

Aleatory Materialism: Louis Althusser and the Necessity of Contingency



Ross Speer
The Queen's College

Thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of
DPhil in Politics in the Department of Politics and International Relations at
the University of Oxford

Trinity Term 2018

99 863 words

Abstract

This thesis examines the philosophy of aleatory materialism formulated by Louis Althusser. Aleatory materialism is an attempt to conceptualise history as open-ended but nevertheless amenable to scientific inquiry.

Althusser argued that theories of history which supposed their object had a fixed direction or *telos* rested on unscientific premises. Such theories were premised on circular reasoning. By taking particular patterns of events to be universal and timeless, those particular patterns could only be explained by pre-existing themselves. Consequently, such 'origin' categories were exempt from requiring explanation. In this way, subjective values were introduced into supposedly objective theories to provide not scientific comprehension but legitimation for particular forms of social power. A scientific theory must dispense with first movers without simultaneously making itself unable to explain change at all.

The way out of this impasse, Althusser argued, was to treat all social forms as contingent, rather than necessary, outcomes. Social structures included strategies and institutions to secure their continued reproduction. They were, however, unable to totally suppress the contingency that initially gave rise to them. It is because of contingency that the laws governing human behaviour can change. Social systems can transition into new systems comprised of new sets of laws. No particular configuration is destined to arise or persist indefinitely. Althusser showed that it is possible to accept both that history is amenable to scientific inquiry and that it is an open system, with a future that is not preordained but over which the actions of agents have a genuine influence. In doing so, this theory demonstrates how teleological theories are mechanisms of justification for prevailing forms of social power, by which they portray themselves as inevitable and natural outcomes, not accurate accounts of history.

Short Table of Contents

1. Introduction	1
2. Philosophy and Science	31
3. Three Shifts	75
4. Aleatory Materialism	119
5. Conclusion	189
6. Bibliography	193

Long Table of Contents

1. Introduction	1
1.1 Argument	5
1.2 Structure	6
1.3 Literature	8
2. Philosophy and Science	31
2.1 Theory of Theoretical Practice	32
2.1.1 Humanism and Empiricism	37
2.1.2 The Althusserian Circle	42
2.1.3 Science and Ideology	44
2.2 Class Struggle in Theory	47
2.2.1 The Persistence of Philosophy	52
2.2.2 A Defence of Class Struggle in Theory	55
2.3 Structure and Conjuncture	59
2.3.1 Structural Causality and Overdetermination	62
2.3.2 The Problem of Transitions	65
2.3.3 Towards a Resolution	67
2.4 Conclusion	71
3. Three Shifts	75
3.1 The Critique of Materialism	76
3.1.1 Idealism and Materialism	76
3.1.2 Origins	81
3.1.3 Dialectical Materialism	86
3.2 Towards a New Materialism	98
3.2.1 Process Without a Subject or Goal	98
3.2.2 A New Practice of Philosophy	101
3.3 The Epistemological Break	107
3.4 Conclusion	115
4. Aleatory Materialism	119
4.1 Aleatory Materialism in the History of Philosophy	120
4.1.1 Some Methodological Considerations	120
4.1.2 The Underground Current of Aleatory Materialism	126
4.2 Concepts of Aleatory Materialism	138
4.3 Necessity and Contingency	145
4.4 Two Concepts of History	153
4.5 Problems of a Science of History	159
4.5.1 Causal Laws and the Possibility of a Science of History	159
4.5.2 Relations of Production and the Last Instance	169
4.6 A Theory of Transitions	176
4.6.1 The Brenner Thesis	177
4.6.2 An Aleatory Theory of Transitions	182
4.7 Conclusion	187
5. Conclusion	189
6. Bibliography	193
6.1 Primary Sources	193
6.2 Secondary Sources	196

1. Introduction

An understanding of history as following a predetermined trajectory or having a meaning is a prevalent one. The view that ‘the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice’, inscribed on Washington’s Martin Luther King Memorial, continues to inspire those who seek a better world. The label ‘progressive’ is applied, in contemporary political discourse, to those who run with this tide rather than against it. Claims of this kind are common to the heirs of the Enlightenment. For every liberal who has believed neoliberalism is the apex of social organisation, there have been Marxists who thought the instability of capitalism must eventually give way to the serenity of communism. Few would deny upsets happen. Just as Virginia Woolf remarked that the First World War brought classical liberalism’s Belle Époque to a halt ‘like a chasm in a smooth road’, so the Great Recession shattered illusions in the power of neoliberalism’s Great Moderation to tame capitalism’s explosive tendencies once and for all.¹ Yet the belief that history will resume its course soon enough, relegating such events to mere blips, endures. Recent political shocks in the United Kingdom and United States are thought of as mere interludes in the perpetual peace promised by globalisation. The only question is how short we can make them.²

A vision such as this is a powerful justificatory tool in the arsenal of any ideology. To work against it is to try to resist the very direction of history, painful in the short term and pointless in the long run. For Marxists, it has generally acted not as a defence of the present but as the promise of a different future. Beyond the market-based coercions of capitalism, defended by the raw force of the state, lay a realm beyond scarcity, competition, drudgery, and repression, a realm in which humans could finally flourish unencumbered by external compulsions. Against the utopian socialists that preceded them, Marx and Engels sought to justify this goal as not just a new ethical project to be realised—‘not ... an *ideal* to which reality [will] have to adjust itself’—but something inscribed in the fabric of history itself.³ Historical materialism showed how history proceeded through stages, the last of which would be communism. A scientific understanding of history demonstrated that emancipation was, sooner or later, inevitable.

Science purports to unveil causal mechanisms, and in doing so predict their consequences. History was a law-governed process, on this reading, and a proper understanding of these laws could show us what their result will be. But if laws dictated

¹ Virginia Woolf, ‘The Leaning Tower’, in *The Essays of Virginia Woolf: 1933–1941*, ed. by Stuart N. Clarke (London: The Hogarth Press, 2011), vi, 259–83 (264). For an example of such a view of the Great Moderation see Robert E. Lucas, ‘Macroeconomic Priorities’, *American Economic Review*, 93:1 (2003), 1–14.

² Edward Luce, ‘Trump Will Be Much More than a Footnote in Obama’s “arc of History”’, *Financial Times*, 28 June 2018 <<https://www.ft.com/content/6d339f8c-7a2e-11e8-8e67-1e1a0846c475>> [accessed 12 July 2018].

³ Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, ‘The German Ideology’, in *Marx-Engels Collected Works: Marx and Engels, 1845–1847* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1976), v, 19–539 (49).

what agents would do—what they would create in history—then in what sense is self-determination possible? What one will do is fated from the outset. If the social world is amenable to scientific understanding, then the possibility of affecting the course of history seems to disappear. If we cannot make meaningful choices about what we do, then self-determination cannot pertain. The possible conflict between emancipation and science is ‘one of the great unresolved tensions bequeathed to contemporary thought’.⁴

In its dual adherence to an emancipatory future and to science, Marxism has perhaps experienced this problem most acutely amongst its competitors. It has proved particularly vulnerable in its claim that communism will be a necessary outcome of capitalism. Such a view entails that things could be other than they are; and yet most of the time the world seems, in the main, stubbornly static. People do not, generally speaking, act in the kinds of ways that facilitate communist social relations, but capitalist ones. Capitalism appears in rude health, ideologically if not always economically, with no systemic alternative on the agenda anywhere. Predictions of capitalism’s imminent collapse have been frequently made, and just as frequently rubbished. As Frederic Jameson has remarked, ‘it is easier to imagine the end of the world than to imagine the end of capitalism’.⁵ The notion of the trajectory of history as preordained functions more compellingly as a justification of the present than it does as a guarantee of an alternative future.

The idea that a science of history will show its necessary path—with competing theories arguing over what that path is—may not, however, be as scientific as it initially appears. Theories of history that make these claims rely on positing a fixed element that governs the process, an element immune to the influence of the process and thus outside of it. Which element assumes this external governing role tends to be, from a scientific point of view, arbitrary. It defies explanation or, better, is excluded from requiring one. Such theories are exercises in begging the question. As Ellen Wood argues, ‘since historians first began explaining the emergence of capitalism, there has scarcely existed an explanation that did not begin by assuming the very thing that needed to be explained. Almost without exception, accounts of the origin of capitalism have been fundamentally circular’.⁶ Capitalism is the natural outcome of human nature or the forward march of forces of production. In some way it was always there, buried beneath the fetter of pre-capitalist social forms, just waiting to emerge. From a political standpoint, however, these starting points are readily explicable: they reflect the values of the adherent. By excluding one part from explanation, and using that part to explain the rest, it is simple to show things could not have been, and could not be, otherwise. In doing so, such theories contravene the conventional understanding of science as an objective discourse by introducing a normative standard. Adjudicating between theories becomes a matter of arguing over the nature of beginnings that are impervious to empirical

⁴ Adrian Johnston, *Prolegomena to Any Future Materialism: The Outcome of Contemporary French Philosophy* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2013), I, 109. See Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. by Paul Guyer and Allen Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 484–88.

⁵ Fredric Jameson, ‘Future City’, *New Left Review*, II, 21 (2003), 65–79 (76).

⁶ Ellen Meiksins Wood, *The Origin of Capitalism* (London: Verso, 2002), 3–4.

substantiation.

Such is my interest in Louis Althusser and his aleatory materialism in particular. In this thesis, I examine Althusser's philosophy of aleatory materialism as an attempt to provide foundations for a science of history. With aleatory materialism, Althusser sought to show how the causal mechanisms a theory of history purports to unveil are laws *in* history and not laws *of* history. Far from being a retreat from science only this view, he argued, can avoid arbitrary starting points and thus the intrusion of subjective values into an objective discourse.

Capitalism is not inscribed in what preceded it. It is not a natural outcome, destined to emerge as one stage, perhaps the final stage, in history's grand sweep. On the contrary, it is a *contingent* result that may not have been. Correspondingly, achieving emancipation may be assisted by knowledge of history, but to suggest it is guaranteed by history is to make an unjustified inference. Agents are not destined to act in ways that facilitate emancipation. In general, they act in ways that are rewarded by the social context in which they exist—and trying to alter that context profoundly will likely rarely appear as the most rational option. But nor are those agents condemned to the permanence of the present. Contingency is as true about the future as it is about the past. If capitalism may not have been, then it is at least possible that it may not continue to be. History might take many paths. Just as capitalism might continue, so there may also be multiple post-capitalist possibilities: '*it all depends*', as Althusser said.⁷ Every social form has its own necessities, but the only overarching necessity of history is the necessity of contingency.

In making these arguments, Althusser aimed to dislodge a certain way of thinking about historical materialism that suggested history in general, and capitalism in particular, would proceed in a certain direction. One need not make any formal declaration for aleatory materialism in order to accept this. Equally, however, one need not explicitly avow a teleological standpoint to operate with it as a background assumption. Aleatory materialism is more about exercising the leftovers of an Enlightenment triumphalism that remained at the heart of Marxist thought for most of the twentieth century than it is about erecting a new and exotic method. The shadow of Marxism's Hegelian heritage was long, Althusser thought, and often manifested itself in subtle ways that distorted social science. The task of the materialist philosopher was to root out those methodological errors and to show them up for what they were.

