montesquieu's argument, if one considers only its 'nature' – in other words, its constitutional form, that which answers the question: Who holds power and how is it exercised? One must also consider its 'principle', the question of the 'condition' on which it can exercise power 'by law'. That leads from formal considerations 'into life'. For men to be 'lastingly subject' to a government, they must have a 'disposition' to it (*Sur la reproduction* speaks of an 'attitude'). Such a disposition can be brought about only by a principle capable of maintaining 'the intersection of the *nature* of the government (its political form) with the real life of men' (*Sur la reproduction* says 'an imaginary relationship to men's real conditions of existence'). The state runs on this principle, and on it alone, 'the way some motors will run only on petrol', as 'Marx in his Limits' repeats after *Montesquieu* (and as Marx does not, for he ignores the issue: that is his main limit). In a word, Montesquieu's feudal dictatorship is a 'nature-principle totality', his version – or Althusser's – of Gramsci's 'expanded' state.

Sur la reproduction adds that a state's ideological petrol fuels 'ideological state apparatuses' (ISAs), which 'realize' the 'state's ideology'; that such apparatuses and the fuel they run on are 'not materially grounded in the existence of the state', but in 'economic class exploitation', which, crucially, also breeds class ideologies *outside* the state's; and that, under capitalism, the ISAs transform such economic 'conflictual difference' (the concept is present, the term is not) into means of dominating these other ideologies, *exterior* to bourgeois ideology. They do so for a reason that explains the existence of the (rest of the) state as well: in a class society, the inherently conflictual relation between exploiters and exploited which presides over the 'combination' of elements known as an economic mode of production cannot maintain itself by economic means of domination alone. 'Indispensable to the survival of this combination', says Althusser in *Reading Capital*, is 'a certain *political* configuration', 'imposed and maintained' 'by means of material force (that of the State) and of moral power (that of the ideologies)'. Economic class struggle accordingly obeys the logic of the supplement: the relations of production/ exploitation that determine, in the last instance, the complex unity of the state depend for their survival on the state that derives from them, that is, on the supplementary political and ideological relations of domination which ensure their reproduction. Both *Sur la reproduction* and 'Marx in his Limits' call this the 'paradox' of the capitalist state. To end exploitation, it is first necessary to dismantle the state which, engendered by it,

presides over it – the lynchpin of the dictatorship that sustains the capitalist economic regime.

What enables an encounter of exploiters and exploited to last, then, is an economic, political, and ideological structure of domination that enables it to reproduce itself as a mode of production: a viable class dictatorship. Only after it has become capable of reproducing itself can it be said to *exist*. The same holds for its elements. As *Montesquieu* points out, the feudal bourgeoisie is not an element of capitalism that pre-exists capitalism; it comes into being *as* the capitalist bourgeoisie only with the production – that is, the reproduction – of the capitalist mode of production, which depends on the perpetuation of its victory in the class struggle. Class dictatorship is why history is not teleology.

The fact that the ISAs proceed from the ‘conflictual difference’ of economic class struggle is, from this point of view, essential. It does not preclude the possibility of a sometimes critically important struggle on their terrain. It does imply, however, that they remain, by definition, the terrain of the dominant, and thus that a struggle for ‘hegemony’ cannot be won until the class domination maintained by the state and all its apparatuses is reversed – that it is impossible to put a social formation ‘in parentheses in order to create the future in its midst’. This is the kernel of the critique of Gramsci in ‘Marx in his Limits’. But it by no means follows from it that, once domination is reversed, the battle to establish a new class dictatorship has been won; as a rule, it has just begun, because the ideologies and ideological apparatuses of the old order resist. Such is the lesson of the exemplary Althusserian example of the brief encounter.