Althusser is not unique in formulating historical materialism on these grounds. He argued that Marx and Engels had done so, if inconsistently. Nevertheless, he has, in my view, diagnosed the problem and suggested an alternative in an interesting and novel way that is worthy of our attention, one that supplements and clarifies more than it replaces other accounts that proceed along the same lines. There are, at least, three

⁷ Louis Althusser, 'Philosophy and Marxism', in *Philosophy of the Encounter: Later Writings, 1978–87*, ed. by François Matheron and Oliver [sic] Corpet, trans. by G. M. Goshgarian (London: Verso, 2006), 251–89 (263). See Peter Frase, *Four Futures: Life After Capitalism* (London: Verso, 2016).

major reasons for investigating aleatory materialism today. The first is that confidence in the possibility of a general theory of social structures is low, and the belief that historical materialism constitutes such a theory even lower. Treating the social world as an intelligible whole, and in doing so claiming objective knowledge of it, is not just inaccurate, so the claim goes, it breeds totalitarianism.⁸ Subjective perspectives, based on an infinite diversity of individual experiences, not objective determinants, felt in common and operational irrespective of knowledge or belief, were the real grounds of history and the proper object of emancipatory political action.⁹ The fragmentation of grand narrative theorising and the abandonment of realism in critical social theory has served to fuel the impression that there is no comprehensive alternative to capitalism.¹⁰ Not only do I think historical materialism is a viable candidate for such a general theory, I think it can be formulated in ways that demonstrate its superiority over its competitors, and that Althusser's work is a crucial component for doing so. Aleatory materialism asserts that apparent permanence is in fact always fleeting, that every social form is temporary and unstable. How it will change is open to influence—including in ways which may be undesirable. The second reason is that while Marxism is experiencing a small but discernible resurgence, otherwise excellent contemporary Marxist scholarship is not always as attentive to the issues Althusser raises as it should be.¹¹ Althusser's work acts here not as a revolution in thought, but as a gentle corrective. The third is that the renewal of Marxist social theory has provoked a response by humanist socialists, portraying themselves as the supposed antidote to the resurrection of this deservedly dead doctrine.¹² Probably no one has illuminated more effectively than Althusser that the dichotomy between humanism and technological determinism is a false one, and that they, in fact, share a common unscientific and anti-emancipatory foundation. Historical materialism can only constitute a social scientific theory that can inform emancipatory political practice by avoiding both of these errors.

⁸ Peter Dews, *Logics of Disintegration: Post-Structuralist Thought and the Claims of Critical Theory* (London: Verso, 1987); Ellen Meiksins Wood, *Democracy Against Capitalism: Renewing Historical Materialism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 1–2; Razmig Keucheyan, *The Left Hemisphere: Mapping Critical Theory Today*, trans. by Gregory Elliott (London: Verso, 2013), 14–20. For examples of such a view see: Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews & Other Writings, 1972–1977*, ed. by Colin Gordon, trans. by Colin Gordon and others (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), 78–92; Karl R. Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies: Hegel and Marx* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2003), II.

⁹ Wendy Brown, *States of Injury: Power and Freedom in Late Modernity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 3–29, 52–76; Asad Haider, *Mistaken Identity: Race and Class in the Age of Trump* (London: Verso, 2018).

¹⁰ See Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (Zero Books, 2009).

¹¹ See, for examples: Paul Mason, *PostCapitalism: A Guide to Our Future* (London: Allen Lane, 2015); Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams, *Inventing the Future: Postcapitalism and a World Without Work* (London: Verso, 2015); Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams, '#Accelerate: Manifesto for an Accelerationist Politics', in *#Accelerate: The Accelerationist Reader*, ed. by Robin Mackay and Armen Avanessian (Falmouth: Urbanomic, 2014), 347–62.

¹² Jon Cruddas, 'The Humanist Left Must Challenge the Rise of Cyborg Socialism', *New Statesman*, 23 April 2018 <<https://www.newstatesman.com/politics/uk/2018/04/humanist-left-must-challenge-rise-cyborg-socialism>> [accessed 12 July 2018].

1.1 Argument

This thesis examines the philosophy of aleatory materialism proposed by Louis Althusser. I want to understand what Althusser thought about this, why he thought these things, the purpose of these ideas, and their value (if any) to us. I argue that aleatory materialism is best understood as a contribution to the philosophical underpinnings of a science of history. Aleatory materialism is an attempt to respond to the methodological impasse faced by social science of how structures can both determine the actions of agents and be transformed by those agents, without introducing an additional element that dictates the direction of change. Althusser aimed to provide a conceptual apparatus with which modes of production can be explained as contingent rather than necessary outcomes.

This issue is frequently the subject of conceptual dispute: What kinds of explanation are appropriate to such analyses? Might social structures be best understood historically or contemporaneously? What phenomena matter, and matter most, in such studies? How can one kind of structure be differentiated from another? Such questions are not immune to empirical evidence. Any answer demands that case studies be mustered in its defence. But they will not ultimately be decided by such evidence. They are philosophical and not scientific problems.

Such is, briefly put, the role philosophy plays in science. It provides the means to organise raw observational data in order that we can direct our attention to the right places. Observations are facts only in the context of a theory. Marxists have traditionally relied on the philosophy of dialectical materialism to perform this function. I argue that Althusser conceived of aleatory materialism as a replacement for a philosophy that he thought had led Marxist social science—historical materialism—astray. I take a sympathetic view of Althusser's criticisms of dialectical materialism and his attempt to replace it. I interpret aleatory materialism as emerging as a response by Althusser both to tensions in his own work and to problems within Marxist thought more generally.

Aleatory materialism asserts that history is best thought of as a process without a subject or goal that is characterised by contingent interactions between its components. History can be divided into discrete units called modes of production, defined by the presence of particular laws or regularities that govern the actions of the agents, but no fixed pattern of change exists beyond these units. These social forms are not harmonious totalities, but rather endemically conflictual structures. The consequences of these interactions cannot always be described in terms of existing laws but may establish new causal mechanisms and sequences of constantly conjoined events. It is in this way that new modes of production emerge in history. History has no guaranteed direction of travel but is an open process—the possible futures are constrained but not fixed by the past. Thinking about history in this way yields superior explanations of past events, and can help guide emancipatory political practice in its efforts to affect the future.

1.2 Structure

Chapter 2 surveys Althusser's two definitions of philosophy and his initial attempt at reconstructing historical materialism. The aim is to identify what Althusser thought the purpose of philosophy was and the problems to which it must respond, with a particular emphasis on Marxist philosophy. The first section looks at Althusser's definition of Marxist philosophy as the 'Theory of theoretical practice' found in his writings from the early- and mid-1960s. This definition of Marxist philosophy failed because it suffered from the same circularity that Althusser had located in other definitions: it could only be verified as true by resorting to the strategy he considered definitive of ideological discourse, the deployment of a guarantee as a foundational assumption. Consequently, Althusser abandoned this view and, as I discuss in the second section, instead defined philosophy as 'class struggle in theory'. Marxist philosophy is understood to be the philosophical representation of proletarian interests. Althusser adopted this view from 1967 and continued to adhere to it in his aleatory works. With this definition, Althusser abandoned any claim to philosophy providing truth, thereby separating it out from both science and ideology as a third type of cognitive practice. The final section of chapter 2 is concerned with explicating the concepts Althusser thought were appropriate for historical materialism in his pre-aleatory period. Structures must be thought of as complex wholes, which entailed that the structure contained various parts with their own efficacy, parts that were united into a 'structure in dominance' by the role of the economy which was determinant 'in the last instance'.¹³ According to Althusser, this demanded a new notion of causality ('structural causality') that could account for the simultaneous interaction of the parts. The complex interactions between the parts of the structure produced unique configurations called 'conjunctures'. Althusser used this apparatus to explain the actions of agents on the basis of the structure: the preferences of agents were inculcated by the structure, such that the structure reproduced itself. The problem is that it becomes difficult to see how change, and particularly emancipatory change, can occur on this basis.

Chapter 3 examines three developments in Althusser's work between the late-1960s and late-1970s. The purpose is to show how these developments lead to the formulation of aleatory materialism. The first section examines Althusser's critique of materialist philosophy. Philosophy could be, he argued, divided into materialist and idealist currents. Materialism, because of its commitment to realism, aided scientific production, while idealist philosophies stifled science by subjecting it to boundaries beyond which further knowledge was ruled out of order. The principal mechanism by which this was achieved was by invoking what Althusser called 'origins'. Origins smuggled socio-political interests into science under the guise of neutral rationality. They invariably reflected ideological suppositions about existing societies that naturalised, and thus justified, the existence of those societies. For a philosophy to serve emancipatory ends, it must resist making use of an origin. Materialist philosophies were supposed to fulfil this role, but Althusser argued that most philosophies generally

¹³ Louis Althusser, 'On the Materialist Dialectic, in *For Marx*, trans. by Ben Brewster (London: Verso, 2005), 160–218 (200–16).

thought of as materialist did not succeed in doing so. Importantly, dialectical materialism failed in the task of providing a philosophy without origins. Dialectical materialism could not, therefore, provide a suitable philosophy for Marxism. I argue that Althusser makes a compelling case for foregrounding the matter of origins when trying to identify the kind of philosophical thinking that Marxists must avoid and that he is correct to indict dialectical materialism on this count. The second section looks at the philosophical concepts Althusser developed prior to the 1980s as a response to the problem he had identified with dialectical materialism. He developed the category of a process without a subject or goal as the centrepiece of a philosophy without origins. The requisite materialist philosophy must be a *new practice of philosophy* that embraced its political partisanship. Philosophies of origin imposed themselves as ‘sciences of the Whole’, in that they organised the practices of a society under a single unifying discourse. A new practice of philosophy was a philosophical strategy that avoided this by accepting its role as one practice among many, as an assistant to the practices which pursued ends internal to themselves rather than having those ends imposed on them by philosophy. The third and final section of this chapter shows how Althusser’s concept of the epistemological break evolved. Althusser had initially advanced, in *For Marx* (1965), the thesis that Marx’s work was divided by a gulf between an idealist Hegelian phase and properly materialist Marxist phase, with which Marx moved from proposing an ideology to a science of history. Althusser later moved from arguing that idealism gave way to materialism at a certain point in Marx’s oeuvre to arguing that this break was a permanent fracture from which Marx never fully extricated himself. I take this to be a more convincing version of this much-criticised notion. It follows that arguments over the extent of fidelity to the letter of Marx’s work should be considered beside the point because multiple correct, if incompatible, readings of his theory are possible. The proper measure of Marxist theory is the extent to which it can advance its scientific and emancipatory goals. No simple reconstruction of Marx’s flawed work was sufficient and therefore the task, in Althusser’s view, became to construct a materialist philosophy that could allow us to identify the valuable components of Marx’s theory as well as its open problems.

Chapter 4 brings us to aleatory materialism. My aim here is to show how aleatory materialism responds to the problems laid out thus far. The first section considers what it means for someone to be an aleatory materialist and highlights elements of aleatory thinking that Althusser identified in the history of philosophy. Althusser claimed that aleatory materialism existed as an ‘underground current’ in the history of philosophy, a repressed counterpart to mainstream materialisms and idealisms. The second section outlines the conceptual apparatus of aleatory materialism. In place of the concepts of dialectical materialism—contradiction, negation, synthesis—Althusser proposed a new set: swerve, void, encounter, atom, and take. These categories were designed to assist in thinking about change in ways that avoided invoking origins. The third section looks in more detail at Althusser’s ideas about necessity and contingency by comparing them with those of Leibniz and Hume. I show how Althusser’s views can be thought about as a secularised version of Leibniz’s in which necessity becomes, as it is for Hume, not a property of nature but a socially constructed convention. The only remaining necessity is the necessity of contingency. The fourth section compares two ways of thinking about

history. Althusser differentiated two approaches that he called static and living history. The first examined history as if it were a physical object, with everything we needed to know simultaneously present. The latter treated history in a historical view, entities as moments in a sequence of events. Althusser sided with the second method as the correct one. I show how Althusser's critics have been wrong to interpret him as treating history as static. In the fifth section, I argue that aleatory materialism should be understood as sustaining a realist science and is not a version of post-structuralism as has sometimes been alleged. Examining the world through the lens of contingency does not entail abandoning science, on the contrary it is central to how we can render the world intelligible. I draw on thermodynamics to illustrate this. I then examine whether Althusser's theory can still be construed as a distinctly Marxist theory, and answer in the affirmative. The sixth and final section pursues a comparison between Althusser's aleatory materialism and Political Marxism, specifically the Brenner Thesis of the transition between feudalism and capitalism. I show how both theories make use of similar suppositions.

1.3 Literature

Althusser has been a controversial figure ever since he came to prominence in the 1960s. The ambitious arguments of the classical Althusserian project, that initiated by *For Marx* (1965) and *Reading Capital* (1965), divided academic interpreters and political activists alike.¹⁴ Uwe Becker calls Althusser one of the two 'most prominent exponents' of Marxism on the 'renaissance of the intellectual left in the late 1960s' (the other being Poulantzas, often seen as an Althusserian disciple).¹⁵ However influential this attempt to formulate a scientific basis for the Marxist project once was, it is the Althusserian theory of ideology that has proved most enduring.¹⁶ One recent commentator expresses a common view in saying that 'undoubtedly, the main contribution of Althusser in Marxist philosophy is his theory of the critique of ideology'.¹⁷ I only deal with Althusser's theory of ideology in passing. This is not just to avoid well-worn ground but in order to highlight other aspects of his project that are equally important, and perhaps more so when it is considered that his theory of ideology cannot be fully appreciated shorn from his accompanying views about science and philosophy. I do not wish to challenge the prevailing view of the importance and novelty of Althusser's theory of ideology, but rather to make the point that the Althusserian theory of ideology has received attention at the expense of his wider project. As Montag points out, the term 'ideology' is not used in 'The Underground Current of the Materialism of the Encounter'.¹⁸ I do not suggest that this is an indication that ideology is no longer important for the late Althusser, but

¹⁴ Althusser, *For Marx*; Louis Althusser and others, *Reading Capital: The Complete Edition*, trans. by Ben Brewster and David Fernbach (London: Verso, 2016).

¹⁵ Uwe Becker, 'Class Theory: Still the Axis of Critical Social Scientific Analysis?', in *The Debate on Classes*, ed. by Erik Olin Wright (London: Verso, 1989), 127–53 (129).

¹⁶ Louis Althusser, 'Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes towards an investigation)', in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, trans. by Ben Brewster (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2001), 85–126.

¹⁷ Agon Hamza, *Althusser and Pasolini* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 14.

¹⁸ Warren Montag, 'Discourse and Decree: Spinoza, Althusser and Pêcheux', *Cahiers du GRM*, 7 (2015), 1–21 <<http://grm.revues.org/600>> (1).

it is a signal that he had other concerns of which we should take account.

What I show is that there remain compelling reasons to take Althusser seriously today and that far from being an exhausted project his aleatory materialist writings signal a direction that might prove fruitful in breaking impasses in social theory, and Marxist social theory in particular. Althusser has been an influence, often an understated one, on many prominent thinkers across an array of disciplines straddling social science and philosophy.¹⁹ Although Althusser himself increasingly dropped out of view after the 1970s, the effects of the Althusserian project continued to reverberate. This influence was unlikely to persist in such undeclared terms forever. An Althusserian revival is now in full swing, benefitting from both original secondary literature and new publications and translations of his texts.²⁰

Since I began writing this thesis, five texts by Althusser have been published for the first time: *Initiation à la philosophie pour les non-philosophes* (1976–78) in 2014, *Être Marxiste en philosophie* (1976) and *Des Rêves d'angoisse sans fin* (1941–67) in 2015, *Les Vaches noires* (1976) in 2016, and *Écrits sur l'histoire* (1963–86) in 2018.²¹ Two of these texts have thus far appeared in English translation, as *Philosophy for Non-*

¹⁹ See, for examples: 1) Sociology: Stuart Hall and others, *Policing the Crisis: Mugging, the State, and Law and Order* (London: Macmillan, 1978); Roger Establet and Christian Baudelot, *L'École capitaliste en France* (Paris: Maspero, 1972). 2) Political theory: Paul Hirst, *On Law and Ideology* (London: Macmillan, 1979); Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000); Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 1989); Nicos Poulantzas, *Political Power and Social Classes*, trans. by Timothy O'Hagan (London: New Left Books, 1973); Nicos Poulantzas, *State, Power, Socialism*, trans. by Patrick Camiller (London: Verso, 2014); Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* (London: Verso, 2001). 3) Cultural theory: Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism: Or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London: Verso, 1991). 4) Feminism and gender studies: Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 2006); Michèle Barrett, *Women's Oppression Today: The Marxist/Feminist Encounter* (London: Verso, 2014); Alison Assiter, *Althusser & Feminism* (London: Pluto Press, 1990). 5) Literary theory: Pierre Macherey, *A Theory of Literary Production*, trans. by Geoffrey Wall (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978); Terry Eagleton, *Criticism and Ideology: A Study in Marxist Literary Theory* (London: Verso, 1978). 6) Anthropology: Emmanuel Terray, *Marxism and 'Primitive' Societies: Two Studies*, trans. by Mary Klopfer (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1972). 7) History: Perry Anderson, *Passages from Antiquity to Feudalism* (London: New Left Books, 1974); Perry Anderson, *Lineages of the Absolutist State* (London: New Left Books, 1974). 8) Economics: Alain Lipietz, *The Enchanted World: Inflation, Credit and the World Crisis*, trans. by Ian Patterson (London: Verso, 1985).

²⁰ This revival is taking place against the backdrop of a revival of materialist philosophy more generally. See Diana Coole and Samantha Frost, eds., *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), in particular Coole and Frost, 'Introducing the New Materialisms', 1–43.

²¹ Louis Althusser, *Initiation à la philosophie pour les non-philosophes*, ed. by G. M. Goshgarian (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2014); Louis Althusser, *Être Marxiste en philosophie*, ed. by G. M. Goshgarian (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2015); Louis Althusser, *Des Rêves d'angoisse sans fin*, ed. by Olivier Corpet and Yann Moulier Boutang (Paris: Éditions Grasset/IMEC, 2015); Louis Althusser, *Les Vaches noires*, ed. by G. M. Goshgarian (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2016); Louis Althusser, *Écrits sur l'histoire*, ed. by G. M. Goshgarian (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2018).

Philosophers (2017) and *How to be a Marxist in Philosophy*.²² *On the Reproduction of Capitalism* (1970) was published in English for the first time in 2014, a longer text from which the famous ‘Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses’ essay had been culled and published alone in the early 1970s.²³ In 2016 the complete edition of *Reading Capital* was finally published in English (the 1970 New Left Books edition lacked the chapters by Rancière, Macherey, and Establet that were part of the original French version), along with a new translation of some of Althusser’s texts from the mid–1960s, *Psychoanalysis and the Human Sciences* (published as *Psychanalyse et Sciences Humaines*, 1996, in French), the same year.²⁴ There have also been some recent translations of shorter pieces: ‘Some Questions Concerning the Crisis of Marxist Theory and of the International Communist Movement’ (1976) in *Historical Materialism* (1:23, 2015), ‘On the Contemporary Phenomenon of “Fashion”’ (1971), ‘A Letter from Louis Althusser on Gramsci’s Thought’ (1968), ‘The Crisis of Marxism (Lecture delivered in Nijmegen on 27 May 1978)’, and ‘On the Objectivity of History’ (1955) in *Décalages* (1:4, 2015; 2:1 2016; and 2:2, 2018 respectively), ‘Marxism as a Finite Theory’ (1978) by *Viewpoint Magazine* (2017), and Althusser’s ‘Preface to *Le Concept de loi économique dans “Le Capital,”*’ by Gérard Duménil’ in *Rethinking Marxism* (30:1. 2018).²⁵

The years immediately prior to the start of this thesis were also productive ones. A collection of Althusser’s correspondence with his wife, Hélène Rytman, *Lettres À Hélène*, was published in 2011 and some of his lectures on Rousseau, *Cours sur Rousseau*, in 2012.²⁶ Neither has yet appeared in English. Althusser’s 1964 text ‘Student

²² Louis Althusser, *Philosophy for Non-Philosophers*, trans. by G. M. Goshgarian (London: Bloomsbury, 2017); Louis Althusser, *How to Be a Marxist in Philosophy*, trans. by G. M. Goshgarian (London: Bloomsbury, 2017).

²³ Louis Althusser, *On the Reproduction of Capitalism: Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses*, trans. by G. M. Goshgarian (London: Verso, 2014); cf. Althusser, ‘Ideology’, *Lenin and Philosophy*.

²⁴ Althusser and others, *Reading Capital*; Louis Althusser, *Psychoanalysis and the Human Sciences*, ed. by Olivier Corpet and François Matheron, trans. by Steven Rendell (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016). Cf. Louis Althusser and Étienne Balibar, *Reading Capital*, trans. by Ben Brewster (London: Verso, 2009); all references are to the 2016 *Reading Capital: Complete Edition* unless otherwise stated.

²⁵ Louis Althusser, ‘Some Questions Concerning the Crisis of Marxist Theory and of the International Communist Movement’, trans. by David Broder, *Historical Materialism*, 23:1 (2015), 152–78; Louis Althusser, ‘On the Contemporary Phenomenon of “Fashion”’, trans. by Daniel Fairfax, *Décalages*, 1:4 (2015), 1–14 <<http://scholar.oxy.edu/decalages/vol1/iss4/3>>; Louis Althusser, ‘A Letter from Louis Althusser on Gramsci’s Thought’, trans. by Warren Montag, *Décalages*, 2:1 (2016), 1–6 <<http://scholar.oxy.edu/decalages/vol2/iss1/18>>; Louis Althusser, ‘The Crisis of Marxism (Lecture Delivered in Nijmegen on 27 May 1978)’, trans. by G. M. Goshgarian, *Décalages*, 2:2 (2018), 1–14 <<http://scholar.oxy.edu/decalages/vol2/iss2/1>>; Louis Althusser, ‘On the Objectivity of History’, trans. by Charles Gelman, *Décalages*, 2:2, 2018 <<http://scholar.oxy.edu/decalages/vol2/iss2/2>>; Louis Althusser, ‘Marxism as a Finite Theory’, trans. by Asad Haider, *Viewpoint Magazine*, 2017 <<http://www.viewpointmag.com/2017/12/14/marxism-finite-theory-1978>> [accessed 11 January 2018]; Louis Althusser, ‘Preface to *Le Concept de loi économique dans “Le Capital,”*’ by Gérard Duménil’, trans. by G. M. Goshgarian, *Rethinking Marxism*, 30:1 (2018), 4–24.