It affirms, more concretely, that the failure of Soviet socialism represented the revenge of the pre-Revolutionary ISAs on the Revolution. That the conjunctural ‘circumstances’ surrounding the Russian Revolution did not just ‘survive’, but were ‘reactivated’ by a new structure that ‘ensured their survival’ thus means that the pre-Revolutionary ISAs were incorporated into the Soviet state by a CPSU become a party of the state, when its chief task should have been to lead, as the party of working-class dictatorship, the long class struggle – ‘without which Revolution is unthinkable’ – to smash the bourgeois ISAs in a confrontation with the Soviet state itself. It follows that the failure of the Bolshevik Revolution, cause and effect of the poverty of an idealist philosophy which reduced the historical dialectic to a progressive sequence of modes of production generated by the expansion of the productive forces, stemmed from the attempt to build socialism after stifling, ‘in the silences of the terror’, the embryonic Soviet working-class dictatorship. The ‘bastard or monstrous forms’ that resulted, attributable in part to “chance”, were still called ‘socialism’, declares ‘Marx in his Limits’, only because that had ‘become routine, or in order to deceive the popular masses’. Althusser had in fact long since come to the broader conclusion that socialism as such was a bastard form, not a mode of production in its own right. That thesis led on, in conjunction with his 1966-72 elaboration of the theory of the encounter first proposed in ‘Contradiction and Overdetermination’, to the materialism of the encounter.

VIII

‘Marx’s fundamental discovery, the topography’, envisages a ‘structure of domination’ – a society structured by a class dictatorship – as a ‘structure in dominance’: an overdetermined combination of irreducibly distinct levels dominated by one of them and determined in the last instance by the economy. Conceived against Hegelian-Marxist theorizations of the social whole as an expressive totality, each part of which reflects the contradiction informing the whole, the topography is necessarily also conceived against the corresponding teleologies of history. Unsurprisingly, Althusser’s alternative turns on explaining the constellation of the topography’s distinct, autonomous levels as the effect of the contingent combination of their distinct, separately evolving *histories*. It is a short step to the conversion of the topography into an instrument for explaining, in non-teleological fashion, the irruption of anything new. Thus Althusser can declare in a 1966 letter on the emergence of the unconscious that defining a ‘logic different from that of *genesis*’, according to which a thing has to ‘exist in some manner *before its own birth* in order to be born’, ‘amounts to the same thing as defining the specific forms of a materialist dialectic’ – precisely what the topography was invented to do.

The encounter was always, for Althusser, one of the specific forms of the materialist dialectic required by a topographical theory of the social structure. Moreover, he concluded, almost as soon as he had introduced his conception of the materialist dialectic in the 1962 'Contradiction and Overdetermination', that the theory of the encounter implied by the topography lent itself to explaining the emergence of things other than social formations, beginning with the theory of the encounter itself. In a 1963 letter, Althusser wryly makes his addressee declare that 'contingency, chance, or what Machiavelli calls *fortuna*' is 'the pre-Marxian concept that comes closest to what Lenin calls the encounter of the objective and subjective conditions of any practice whatsoever.... Knowledge, too, is only ever produced by an "exceptional" encounter ... in other words, it is produced by a historical conjuncture in which *several distinct practices* intervene: I can sense, Louis, that you are going to develop ... this point; I can already sense in your essay ['Contradiction and Overdetermination'] the imminence and, as it were, ineluctable necessity of this discovery.' Like 'Marx in his Limits', *Reading Capital* pursues the programme sketched here, illustrating the theory of the "exceptional" encounter' with respect to both the origins of capitalism and historical materialism.

'Marx's texts on primitive accumulation', Althusser declares at the end of his contribution to the book, 'constitute the material if not already the outline of ... the theory of the transition [from feudalism to capitalism]'. This earnest of things to come serves as the bridge between his own illustration of 'the necessity of contingency', which bears on the 'combination' that produced Marxist theory, and Balibar's, about the 'encounter' that produced capitalism. A year later, Althusser drew up a balance-sheet of these and related attempts to spell out, for Marx, the implications of Marx's fundamental discovery. They constituted, he said, a 'theory of the encounter', in unpublished notes that assimilate the concept of the 'conjunction' to the Spinozist 'singular essence', and refer, in passing, to 'Epicurus, the clinamen, Cournot' and the 'theory of the swerve'. A geneticist might be forgiven for concluding that, in the theory of the encounter, the *materialism* of the encounter existed, at least 'in some manner', before its own birth.