²⁶ Louis Althusser, *Lettres à Hélène*, ed. by Olivier Corpet (Paris: Éditions Grasset/IMEC, 2011); Louis Althusser, *Cours sur Rousseau*, ed. by Yves Vargas (Paris: Le Temps des Cerises, 2012).

Problems’ was published in English in *Radical Philosophy* (170, 2011).²⁷ *Viewpoint Magazine* translated a text from Althusser’s aleatory period, ‘On Marxist Thought’, in 2012 (published 1993 in French), and *Décalages* gave us ‘On the Cultural Revolution’ (1966) in 2010, originally published in French in 1966, and ‘On Genesis (1966) in 2014 (1:1 and 1:2 respectively).²⁸ The appearance of new texts by Althusser is a resumption of the project of publishing manuscripts from Althusser’s archives, a project which yielded a large output in the 1990s but slowed markedly in the 2000s.²⁹ The volume of posthumously published texts now far outstrips those published in Althusser’s lifetime. As Montag has argued, they ‘necessitate a thorough reevaluation of Althusser’s project’.³⁰

The secondary literature tells a similar story of an Althusserian revival. Aside from *Décalages*, solely devoted to Althusserian scholarship, there have been special issues of *Crisis and Critique* (2:2, 2015), *La Pensée* (382, 2015), *Cahiers du Groupe de Recherches Matérialistes* (7/8, 2015), *diacritics* (43:2, 2015), *Mediations* (30:2, 2017), and *Rethinking Marxism* (29:2, 2017) given over to Althusser. *Viewpoint Magazine* and the *LA Review of Books* both produced dossiers on Althusser in 2016. There have been five edited volumes, *Autour d’Althusser* (2012), *Althusser and Law* (2013), *Encountering Althusser* (2013), *Althusser and Theology* (2016), and *The Concept in Crisis* (2017), along with monographs by Lahtinen, *Politics and Philosophy* (English translation 2011), Montag, *Althusser and His Contemporaries* (2013), Morfino, *Plural Temporalities* (2014), Hamza, *Althusser and Pasolini* (2016), and De Ípola, *Althusser, The Infinite Farewell* (English translation 2018).³¹ Rancière’s critical account of Althusser, *Althusser’s Lesson*, originally published in French in 1974, appeared in English in 2011, the reception of which included an issue of *Radical Philosophy* (170)

²⁷ Louis Althusser, ‘Student Problems’, trans. by Dick Bateman, *Radical Philosophy*, 170 (2011), 11–15.

²⁸ Louis Althusser, ‘On Marxist Thought’, trans. by Asad Haider and Salar Mohandes, *Viewpoint Magazine*, 2012 <<http://viewpointmag.com/2012/09/12/on-marxist-thought/>> [accessed 11 December 2016]; Louis Althusser, ‘On Genesis’, trans. by Jason E. Smith, *Décalages*, 1:2 (2012), 1–4 <<http://scholar.oxy.edu/decalages/vol1/iss2/11>>; Anonymous [Attributed to Louis Althusser], ‘On the Cultural Revolution’, trans. by Jason E. Smith, *Décalages*, 1:1 (2010), 1–18 <<http://scholar.oxy.edu/decalages/vol1/iss1/9>>.

²⁹ For an overview of this posthumous publishing project see Félix Boggio Éwanjé-Épée and G. M. Goshgarian, ‘Philosophy and Revolution: An Interview with G. M. Goshgarian’, trans. by Patrick King, *Viewpoint Magazine*, 2016 <<http://viewpointmag.com/2016/07/18/philosophy-and-revolution-an-interview-with-g-m-goshgarian/>> [accessed 3 March 2017], §6–16.

³⁰ Warren Montag, *Althusser and His Contemporaries: Philosophy’s Perpetual War* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013), 9.

³¹ Laurent de Sutter, ed., *Althusser and Law* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2013); Katja Diefenbach and others, eds., *Encountering Althusser: Politics and Materialism in Contemporary Radical Thought* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013); Annie Ibrahim, ed., *Autour d’Althusser - penser un matérialisme aléatoire : problèmes et perspectives* (Paris: Le Temps des Cerises, 2012); Agon Hamza, ed., *Althusser and Theology: Religion, Politics and Philosophy* (Leiden: Brill, 2016); Nick Nesbitt, ed., *The Concept in Crisis: Reading Capital Today* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017); Mikko Lahtinen, *Politics and Philosophy: Niccolò Machiavelli and Louis Althusser’s Aleatory Materialism*, trans. by Gareth Griffiths and Kristina Köhli (Leiden: Brill, 2009); Montag, *Althusser and His Contemporaries*; Vittorio Morfino, *Plural Temporality: Transindividuality and the Aleatory Between Spinoza and Althusser* (Leiden: Brill, 2014); Hamza, *Althusser and Pasolini*; De Ípola, Emilio, *Althusser, The Infinite Farewell*, trans. by Gavin Arnall (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018).

devoted to it.³² Two PhD theses on Althusser, of which I am aware, have also been completed in this time: *Sur le matérialisme aléatoire de Louis Althusser* by Luca Pinzolo and *Althusser and Contingency* by Stefano Pippa.³³ I am confined to the English and French literature, but there have also been significant contributions in other languages that remain to be translated.

This posthumous publication project has spanned the length of Althusser's career. The works of the late Althusser, those after his retreat from public life in 1980, are a small part of his overall oeuvre. While I have taken the opportunity to draw from newly published texts of the 1950s, 60s, and 70s, I am only interested in these insofar as they shed additional light on the late texts. And even then it is necessary to be more specific, for there are post-1980 texts that are not explicitly concerned with aleatory materialism. For example, Althusser's autobiography, *The Future Lasts a Long Time*, written in 1985, is of no more than peripheral concern for the task here.³⁴ There are also other post-1980 texts (still mostly unpublished) which bear no obvious relation with aleatory materialism, including short essays on liberation theology, Jean-Marie Le Pen, and the media among other things. Althusser's aleatory materialist texts are not co-extensive with his late work in general, and only the former is my topic of study. I define the aleatory materialist texts as follows:

Published

The Underground Current of the Materialism of the Encounter (1982).³⁵

On Marxist Thought (1982).³⁶

Note sur les thèses sur Feuerbach (1982).³⁷

Correspondence about 'Philosophy and Marxism' (1984–87).³⁸

Philosophy and Marxism (1984–87).³⁹

The Only Materialist Tradition, Part 1: Spinoza (1985).⁴⁰

³² Jacques Rancière, *Althusser's Lesson*, trans. by Emiliano Battista (London: Continuum, 2011).

³³ Stefano Pippa, 'Althusser and Contingency' (London: Kingston University, 2015); Luca Pinzolo, 'Sur le matérialisme aléatoire de Louis Althusser' (Nice: Université de Nice-Sophia Antipolis, 2011). Pinzolo's dissertation has been published in Italian as, Luca Pinzolo, *Il Materialismo aleatorio. Una filosofia per Louis Althusser* (Milan: Mimesis, 2012); I am reliant on the dissertation here.

³⁴ Louis Althusser, *The Future Lasts a Long Time and The Facts*, ed. by Olivier Corpet and Yann Moulier Boutang, trans. by Richard Veasey (London: Vintage, 1994); Louis Althusser, *L'Avenir dure longtemps suivi de Les Faits*, ed. by Olivier Corpet and Yann Moulier Boutang (Paris: Éditions Stock/IMEC, 1994).

³⁵ Louis Althusser, 'The Underground Current of the Materialism of the Encounter', in *Philosophy of the Encounter*, 163–207.

³⁶ Althusser, 'On Marxist Thought', *Viewpoint Magazine*.

³⁷ Louis Althusser, 'Note sur les thèses sur Feuerbach', *Magazine Littéraire*, 324 (1994), 38–42.

³⁸ Louis Althusser, 'Correspondence about "Philosophy and Marxism"', in *Philosophy of the Encounter*, 208–50.

³⁹ Althusser, 'Philosophy and Marxism', *Philosophy of the Encounter*.

⁴⁰ Louis Althusser, 'The Only Materialist Tradition, Part 1: Spinoza', in *The New Spinoza*, ed. by Warren Montag and Ted Stolze, trans. by Ted Stolze (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 3–19.

Machiavel (1985).⁴¹
Machiavelli and Us (1986).⁴²
Du Matérialisme aléatoire (1986).⁴³
Portrait of the Materialist Philosopher (1986).⁴⁴
Sur l'histoire (1986).⁴⁵

Unpublished

'J'écris ce livre en octobre 1982...' (1982).⁴⁶
Qu'y faire? Que faire? (1985?).⁴⁷
Enrichissez-vous (1985).⁴⁸
La Philosophie c'est enfantin (1985–86?).⁴⁹
Les 2 grands courants de l'histoire de la philosophie (1985–86?).⁵⁰
Thèses de juin (1986).⁵¹

It is in these texts that Althusser develops the concept of aleatory materialism explicitly. The unpublished texts listed here do not correspond precisely to the documents located in Althusser's archives. This is because some fragments are integrated into other texts. Where there are published versions of texts, I have deferred to these. Consequently, I place myself at the mercy of editorial judgements made about how to reconstruct these fragmentary texts and am not proposing to improve upon them. The sole and partial exception is the untitled text (the first line of which is 'J'écris ce livre en octobre 1982...'). This text exists in the archives in several versions, with parts of it arranged in different orders. It is therefore not clear how Althusser intended it to be read.⁵² It has been published in three separate parts: 'The Underground Current of the Materialism of the

⁴¹ Louis Althusser, 'Machiavel', in *L'Avenir dure longtemps*, 488–507.

⁴² Louis Althusser, *Machiavelli and Us*, ed. by François Matheron, trans. by Gregory Elliott (London: Verso, 1999).

⁴³ Louis Althusser, 'Du Matérialisme aléatoire', *Multitudes*, 21:2 (2005), 179–94 <<https://www.cairn.info/revue-multitudes-2005-2-page-179.htm>>.

⁴⁴ Louis Althusser, 'Portrait of the Materialist Philosopher', in *Philosophy of the Encounter*, 290–91.

⁴⁵ Louis Althusser, 'Sur l'histoire', in *Écrits sur l'histoire*, 279–81.

⁴⁶ Louis Althusser, 'Ouvrage sans titre commençant par "j'écris ce livre en octobre 1982"', 1982, IMEC, ALT2. A29-02.01; Louis Althusser, 'Ouvrage sans titre commençant par "j'écris ce livre en octobre 1982"', 1982, IMEC, ALT2. A29-02.02; Louis Althusser, 'Fragments divers de l'ouvrage de 1982 avec une numérotation différente de la numérotation définitive', 1982, IMEC, ALT2. A29-03.01; Louis Althusser, 'Fragments du livre de 1982 tiré de "Sur la pensée marxistes"', 1982, IMEC, ALT2. A29-03.02; Louis Althusser, 'Fragments du livre de 1982, non numéroté', 1982, IMEC, ALT2. A29-03.03; Louis Althusser, 'Fragments de les thèses sur Feuerbach', 1982, IMEC, ALT2. A29-03.04.

⁴⁷ Louis Althusser, 'Qu'y faire? Que faire?', 1985, IMEC, ALT2. A29-05.05; Louis Althusser, 'Que faire?', 1985, IMEC, ALT2. A29-05.06.

⁴⁸ Louis Althusser, 'Enrichissez-vous', 1985, IMEC, ALT2. A29-04.02.

⁴⁹ Louis Althusser, 'La philosophie c'est enfantin', 1985, IMEC, ALT2. A29-04.08.

⁵⁰ Louis Althusser, 'Les 2 grands courants de l'histoire de la philosophie', 1985, IMEC, ALT2. A29-04.09.

⁵¹ Louis Althusser, 'Thèses de juin (86)', 1986, IMEC, ALT2. A29-06.02; Louis Althusser, 'Thèses de juin', 1986, IMEC, ALT2. A29-06.04; Louis Althusser, 'Thèses de juin', 1986, IMEC, ALT2. A29-06.03.

⁵² See the editorial note in Althusser, 'Underground Current', *Philosophy of the Encounter*, 163–64.

Encounter', 'On Marxist Thought', and 'Note sur les thèses sur Feuerbach'. Even with these difficulties in mind the publication of this text has been somewhat haphazard. It is not clear to me why 'Underground Current' was published without what is now known as 'On Marxist Thought', given that this section of the manuscript is sufficiently lucid. The two texts slot together in a complex way. Part of 'On Marxist Thought' occurs in the middle of 'Underground Current', the end of which is then followed by the final part of 'On Marxist Thought'. 'Note sur les thèses sur Feuerbach' is composed of the final pages of this manuscript. In this case, owing to its centrality as the longest single text on aleatory materialism that Althusser produced I have consulted the remaining unpublished passages that do not appear in any of these three publications. Most of the archival texts are available in several versions. I have tended to make use of the most recent version on the assumption that this is the most developed.

These writings were left in a raw state, with a considerable volume of vague references and uncited material. It is unclear whether they were ever intended for publication, and interpreters are subsequently saddled with the problem of how much weight to assign them. These texts should be read with their draft form, their editorial interventions, and inevitable lacunae in mind, but must not be treated as of non or partial importance merely because they lay unfinished. Nonpublication is not, by itself, proof of theoretical marginality. The fact that, as I argue in this thesis, aleatory materialism can be shown to have developed out of earlier lines of thought in Althusser's work is itself a reason not to disregard these texts as errors or, worse, products of Althusser's poor state of mental health. Whatever criticisms one wants to level at Althusser's late writings, they should not be treated as irrational.⁵³

The exception to this interpretive problem is *Machiavelli and Us* which had been polished to such a point that it was clearly meant for wider dissemination. 'Among his own posthumously published drafts,' Gregory Elliott writes in the English introduction to this text, 'one, at least, is neither mistake nor out-take'.⁵⁴ Given the use of the concept of aleatory materialism here, it is a justifiable inference that Althusser intended for it to be taken seriously. It therefore seems reasonable to seek it out as a concept, even if it is one that received no complete and final formulation. The use of aleatory materialism as a concept in *Machiavelli and Us* is vague, or at least appears to be so if this case study is taken to be self-supporting. There is, however, a wealth of material elsewhere that allows it to be unravelled. When attempting to grapple with aleatory materialism it seems prudent to make use of the full range of available evidence, and not only that prepared for publication. There is now a rich literature on Althusser's Machiavelli.⁵⁵ I

⁵³ And the temptation to do so is there, not least because of some of Althusser's own comments in *Future Lasts a Long Time*.

⁵⁴ Gregory Elliott, 'Introduction: In the Mirror of Machiavelli', in Althusser, *Machiavelli and Us*, xi–xxii (xi).

⁵⁵ Aside from Lahtinen cited above see: Emmanuel Terray, 'An Encounter: Althusser and Machiavelli', in *Postmodern Materialism and the Future of Marxist Theory: Essays in the Althusserian Tradition*, ed. by Antonio Callari and David F. Ruccio (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 1996), 257–77; Filippo Del Lucchese, 'On the Emptiness of an Encounter: Althusser's Reading of Machiavelli', trans. by Warren Montag, *Décalages*, 1:1 (2010), 1–19 <<http://scholar.oxy.edu/decalages/vol1/iss1/5>>; Adam Holden and Stuart Elden, "'It Cannot Be a Real Person, a Concrete Individual": Althusser and Foucault on Machiavelli's Political

do not consider Althusser's views about Machiavelli here except where they are helpful in understanding aleatory materialism.

Whatever the problems of interpretation with the aleatory materialist texts these are not new hurdles to Althusserian scholarship. Having never seen through to publication a single solo-authored monograph, despite promising several works in such a format, Althusser's corpus in general might be described as fragmentary. In the two languages in which Althusser's work is most widely available, English and French, neither has all the texts published in the other. This is important to remember with older commentaries on Althusser, for misreadings might sometimes be attributed to the author not having access to more of Althusser's writings. For example, *Philosophy and the Spontaneous Philosophy of the Scientists*, without which it is difficult to understand Althusser's second definition of philosophy, was not available in English until 1989—well after the high point of discussion about Althusser.⁵⁶ As Timothy O'Hagan remarks, 'this gap in the corpus of Althusser's translations means that the full novelty, subtlety and fragility of the new position has not been widely appreciated'.⁵⁷ George Comninel makes criticisms of Althusser that are applicable only to the 1960–67 period, criticisms that would be severely tempered by works published after 1968 and are totally undermined by his aleatory materialism. Comninel made these criticisms in 1987, and while it is inexcusable not to have taken account of what was available it is also understandable for it not to have taken account of the aleatory texts, which were not public knowledge at that time.⁵⁸ These are only two examples which demonstrate the

Technique', *Borderlands*, 4:2 (2005)

<http://www.borderlands.net.au/vol4no2_2005/eldenhold_foucault.htm>; Ross Speer, 'The Machiavellian Marxism of Althusser and Gramsci', *Décalages*, 2:1 (2016), 1–15
<<http://scholar.oxy.edu/decalages/vol2/iss1/7>>; Nick Hardy, 'Theory From the Conjunction: Althusser's Aleatory Materialism and Machiavelli's Dispositif', *Décalages*, 1:3 (2013), 1–33
<<http://scholar.oxy.edu/decalages/vol1/iss3/5>>; Timothy O'Hagan, "Machiavelli's Solitude": An Introduction', *Economy and Society*, 17:4 (1988), 461–67; Mikko Lahtinen, 'Althusser, Machiavelli and Us: Between Philosophy and Politics', in *Encountering Althusser*, 115–25; Warren Montag, 'Conjuncture, Conflict, War: Machiavelli between Althusser and Foucault (1975–6)', in *Encountering Althusser*, 127–35; Vittorio Morfino, 'History as "Permanent Revocation of the Accomplished Fact": Machiavelli in the Last Althusser', in *Encountering Althusser*, 61–74; Hervé Oul'hen, 'Un Moment Machiavélien dans la théorie. Sur Althusser', *Cahiers du GRM*, 8 (2015), 1–17 <<http://grm.revues.org/707>>; Mohamed Moulfi, 'Althusser, lecteur de Machiavel', *Décalages*, 1:3 (2013), 1–12
<<http://scholar.oxy.edu/decalages/vol1/iss3/1>>; Mikko Lahtinen, 'Machiavelli was Not a Republicanist—or Monarchist: On Louis Althusser's "Aleatory" interpretation of *The Prince*', in *The Radical Machiavelli: Politics, Philosophy, and Language*, ed. by Filippo Del Lucchese, Fabio Frosini, and Vittorio Morfino (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 393–405; Mohamed Moulfi, 'Lectures Machiavéliennes d'Althusser', in *Radical Machiavelli*, 406–19; Banu Bargu, 'Machiavelli after Althusser', in *Radical Machiavelli*, 420–39; Antonio Negri, 'Machiavel selon Althusser' in *Lire Althusser aujourd'hui*, ed. by Jean-Marie Vincent (Paris: Éditions L'Harmattan, 1997), 139–58; Pippa, 'Althusser and Contingency', 151–95; Larry Alan Busk and Elizabeth Portella, 'Who Are the True Machiavellians? Althusser and Merleau-Ponty Reading *The Prince*', *Rethinking Marxism*, 29:3 (2017), 405–15; Jean-Claude Bourdin, 'Machiavel, philosophe sans guillemets', *La Pensée*, 382 (2015), 73–84; Dhruv Jain, 'The Atomic Prince: A Lucretian Interpretation of Machiavelli' (Toronto: York University, 2017), 34–78.

⁵⁶ Louis Althusser, *Philosophy and the Spontaneous Philosophy of the Scientists*, ed. by Gregory Elliott, trans. by Warren Montag and others (London: Verso, 2011).

⁵⁷ Timothy O'Hagan, 'Althusser: How to Be a Marxist in Philosophy', in *Marx and Marxisms*, ed. by G. H. R. Parkinson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 243–64.

⁵⁸ George C. Comninel, *Rethinking the French Revolution* (London: Verso, 1987), 84–90.

warped reception of Althusser's work that has contributed to considerable misunderstandings. More recently, Asad Haider has accused some of the most prominent English language commentators of readings that are 'not merely inaccurate but something bordering on hallucination'.⁵⁹ I hope to contribute to correcting the record. Against those who tend to see Althusser's work as an ossified system, I look to emphasise how it develops over time.⁶⁰

There are two reasons to revisit Althusser today. The first is the availability of more of Althusser's writings may force us to alter our understandings of the Althusserian project. The second is that new appreciations of Althusser's work may make a valuable contribution to contemporary renewals of Marxist theory. I want to demonstrate both of these propositions. Let us take each in turn.

In this thesis, I will show how new evidence shows some of Althusser's critics to be mistaken in several respects. At this stage, I want to concentrate on two themes that are commonplace in the literature but can now be seen to be incorrect. The first is a series of premature judgements that treat Althusser's move from his first definition of Marxist philosophy as Theory of theoretical practice to the second definition as the proletarian class position in theory as a retreat or failure on Althusser's part. Gregory Elliott, in the single most thorough overview of Althusser's corpus, said that the move from the first to the second definition 'resulted in a noticeable overall decline in the power and originality of Althusser's work'.⁶¹ Similarly, Lucio Colletti found that 'it is impossible to escape the impression that his [Althusser's] thought has become increasingly impoverished and arid with the passage of time'.⁶² Vincent Descombes' assessment was that once Althusser abandoned his attempt to provide an epistemological foundation to Marxism 'the Althusserian undertaking' is brought to a 'close'.⁶³ Simon Clarke wrote that Althusser's period of 'serious work' is 'confined' to *For Marx* and *Reading Capital*.⁶⁴ Margaret Majumdar understood Althusser as engaged in 'an almost total repudiation of all the major theoretical tenets' that he had formerly held, thereby abandoning Marxism's 'theoretical pretensions'.⁶⁵ Ted Benton labelled Althusser's second definition of philosophy 'a retreat' compared to the first.⁶⁶ In contrast, my view

⁵⁹ Asad Haider, 'Crisis Theory', *Viewpoint Magazine*, 2017
<<https://www.viewpointmag.com/2017/12/14/crisis-theory>> [accessed 16 December 2017], §24.