Nowhere are the affinities between the anti-finalism of earlier and later Althusserianism more striking than in the chapter on primitive accumulation in *Reading Capital*. In the transitional period between feudalism and capitalism, on Balibar's account of Marx's account of it, the 'unity of a conjuncture' throws up elements whose 'encounter', in the event of a happy 'find'... coalesces in a structure that is both distinct from the one to which they previously belonged and, 'once [the new structure] has been constituted', determinant of them. It is thus 'necessary' with respect to these elements, once they come under its 'jurisdiction'. Its necessity is not, however, dictated by the old structure, which really 'dies out as such' when the new one is formed. Nor is it inscribed in the elements the new structure 'combines', which 'have different and independent origins'; they 'become its effects' only after their encounter imposes its necessity on their contingency. This contingency, finally, 'does not imply chance', a statement which seems to mean that the elements combined in the new structure are, not accidentally, combinable.

A world comes about, in 'The Underground Current', when atoms falling parallel to one another in the void collide and pile up in consequence of an infinitesimal swerve called the clinamen. 'Swerve' engenders '*the form of order* and the *form of beings* whose birth is induced by this pile-up, determined as they are by the *structure* of the encounter; whence, once the encounter has been effected (but not before), the primacy of the structure over its elements; whence ... what one must call an *affinity* and a complementarity of the elements that come into play in the encounter, their 'readiness to collide-interlock'". 'No determination of these elements can be assigned, Althusser adds, except by *working backwards* from the result to its becoming'.

The geneticist error consists in assuming that this result came about before it did, or that it had to. Perpetrators of the error retrospectively obliterate the difference between the 'several distinct ... elements engendered in the previous historical process by different *genealogies* that are independent of each other and can, moreover, be traced back to several possible "origins"', Althusser says in 1967. Only when atoms 'destined to encounter each other' combine or 'take hold', affirms 'The Underground Current', do they 'enter the realm of Being that they inaugurate [and] constitute *beings* ... in

short, there emerges in them a structure of Being or of the world that assigns each of its elements its place, meaning, and role, or, better, establishes them as “elements of.”” Whence this 1966 warning about the perils of the retrospective illusion, a summary of Althusser’s 1960-65 account of the emergence of Marxism as the ‘surprise’ of its prehistory, not its ‘goal’: ‘In 1845, there appears something radically new ... under the explosive impact of the combination of [its] diverse elements ... the old *ideological* problematic was shattered, and a new, *scientific* problematic irrupted from its disintegration. ... That certain concepts of the old ideological problematic took their place in the new one in no way affects our thesis: for we know that a concept is theoretical only as a function of the *theoretical* system in which it is inscribed, and which assigns it its place, function and meaning.’

Does this warning about the transformative power of the combination apply to Althusser’s early concept of the transformative power of the combination? Or does his ‘late’ concept of the encounter preserve the elements of its predecessor intact? *Reading Capital*, echoing *For Marx*, affirms that Marx’s topography differs from idealist conceptions of the whole in that it is a *Verbindung* or ‘structure which combines’ autonomous levels constituting *Verbindungen* in their turn. ‘The elements defined by Marx’, Althusser writes in 1966, ‘are “combined”; I prefer to say (to translate the term *Verbindung*) are “conjoined” in “taking hold” in a new structure. This structure can only be thought, in its irruption, as the effect of a conjunction.’ ‘Conjuncture means conjunction’, explains his last book, ‘that is, an aleatory encounter of elements.’ If the contingent or aleatory encounter is the defining concept of aleatory materialism, it would seem to follow, late-Althusserianism had taken hold as the ‘surprise’ of its prehistory by 1962.

As for the metaphor of the ‘take’ (*prise* or *sur-prise*), introduced in 1965 by way of that pun, it might be said to have ‘taken hold’ in Althusser’s 1966 ‘Three Notes on the Theory of Discourses’ – if it were not that this text assimilates it to the topography proposed in *For Marx*. The unconscious, ‘Three Notes’ argues, is realized in articulation with ideology: when it comes together with ideological structures with which it has ‘affinities’, it abruptly ‘takes hold’ the way mayonnaise does (in French). This *prise* is said to ‘call for a type of reflection ... in every respect similar to the one by means of which Marx situates the different instances and thinks their articulation’. It is also similar to the one by means of which Althusser thinks their disarticulation: *For Marx*, where the mayonnaise is present in its absence, evokes the ‘fusion’ into ‘a ruptural unity’ of the ‘circumstances’ and ‘currents’ that crystallize in social revolutions. Ruptural unity or ‘take’: from the eggs’ point of view, it is much the same thing.

IX

But not every ruptural unity takes; there are, as it were, mis-takes, such as revolutions that fail to produce viable class dictatorships. And not every encounter fuses in the ruptural unity thanks to which it can take *place*; most encounters are virtual or utopian, that is, non-encounters. Althusser’s long reflection on the first idea (the exemplary example of the ‘swerve’ which takes or not, in the ‘late’ terminology of 1966) was assigned a new place, meaning and role by the late theoretical system centred on the second (imaged as the rain of atoms falling side-by-side in the void, except when the clinamen induces a ‘pile-up’). The transformation was catalyzed by an encounter with his own early thought as echoed in Gilles Deleuze’s and Félix Guattari’s Epicurean variation on Balibar’s variation on the ur-Althusserian theme of the necessity of contingency.

‘The encounter’ that engendered capitalism, Deleuze and Guattari write in their 1972 *Anti-Oedipus*, generously quoting Balibar’s study of primitive accumulation in Marx, ‘might not have taken place, with the free workers and money-capital existing “virtually” side-by-side’. The proof is that ‘great accidents were necessary, and amazing encounters that could have happened elsewhere, or before, or might never have happened ... to ... fashion a new machine bearing the determinations of the capitalist socius’. This Deleuzian conclusion was scarcely the surprise of its Althusserian prehistory; the surprising thing is that Althusser did not state it first. Hardly was it stated for him than he formulated its premises in *Livre sur le communisme* and *Livre sur l’impérialisme*. We shall sketch the most important in closing. Readers

of 'The Underground Current' will decide whether and to what extent they underpin the materialism of the encounter.

They are bound up with the question of the USSR. 'Ensuring the survival' of the pre-Revolutionary ISAs, Stalin's party and state had, on Althusser's analysis, ensured the demise of Soviet working-class dictatorship; yet he maintained, through *Sur la reproduction* and beyond, that Soviet society was based on a 'socialist mode of production'. The problematic implication was that a mode of production could be reproduced by a state apparatus inimical to it. By 1973, the problem has disappeared. 'There is no such thing', *Livre sur l'impérialisme* contends, 'as a socialist mode of production'; socialism is a contest between co-existing elements of the capitalist and communist modes of production. The argument is elaborated by way of another about the transition from feudalism to capitalism. The heart of it is the Deleuzian-Althusserian claim that capitalism might not have happened. The stake of it is the idea that communism might never happen.

We treat the victory of capitalism as inevitable, according to *Livre sur l'impérialisme*, because, confronted with its results, we approach them as the historian does: 'we always reason on the basis of the accomplished fact'. Yet history itself gives the lie to this 'fetishism of the *fait accompli*'. Regarded with an eye to its uncertain unfolding, it shows, rather, that a mode of production 'can fail to exist, come into existence but perish as soon as it appears, or, on the contrary, grow stronger and pursue its historical destiny'. Thus 'the capitalist mode of production died several times before "taking hold" on the feudal (or other) modes of production', as in the thirteenth-century Po Valley. Whence a first, methodological principle: the object of materialist history should be, not the accomplished fact, but its *accomplishment*. 'How', asks *Livre sur l'impérialisme*, 'did the accomplished fact become one'?

Everything that is is accomplished fact: '*Die Welt ist alles, was der Fall ist ...* everything that comes about, everything that is the case, everything that falls'. More exactly, the world is everything that succeeds in reproducing itself, since 'existence is self-reproduction'; and everything that happens is part of the history of the world. Yet not everything that happens is 'historic', and, 'paradoxically, history itself' judges what is. Its judgements take the form of 'the results of the class struggle', that is, the 'victory of the dominant class'. Historic are events which give rise to such victories. Better, such events give rise to what counts as historic, for there is no measure for them outside themselves: 'the measure of the event is measureless', says *Livre sur le communisme*, after Lenin. This means, in particular, that they give rise to their own elements, beginning with the victorious and defeated class. Whence a second key principle, simultaneously political and theoretical. The class struggle, *Livre sur l'impérialisme* repeats after the 1972-73 'Reply to John Lewis', has primacy over the contending classes. It is because exploitation 'is the case' that there is a dominant class, whose class struggle commences with, and essentially consists in, the fact that it exploits. Similarly, exploitation engenders the exploited classes, whose usually defensive class struggles originate in their resistance to it. 'The Underground Current' talks, more cryptically, about the 'priority of the occurrence, of the *Fall*, over all its forms', and 'the primacy of the encounter over the forms to which it gives birth'. The contingent encounter which combines 'atoms' in a 'world', it adds, 'confers their reality upon the atoms themselves'; before the encounter, there is only 'the non-world that is merely [their] *unreal* existence'.