⁶⁰ See the comments by Macherey and Balibar on the British reception of Althusser and the tendency to treat his work as a distinct system in James H. Kavanagh and others, 'Interview: Etienne Balibar and Pierre Macherey', *Diacritics*, 12:1 (1982), 46–51 (46–48).

⁶¹ Gregory Elliott, *Althusser: The Detour of Theory* (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 179.

⁶² Lucio Colletti, 'A Political and Philosophical Interview', *New Left Review*, I, 86 (1974), 3–28 (17).

⁶³ Vincent Descombes, *Modern French Philosophy*, trans. by L. Scott-Fox and J. M. Harding (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 135.

⁶⁴ Simon Clarke, 'Althusserian Marxism', in *One-Dimensional Marxism*, by Simon Clarke and others (London: Alison & Busby, 1980), 5–102 (16).

⁶⁵ Margaret A. Majumdar, *Althusser and the End of Leninism?* (London: Pluto Press, 1995), 164.

⁶⁶ Ted Benton, *The Rise and Fall of Structural Marxism: Althusser and His Influence* (London: Macmillan, 1984), 91.

is that there is life in the Althusserian project after the mid–1960s.

Nor am I convinced that the 1960–66 period represents the single high point of Althusser’s work. While there are important and considerable continuities between classical Althusserianism and that which takes place after the redefinition of philosophy in 1967, this redefinition elicits a stronger and more defensible version of Marxist philosophy. When re-reading Althusser’s oeuvre from the vantage point of aleatory materialism, as I propose to do, it becomes clearer that the works that brought him initial fame cannot be seen as uniquely definitive of his endeavour, but should be thought of as only one stage within it. Whether these commentators would have changed their views on Althusser if they had had access to his late writings is impossible to say (with the exception of Elliott who included a chapter on the aleatory texts in the second edition of *Detour of Theory*, and who does not alter his perspective), but the vast majority of Althusserian scholarship published in the twentieth century does not take account of them.⁶⁷

The second theme that must be revised is structuralism. If there is one epithet by which Althusser is known, it is as a structuralist.⁶⁸ This is generally intended as an indictment, even if it is not always made clear why this should be the case. It is also often used more innocently as a descriptive term. The Althusserian school was dubbed ‘structural Marxism’ (as Althusser said, ‘for flagrant reasons of convenience, we were called “structuralists”’).⁶⁹ The question ‘was Althusser a structuralist?’ looms large in the secondary literature.

Originating in post-war France, structuralism was an intellectual trend involving the importation of a method first developed in linguistics into other social sciences. The structuralist period itself is rather more short-lived than its extensive and ongoing influence might indicate, reaching its high point between 1962 and 1966 and going into decline thereafter. In some ways, Althusser serves as a perfect example of the structuralist trend. Located at the École Normale Supérieure (ENS), the epicentre of

⁶⁷ Elliott, *Detour of Theory*, 367.

⁶⁸ André Glucksmann, ‘A Ventriloquist Structuralism’, *New Left Review*, I, 72 (1972), 68–92; Miriam Glucksmann, *Structuralist Analysis in Contemporary Social Thought: A Comparison of the Theories of Claude Lévi-Strauss and Louis Althusser*. (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1974); Sebastiano Timpanaro, *On Materialism*, trans. by Lawrence Garner (London: New Left Books, 1975); E. P. Thompson, *The Poverty of Theory: Or an Orrery of Errors* (London: Merlin Press, 1995); John Lewis, ‘The Althusser Case (Part 2)’, *Marxism Today*, February 1972, 35, 43–48; Alfred Schmidt, *History and Structure: An Essay on Hegelian-Marxist and Structuralist Theories of History*, trans. by Jeffrey Herf (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1981); Henri Lefebvre, *Au-delà du structuralisme* (Paris: Éditions Anthropos, 1971); Jorge Larrain, *The Concept of Ideology* (London: Hutchinson, 1979); Martin Jay, *Marxism and Totality: The Adventures of a Concept from Lukács to Habermas* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984); Comninel, *Rethinking the French Revolution*; Sean Creaven, ‘The “Two Marxisms” Revisited: Humanism, Structuralism and Realism in Marxist Social Theory’, *Journal of Critical Realism*, 14:1 (2015), 7–53.

⁶⁹ Louis Althusser, ‘Elements of Self-Criticism’, in *Essays in Self-Criticism*, trans. by Grahame Lock (London: New Left Books, 1976), 100–50 (127); Robert Resch, *Althusser and the Renewal of Marxist Social Theory* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992); Benton, *Structural Marxism*; Bob Jessop, *The Capitalist State: Marxist Theories and Methods* (Oxford: Martin Robertson, 1982).

structuralism, he released *For Marx* and *Reading Capital* right on the cusp of structuralism's apogee. He began his rejection of some elements of those texts in 1967, the year in which structuralism entered its decline and, after killing his wife H  l  ne, retreated from public life from 1980, a period which coincided with the death of a number of important structuralist thinkers in close succession (Poulantzas, P  cheux, Barthes, Lacan, and Foucault).⁷⁰

Biographical affinities notwithstanding, a large part of the problem in assessing whether Althusser was a structuralist rests on how we interpret the term. For all the literature devoted to structuralism, there are few attempts to offer an adequate *definition* of it. This is not to deny the existence of an intellectual current in post-war France, in which a range of thinkers shared an outlook and some methodological positions. But it is to say that structuralism was never a unified school and thus determining whether a particular theory is a structuralist one, as opposed to merely influenced by structuralism, is a difficult task.

Nevertheless, given the prominence of the structuralist label in the literature it is impossible to avoid some remarks on what constitutes a structuralist theory. The promise of structuralism lay in placing the social sciences on an equally secure methodological foundation to that of the natural sciences. The structuralist contention is that behind the apparent chaos of experience there is a hidden logic. A *scientific* account meant uncovering this logic. As Descombes puts it: 'just as the science of motion (physics) is the knowledge of that which, in the course of a change, remains unchanged ... so human science is the knowledge of that which remains constant in any possible variation'.⁷¹ Structuralism seeks to isolate that which is constant in any social structure. It is positioned against two other approaches: 1) The social world had no overarching structure but was a series of accidents without identifiable, enduring, causal mechanisms. 2) Structures were reducible to their component parts, the structure thereby being the wrong unit of analysis from which the human sciences should proceed. Against the first position, structuralism asserts that there are indeed regularities in the world that can be called structures and while they might not be physical objects they were real and intelligible ('*real without being actual*' in Deleuze's phrase).⁷² Against the second position, structuralism asserts that the whole is analytically prior to its parts.

Structuralism is thus a methodological holism—it asserts that the whole is different to the sum of its parts (it cannot be reduced to them without remainder). But not all methodological holisms are structuralisms and structuralism has a number of particularities that mark it out as a distinct approach. First, the structure is proposed as

⁷⁰ On the history of structuralism see: Fran  ois Dosse, *History of Structuralism: The Rising Sign, 1945–66*, trans. by Deborah Glassman (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), I; Fran  ois Dosse, *History of Structuralism: The Sign Sets, 1967–Present*, trans. by Deborah Glassman (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), II.

⁷¹ Descombes, *Modern French Philosophy*, 104.

⁷² Gilles Deleuze, 'How Do We Recognize Structuralism?', in *Desert Islands and Other Texts, 1953–1974*, ed. by David Lapoujade, trans. by Michael Taomina (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2004), 170–92 (179).

the correct level of analysis for objectivity *against* the standpoint of the subject, which can only ever attain a partial viewpoint and is, crucially, conceived of as an effect of the structure. Our *perception* of events does not constitute reliable knowledge of them. Structures produce subjects, and structuralists are therefore anti-humanists (see 2.1.1). Second, structuralists adopt a decentered view in which there is no essential principle of the structure (be it the subject or something else). The structure is not produced by one or more elements that pre-exist it. Rather, the elements are constituted by the *relations* between them. These relations are what constitute the structure, and that, not an essence, is what we are looking for when we take a structuralist perspective. There are a finite number of ways in which the elements can be arranged in a structure. The *movement* of a structure is the rearrangement of the set of elements. Consequently, it should be in principle possible to establish all the possible combinations irrespective of their empirical observation. The necessary components of a structure make structures within a given domain (history, linguistics etc.) comparable to one another, while the different orderings of the components differentiate them. Third, structures are closed systems which reproduce themselves. This is not to deny interaction between structures, but to say that it is a condition of their intelligibility as a structure that each structure has its own logic of self-regulation. If it did not, it would not qualify as a structure in its own right as it would be reducible to another. Fourth, it follows that the historical becoming of the elements that make up a structure is irrelevant in understanding either that structure or any one of its elements. Everything we need to understand a structure is simultaneously present at any given moment. If the relations between the parts are what is constitutive of structure, then those relations cannot be successive (coming one after another) but must co-exist at the same time. This is what is being asserted when structuralists say they are performing a ‘synchronic’ analysis, as opposed to a ‘diachronic’ (historical) analysis (what might otherwise be called, respectively, *cross-sectional* and *longitudinal* methods).⁷³ Structuralists therefore study structures and *not* histories, essences, or experiences.⁷⁴

One cannot read Althusser without recognising many if not all of these elements, and his relation to structuralism surely exceeds the mere ‘flirt’ that he attributed to himself.⁷⁵ If one reads Althusser, however, with the insistence that he is a structuralist, then one will no doubt find oneself extremely surprised upon reaching aleatory materialism. And it is in part because Althusser has been so frequently read as such that aleatory materialism appears as a problem that requires explanation. Much of Althusser’s work can, and should, be read as an *engagement* with structuralism, as in tension with it rather than wholly given over to it.⁷⁶ But then this is also true of most his contemporaries, for a good number of those that might be called structuralists were also

⁷³ For accounts of structuralism see: Jean Piaget, *Structuralism*, trans. by Chaninah Maschler (New York: Basic Books, 1970); John Sturrock, *Structuralism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003).

⁷⁴ Étienne Balibar, ‘Structuralism: A Destitution of the Subject’, trans. by James Swenson, *Differences*, 14:1 (2003), 1–21 (3).

⁷⁵ For Althusser’s own views on his supposed structuralism see: Althusser, ‘Elements of Self-Criticism’, *Self-Criticism*, 126–31; Althusser, ‘Correspondence’, *Philosophy of the Encounter*, 210–11.

⁷⁶ Ted Stolze, ‘Deleuze and Althusser: Flirting with Structuralism’, *Rethinking Marxism*, 10:3 (1998), 51–63 (55–58).

those that we call *post-structuralists*.