How, then, did the accomplished fact of capitalism become an accomplished fact? 'In a certain sense', Althusser affirms in 1973, 'the encounter of the owners of money ... and free labourers ... is sufficient response to the question'. In another, as we have seen, it is not, for a reason stated in *Sur la reproduction*: 'the "duration" of a given social formation dominated by a given mode of production ... depends ... on the "duration" of the class state'. Both ideas beg translation into the language of the aleatory materialist encounter which lasts, or fails to – if they are not the original of which aleatory materialism is the translation.

What Althusser learnt from *Anti-Oedipus* bore, however, less on the accomplishment of accomplished facts than on the non-accomplishment of what has failed to come about. 'The existence of a thing is a result,' *Livre sur le communisme*

proclaims, 'and this result is not pre-formed in the state of affairs preceding the existence of the thing.' So ran the alternative proposed by the 'theory of the encounter' to the geneticist logic which has it that a thing has somehow to exist 'before its own birth in order to be born'. But the anti-geneticism of the theory of the encounter, if it did not quite reason on the basis of accomplished facts, nevertheless sets out from the fact of their existence – as Balibar's Marx writes the history of the process that produced capitalism on the 'basis of knowledge of [its] result'. The materialism of the encounter, for which *die Welt ist alles, was der Fall ist*, also reasons backwards from the 'Faktum', the 'that is just how it is' of existence. It does so, however, in the awareness that every *Fall* stems from a 'fall' that endows a thing with an existence comprising an exception to the rule of its non-existence – as capitalism is, in *Anti-Oedipus*, an 'amazing' exception to the state of affairs in which free workers and money-capital exist 'virtually' side-by-side, in a void defined by their non-encounter. Non-existence, in other words, is, for the Althusser of 1973, the state in which a thing is normally held, so that its existence must be conceived as a result of the always exceptional encounter of elements whose surprising fusion ceases to prevent it from appearing. *Livre sur l'impérialisme* introduces this lesson in more familiar terms: 'In socialism, the conditions for the non-existence of communism are all met, and there for all to see ... they are the still existing elements of the capitalist mode of production. ... As for those who think that the game has already been won....' Althusser's conclusion, formulated, as it happens, on 26 August 1973, might be taken to mark the moment of his turn to aleatory materialism proper: 'The secret of the historical existence of existent modes of production ... is to be sought less in the accomplished fact of the conditions of their existence than in the annulled, because non-accomplished fact of the conditions of non-existence of the same modes of production (for these conditions have sometimes been the death of them).'

It was about the same time that he declared that the *Programme commun* was a lure. That is, perhaps, reason enough not to read the first half of the present volume first. When all the evidence is in, the conclusion may well be that the battle for working-class dictatorship chronicled in it was fought from aleatory-materialist positions fully explained only in the second.

Berlin and Yerevan, January 2006

'ISBMP?' 213; *LCW* 38: 319, 380; *SISS* 4; *THC* 170; *FM* 200; *POE* 36ff., 54ff.

'Conversation avec Richard Hyland', A46-05.04, p. 5.

'ISBMP?' 215-6; *POE* 188, 93.

RC 125-6; *FM* 108; *SR* 244-7.

FM 197-8; 'ISBMP?' 215.

Besides 'The Underground Current', *FM*, and Althusser's correspondence with Navarro, 'Philosophy and Marxism' ventriloquizes 'LP', *ESC*, 'Au lecteur latino-américain' (A30-02), *Initiation à la philosophie, Introduction à la philosophie* (A25-03ff.), and 'TP'. The Spanish version of the text, unlike the published French version translated below, also incorporates an unexcelled summary of Althusser's critique of historicism, taken from 'Entretien donné à Gretzky, 20 janvier 1973' (A46-02.04).

Letter of 25 December 1985 to Fernanda Navarro.

Antonio Negri, 'Notes on the Evolution of the Thought of the Later Althusser', trans. Olga Vasile, *Postmodern Materialism and the Future of Marxist Theory*, eds. Antonio Callari and David F. Ruccio, Hanover, New Hampshire, 1996, pp. 51-68.