If structuralism is hard to define, then post-structuralism is even more so.⁷⁷ Arguably, post-structuralism as a category had more to do with how the French philosophy of the period was received in the United States than it did with commonalities between those theorists themselves.⁷⁸ Insofar as we can even coherently talk of post-structuralism, the post-structuralist move seems to be that of following through on what Ellen Wood called ‘the paradox of structuralism’: that once you dissolve the subject into the structure the status of the structure is put into question as well. The result is a lurch between the ‘absolute determinism’ of structuralism and the ‘absolute contingency’ of post-structuralism.⁷⁹ And this is indeed exactly how Althusser has been understood, as transitioning from a structuralist phase in *Reading Capital* to the absolute contingency of aleatory materialism. From ‘Althusser the structuralist philosopher, the thinker of the formal orders of history’ to ‘Althusser the postmodernist poet, prophet of unreason, celebrant of difference and disorder’.⁸⁰ Whatever I have to say about Althusser himself, Wood is right that it was a certain reading of Althusser that provided ‘the main theoretical channel through which Western Marxism travelled in its passage to post-Marxism and beyond’.⁸¹

The question of whether Althusser should be labelled a structuralist or post-structuralist is principally an argument about how he can be positioned relative to contemporaries in post-war French philosophy. This is not the question that interests me, as I am concerned with Althusser in his relation to the field of Marxist philosophy rather than his immediate intellectual context. Thus if it has been necessary to raise this issue, it is only in order to speak of how these categories have relevance to debates within Marxism that precede these particular theoretical positions. For when Althusser’s (Marxist) critics label him a structuralist, what they are asserting is that he adhered to *determinism*: ‘the thesis that for everything that happens there are conditions such that, given them, nothing else could have happened’.⁸² For a determinist it is, in principle, possible, given total knowledge of a particular moment and the causal laws that govern the system, to predict future events with certainty. Importantly, for our purposes here, it implies that the actions of agents can be fully accounted for by factors beyond their control. If all historical events have determined causes, then everything that occurs does so *necessarily*. There are no genuine choices to be made by agents. Even if communism is inevitable, it is not clear how it could be

⁷⁷ For accounts of post-structuralism see: James Williams, *Understanding Poststructuralism* (Chesham: Acumen, 2005); Dews, *Logics of Disintegration*.

⁷⁸ Johannes Angermuller, *Why There Is No Poststructuralism in France* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015).

⁷⁹ Ellen Meiksins Wood, *The Retreat from Class: A New ‘True’ Socialism* (London: Verso, 1998), 75–76. See also: Wood, *Democracy Against Capitalism*, 51–52; Perry Anderson, *In the Tracks of Historical Materialism* (London: Verso, 1983), 50–55; Balibar, ‘Structuralism’, *Differences*, 10–11.

⁸⁰ Warren Montag, *Louis Althusser* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 13–14.

⁸¹ Wood, *Democracy Against Capitalism*, 8.

⁸² Roy Bhaskar, ‘Determinism’, in Tom Bottomore and others, eds., *A Dictionary of Marxist Thought*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), 139–141 (139). See also Karl R. Popper, *The Open Universe: An Argument for Indeterminism*, ed. by W. W. Bartley (London: Routledge, 1982), 36.

meaningfully different from what preceded it: the actions of the agents would remain subject to an external cause. In importing the alien current of structuralism into Marxism, Althusser was recreating a discredited faux-Marxism associated with Stalinism and the Second International *against* authentic Marxism. And when Althusser is treated as a post-structuralist, he is being claimed as a member of its marxisant offshoot, post-Marxism.

The two principal charges that emerge from within Marxism are these: First, structuralist Marxism reduces the subject to an effect of the structure; thus it is impossible to conceive of emancipation as self-determination for, prior to the action of the structure, there is no self. If this is the case, then the agents are permanently condemned to reside within a social order that produces them rather than being produced by them. Second, insofar as Althusser conceives of class struggle at all, it is only the effect of some other mechanism (the interplay of the instances of the structure) and thus *epiphenomenal*. Class struggle does not itself affect the course of history in a significant way. Alongside these are the linked charges of elitism—that Althusser’s doctrine involved providing a science that could only be understood by a minority of specialists, compared to the majority who were trapped in the illusions of ideology, and Stalinism—that irrespective of explicit agreement with Stalin, Althusser’s work amounted to theoretical support for Stalinism (‘Althusserianism is Stalinism reduced to the paradigm of Theory’).⁸³

If ‘the whole purpose of historical materialism’ is to permit the exercise of ‘*a real*

⁸³ Thompson, *Poverty of Theory*, 245–46; Rancière, *Althusser’s Lesson*; Lefebvre, *Au-delà du structuralisme*, 380–85; Clarke, ‘Althusserian Marxism’, *One-Dimensional Marxism*, 16–25; Russell Jacoby, *Dialectic of Defeat: Contours of Western Marxism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 36; Steven B. Smith, ‘Althusser’s Marxism Without a Knowing Subject’, *The American Political Science Review*, 79:3 (1985), 641–55; John Fraser, ‘Louis Althusser on Science, Marxism and Politics’, *Science & Society*, 40:4 (1976), 438–64; Tony McKenna, ‘Against Post-Marxism: How Post-Marxism Annuls Class-Based Historicism and the Possibility of Revolutionary Practice’, *International Critical Thought*, 4:2 (2014), 142–59 (142–48); William E. Connolly, *Appearance and Reality in Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 41–62; Jay, *Marxism and Totality*, 405, 412; Chris Harman, ‘Philosophy and Revolution’, *International Socialism*, 2, 21 (1983), 58–87; Tony Judt, *Marxism and the French Left: Studies in Labour and Politics in France, 1830–1981* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), 215; Jordan Humphries, ‘Althusser, Ideology, and Stalinism: A Response to Andrew Ryder’, *International Socialist Review*, 102 (2016) <<http://isreview.org/issue/102/althusser-ideology-and-stalinism>>; Creaven, “‘Two Marxisms’”, *Journal of Critical Realism*, 23. Cf. on elitism: ‘Those who regarded Louis Althusser’s brand of Marxism as elitist because they imagined academic Theory delivering austere scientific lectures to a befuddled proletarian Ideology seemed to assume that working people cannot be theoreticians and intellectuals cannot be ideological. There may be other reasons for objecting to the Althusserian model, but this particular one revealed more about the spontaneous prejudices of the critic than of the author’; Terry Eagleton, ‘Lenin in the Postmodern Age’, in *Lenin Reloaded: Toward a Politics of Truth*, ed. by Sebastian Budgen, Stathis Kouvelakis, and Slavoj Žižek (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), 42–58 (45–46). Cf. on Stalinism: ‘Althusser’s savage indictment of the bureaucratic regime and sectarian politics of the PCF made the notion of him as the personification of Stalinism patently ridiculous ... it is probably safe to say that Althusser’s manifesto of April 1978 is the most violent oppositional charter ever published within a party in the post-war history of Western Communism’; Perry Anderson, *Arguments Within English Marxism* (London: Verso, 1980), 113.

popular self-determination for the first time in history’, by providing ‘a causal knowledge of historical processes capable of furnishing the basis for an adequate political practice in the present, aimed at transforming the existing social order into a prepared, popular future’, then far from producing a superior historical materialism Althusser seemed to suggest Marxism’s aims were an impossible dream.⁸⁴ These criticisms amount to Althusser’s assimilation into the tradition of ‘socialism-from-above’, alongside Stalinism and the Second International. What these currents had in common was their teleological and reductionist understandings of historical materialism coupled with forms of political practice that eschewed mass participation. By teleological it is meant that there is a necessary course of development inscribed in the historical process towards a terminus, and by reductionist it is meant that what caused this necessary development can be located at one point—the economy, for example. These are the two most frequent forms in which the aforementioned determinism is found in Marxism. The central debate in this respect is between those who argue that the development of productive forces is the principal factor in causal explanations of the historical process, the main position in orthodox Marxism, and those who argue that class struggle is the principal factor.⁸⁵ Taken to their extremes, the former position collapses the Marxist political project into its scientific one—for if we prove that history will take a certain path, then the effectiveness of, and thus need for, political action is diminished if not abolished—and the latter the scientific project into its political one—political goals were attained by acts of will, the propagation of moral ideals, unburdened by objective constraints. Pure necessity versus pure contingency. Determinism versus voluntarism.

If structuralist readings of Althusser saw him as part of the first current, some responses to his aleatory materialism located him at the extreme edge of the second, and as having belatedly relinquished attempts to provide a science of history in favour of a pluralism that had no unifying logic.⁸⁶ If structuralist Marxism was supposed to have made empirical history irrelevant with its absolute determinism, aleatory materialism gave over to history without a narrative, a random sequence of events without identifiable patterns. In holding to the determination of the economy in the last instance, Althusser had retained an essentialism that the thrust of his work otherwise denied.⁸⁷ As Resnick and Wolff wrote, commenting on Althusser’s work up to the mid-1970s, Althusser ‘cannot see a way finally to let go of the ontological sort of primacy and privilege

⁸⁴ Ibid, 22, 85.

⁸⁵ See Vivek Chibber, ‘What Is Living and What Is Dead in the Marxist Theory of History?’, *Historical Materialism*, 19:2 (2011), 60–91.

⁸⁶ Antonio Negri, ‘Notes on the Evolution of the Thought of the Later Althusser’, in *Postmodern Materialism*, 51–68; Miguel Vatter, ‘Machiavelli After Marx: The Self-Overcoming of Marxism in the Late Althusser’, *Theory & Event*, 7:4 (2005) <muse.jhu.edu/article/244122>; Isabelle Garo, *Foucault, Deleuze, Althusser & Marx : La Politique Dans La Philosophie* (Paris: Demopolis, 2011), 354–60.

⁸⁷ John Grant, *Dialectics and Contemporary Politics* (London: Routledge, 2011), 44–45; Jay, *Marxism and Totality*, 408–9; Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, 98; Mark G. E. Kelly, ‘Foucault against Marxism: Althusser beyond Althusser’, in *(Mis)Readings of Marx in Continental Philosophy*, ed. by Jernej Habjan and Jessica Whyte (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 83–98 (90–91).

accorded the economic in and for Marxian theory'.⁸⁸ Aleatory materialism can then be seen as the realisation of its abandonment.⁸⁹

The consequences of this manoeuvre are not always thought through. The privilege accorded to the causal role of class struggle only makes sense if the economic field upon which class is founded is given analytical primacy in our accounts of social structures. Class is important *because* it is a division produced by the instance that plays the largest role in characterising the whole. Resnick and Wolff are incoherent on this point, claiming to retain class as an entry point, thus preserving the possibility of a science of history, while jettisoning the essentialism of the economy as an idealist leftover.⁹⁰ As are Callari and Ruccio, claiming that 'a Marxist discourse on politics must be a discourse on class politics'.⁹¹ But what makes a *class* politics, as opposed to any other kind of politics, special if there is nothing particularly noteworthy about the field on which classes are formed? Laclau and Mouffe at least follow through on the logic of this, arguing that class is only one form of antagonism among many others of equal weight.⁹² The conclusion that follows is the replacement of the goal of communism, which can retain no exceptional status, with that of radical democracy.⁹³

Whatever the merits or otherwise post-Marxist thought might have, it is not the direction Althusser took. He retained the core conceptual apparatus of historical materialism and made no claim to having given up on the project of a science of history as a general explanatory framework, nor of communism as a political goal. Thus it is a central contention of this thesis that aleatory materialism is best understood as a contribution to Marxism, rather than as an exit from it. In his aleatory materialist phase, Althusser was aligned with those interpretations of historical materialism that emphasise class struggle. He was not a determinist, but nor did he abandon a concept of structure as mode of production—a concept dependent on emphasising the role of the economic instance. Rather than rejecting empirical history in favour of structuralist synchronic analysis, we see that Althusser argued that empirical historical analysis is the only sufficient way of examining transitions between structures. Althusser is best understood as aligned with a tradition of 'socialism-from-below', the defining principle of which is 'the emancipation of the working classes must be conquered by the working classes themselves'.⁹⁴ Read as such, aleatory materialism appears as a new phase of the project that Althusser had pursued since the 1960s, of charting a left-wing exit from Stalinism and other forms of 'vulgar Marxism'—of trying to restore Marxism as an

⁸⁸ Stephen Resnick and Richard Wolff, *Knowledge and Class: A Marxian Critique of Political Economy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 93.