Gregory Elliott, 'Ghostlier Demarcations', *Radical Philosophy*, no. 90, 1998, p. 28.

POE 33; 'Notes sur Lucrèce', A58-02.16 (notes on Francis Wolff's master's thesis on Lucretius).

Letter of 19 July 1973 to Étienne Balibar.

Roger Garaudy, letter of 14 February 1966 to Rochet, PCF Archives. See my Introduction to *THC*, pp. xxiv-xxxi.

'La conjoncture, 4 mai 1967', A11-03.01, p. 2; *LF* 693-4.

'Lettre aux camarades du Comité central d'Argenteuil', A42-04.01, p. 20 (forthcoming in *Historical Materialism* in William Lewis's English translation); 'THC' 297-8; letter of 12 July 1966 to Guy Besse.

VN 55, 36.

SISS 5, 12-19, 25-8.

Waldeck Rochet, *Le marxisme et les chemins de l'avenir*, Paris, 1966, pp. 20-7; *SR* 139.

POE 31ff., 50ff.

Letter of 14 August 1966 to Michel Verret; Norberto Bobbio, 'Is There a Marxist Doctrine of the State?' [1975], *Which Socialism?*, ed. Richard Bellamy, trans. Roger Griffin, Cambridge, 1986, p. 51; 'CM' 216-20; 'Aliénation et culte de la personnalité', A3-04.01, pp. 17, 23. Bobbio lost no time launching the ongoing campaign to represent Althusser's position as a post-Marxist defence of the 'autonomy of politics' ('Marxism and Socialism' [February 1978], *Which Socialism?*, p. 173).

Il Manifesto, ed., *Power and Opposition in Post-Revolutionary Societies*, London, 1979; 'MCTF'; 'MT'.

'Extracts from Althusser's "Note on the ISAs"' (1976), trans. Jeremy Leaman, *Economy and Society*, 12, 1983, p. 431; 'MCTF' 290.

Thierry Pfister, 'L'abandon de la dictature du prolétariat est critiqué au sein même du P.C.F.', *Le Monde*, 25-26 April 1976, p. 1. A German newspaper not known for its excessive interest in Gallic Communism took the trouble to warn its readers that the philosopher might be conspiring with KGB chief Yuri Andropov. Harry Hamm, 'Kritik aus der Partei an Marchais?', *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 28 April 1976, p. 4.

VN 55; Alain Wasmès, 'Les Communistes et l'État', *l'Humanité*, 1 April 1977, p. 4; Claude Prévost, 'Quelques impressions (fugitives) sur un débat', *l'Humanité*, 2 April 1977, p. 3; 'Projet d'intervention à un débat', A23-02.02; Manuel Vazquez Montalban, 'Althusser y *El Correo*', *Triunfo*, no. 703, 17 July 1976, p. 12; Étienne Balibar, letter [December 1976?] to the Secretary of the History-Philosophy Cell of the Communist Student Organization's Sorbonne Branch; Gérard Molina and Yves Vargas, *Dialogue à l'intérieur du PCF*, Paris, 1978, p. 34.

POE 53; Georges Bouvard, 'Débat sur la philosophie', *l'Humanité*, 24 April 1976, p. 3; Thierry Pfister, 'M. Louis Althusser met en garde contre "le risque de déferlement droitier"', *Le Monde*, 25-26 April 1976, p. 7; "On the Twenty-Second Congress of the French Communist Party", *New Left Review*, no. 104, July-August 1977, pp. 3-22; 'Algunas cuestiones de la crisis de la teoría marxista', *Nuevos Escritos*, Barcelona, 1978, pp. 9-54.

Alain Touraine, 'Les dangereuses illusions de Louis Althusser', *Nouvel Observateur*, no. 706, 22 May 1978, p. 56. The remark was partly inspired by an Althusserian denunciation of the Party's resemblance to the 'bourgeois state and military apparatus', itself inspired by a harsher denunciation in VN. See Althusser, [Étienne Balibar and Jean-Pierre Lefebvre], 'What Must Change in the Party', trans. Patrick Camiller, *New Left Review*, no. 109, May-June 1978; Étienne Balibar, letter of 20 September 1976 to Althusser.

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