⁸⁹ Callari and Ruccio, 'Introduction: Postmodern Materialism and the Future of Marxist Theory', in *Postmodern Materialism*, 1–48 (3–4, 34–35).

⁹⁰ Resnick and Wolff, *Knowledge and Class*, 97.

⁹¹ Callari and Ruccio, 'Introduction', *Postmodern Materialism*, 40.

⁹² Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*.

⁹³ For an account of Althusser's relationship to post-Marxism see Philip Goldstein, *Post-Marxist Theory: An Introduction* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005).

⁹⁴ Karl Marx, 'Provisional Rules of the Association', in Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Marx-Engels Collected Works: Marx and Engels. 1864–1868* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1985), XX, 14–16 (14). On 'socialism-from-above' and 'socialism-from-below' see Hal Draper, *The Two Souls of Socialism* (Berkeley: Independent Socialist Committee, 1966). Cf. Harman, 'Philosophy and Revolution', 66.

emancipatory project, rather than a rationalisation of domination.

The purpose of re-examining Althusser's corpus with aleatory materialism in mind is to show how this idea emerges from pre-existing considerations. Upon their initial publication, Althusser's late texts were 'received ... as the announcement of nothing less than a new project'.⁹⁵ Nevertheless, it is now clear that aleatory materialism does not 'come out of the blue, without any clearly recognizable motivation'.⁹⁶ I do not see aleatory materialism as a '*Kehre*' in Althusser's work, as Negri did, but instead argue that the principal turning point in Althusser's work occurs in 1967 in the redefinition of philosophy from the 'Theory of theoretical practice' to 'class struggle in theory' (see chapter 2). This is not to say there are no further changes in Althusser's views. Chapter 3 is concerned with exposing three of these. These are not, however, the radical reversals one would expect if Althusser was moving from determinism to contingency. The one that may appear (to Marxists) as the most drastic, the rejection of dialectical materialism and its replacement with aleatory materialism, a move which Matheron calls a 'rupture' in Althusser's work, is not really sudden (aside from the change in terminology), but Althusser following through his arguments to their logical conclusions.⁹⁷ The point, then, is that aleatory materialism is only the culmination of long-standing trends in Althusser's work, making it difficult to see his earlier work as simply structuralist, and the later work as post-Marxist.

There is now a significant literature on aleatory materialism that argues for continuities between Althusser's earlier and later work. On this matter, I am aligned with what is now the majority interpretative current. Montag has dismissed the idea that Althusser was ever a structuralist, and thus aleatory materialism's novelty is reduced in this respect.⁹⁸ Pippa has investigated how the thread of contingency runs through Althusser's entire oeuvre.⁹⁹ Elliot also points to the pervasiveness of the problem of contingency.¹⁰⁰ Matheron has argued for the persistence of the concept of 'void' in Althusser's work.¹⁰¹ Sotiris makes a case for Althusser's ongoing Marxism, locating aleatory materialism as 'based on the centrality of the class struggle and the continuing relevance of the communist project'.¹⁰² Lewis has shown that Althusser continues to think of Marxism as a science throughout.¹⁰³ Williams has argued for 'the persistence of

⁹⁵ Warren Montag, 'Spectres of Althusser', *Historical Materialism*, 19:3 (2011), 147–56 (148).

⁹⁶ Frieder Otto Wolf, 'The "Limits of Dialectical Presentation" as a Key Category of Marx's Theoretical Self-Reflection', *Capitalism, Nature, Socialism*, 15:3 (2004), 79–85 (83).

⁹⁷ François Matheron, 'Présentation', in Louis Althusser, *Écrits philosophiques et politiques*, ed. by François Matheron (Paris: Éditions Stock/IMEC, 1994), I, 7–22 (21); my translation.

⁹⁸ Montag, *Althusser and his Contemporaries*.

⁹⁹ Pippa, 'Althusser and Contingency'.

¹⁰⁰ Gregory Elliott, 'The Necessity of Contingency: Some Notes', *Rethinking Marxism*, 10:3 (1998), 74–79.

¹⁰¹ François Matheron, 'The Recurrence of the Void in Louis Althusser', trans. by Erin A. Post, *Rethinking Marxism*, 10:3 (1998), 22–37.

¹⁰² Panagiotis Sotiris, 'Rethinking Aleatory Materialism', in *Encountering Althusser*, 27–41 (29). See also Panagiotis Sotiris, 'The Difficult Encounter with Materialism', *Historical Materialism*, 16:3 (2008), 147–78 (in particular 166–67).

¹⁰³ William Lewis, 'Althusser's Scientism and Aleatory Materialism', *Décalages*, 2:1 (2016), 1–72 <<http://scholar.oxy.edu/decalages/vol2/iss1/22>>.

Spinoza's philosophy throughout his thought'.¹⁰⁴ Goshgarian, the main editor and translator of Althusser's most recently published texts, has vigorously promoted the continuity reading, locating the emergence of the concept of 'encounter' in Althusser's 1958 text on Montesquieu.¹⁰⁵ André Tosel has also taken this view.¹⁰⁶

Situating aleatory materialism as the outcome of lines of thought Althusser had been toying with since, at least, *For Marx* and *Reading Capital* yields an understanding of it having two purposes:

- 1) An underlabourer that supplies the concepts and clarifications that help to resolve problems in the Marxist science of history, historical materialism.
- 2) To justify, clarify, and extend the Marxist political project via philosophical argument.

These are not separate dimensions, but linked, as we will see in chapter 2. In Althusser's view, philosophy mediates between science and politics, such that it either blocks or advances the development of sciences according to the political requirements of a dominant group. Materialist philosophy is that type of philosophy which removes conceptual obstacles in the way of scientific advance, and it is turned to in cases where advances in science would undermine the legitimation strategies of the dominant group. My claim is that aleatory materialism is only explicable when understood with this in mind.

This brings us to the second reason for revisiting Althusser today: aleatory materialism as a contribution to emancipatory social theory. This thesis is intended not only to revise our understanding of Althusser but also to show the potential of his contribution to resurrecting Marxism as a plausible emancipatory social theory. Althusser's targets in his late work were as they had been since *For Marx* and *Reading Capital*, namely the presence of idealism in Marxist philosophy that hampered its scientific capacities, thereby producing an inaccurate account of the world and a correspondingly insufficient political practice given Marxism's emancipatory goals. The problems Althusser identifies in historical materialism are variously identified as economism, humanism, evolutionism, determinism, historicism, essentialism, fatalism, mechanism, technicism, teleology, and functionalism. These prevent scientific understanding, and it is philosophy's task to displace them so that science can resume its work. I explore Althusser's critique of humanism in chapter 2, but this acts merely as an index for a wider problem that I examine in chapter 3. Althusser's central contention is that these errors have a common source. They are the consequence of

¹⁰⁴ Caroline Williams, 'Althusser and Spinoza: The Enigma of the Subject', in *Encountering Althusser*, 153–63 (154).

¹⁰⁵ G. M. Goshgarian, 'The Very Essence of the Object, the Soul of Marxism and Other Singular Things: Spinoza in Althusser 1959–67', in *Encountering Althusser*, 89–111; Goshgarian, 'Translators Introduction', in Althusser, *Philosophy of the Encounter*, xiii–l. For Althusser's work on Montesquieu see Louis Althusser, 'Montesquieu: Politics and History', in *Politics and History: Montesquieu, Rousseau, Marx*, trans. by Ben Brewster (London: Verso, 2007), 9–109.

¹⁰⁶ André Tosel, 'De la théorie structurale à la conjoncture aléatoire', *La Pensée*, 382 (2015), 31–45 (33–34).

taking something that should be explained by the theory as its foundation.¹⁰⁷

There are, roughly divided, three schools of Marxist thought that Althusser seeks to take on this way: Stalinism, the Second International, and Western Marxism. The first two based themselves on a version of historical materialism which took the growth of the productive forces as the principal causal mechanism that explained major historical transitions.¹⁰⁸ Expanding forces of production at some point conflicted with prevailing relations of production, provoking agents to change those relations to more suitable ones. The process of history is thus conceived as progressive, the forces of production will improve come what may, and linear, it follows a set trajectory, and generally towards a terminus—communism.¹⁰⁹ The political effect of this theory depended on the type of society in which it was deployed. In the Eastern Bloc, it legitimated repression in the name of developing the forces of production as the overriding objective. In the capitalist West, the theory permitted passivity—either revolutionary political action could always be deferred given that socialism was an inevitable eventuality, or else the failure of this vision to come true showed that the real task was to advance a moral ideal within capitalism, not against it.¹¹⁰

Western Marxism, itself an attempt to escape these positions, is a more complex case because unlike the first two schools it had no organisational or doctrinal unity, nor any substantial degree of self-identification by its proponents. It is a case that demands considerably more sympathy. Western Marxism denotes a current of Marxism that emerged mainly in Western Europe from the end of the First World War until the 1980s.¹¹¹ For the most part, its theorists wrote from outside the ranks of either the Stalinist or Second International parties and expounded versions of Marxism heavily influenced by Hegel. Western Marxism's foundational text, Lukács *History and Class Consciousness* (1923), set the tone in this respect. Althusser fits neither of these criteria, but nevertheless tends—not unreasonably—to be included within the category of Western Marxism.¹¹² He is as good an example as anyone of the Western Marxist disposition towards issues of method, ideology, and culture. He nevertheless took his distance from the majority current in Western Marxism, arguing that if the Second International and Stalinism denied the efficacy of politics then Western Marxists tended to commit an opposite mistake by eroding the specificity of science. For many Western Marxists, what made Marxism valid was its attachment to a particular class,

¹⁰⁷ That there is a connection between social scientific errors such as functionalism and teleology and a 'speculative philosophy of history' is also the view of Elster; Jon Elster, 'Further Thoughts on Marxism, Functionalism and Game Theory', in *Analytical Marxism*, ed. by John Roemer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 202–20 (206).

¹⁰⁸ Althusser, *On the Reproduction*, 209–17.

¹⁰⁹ For Marx's most succinct statement of this view see Karl Marx, 'A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy', in Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Marx-Engels Collected Works: Marx, 1857–1861* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1987), XXIX, 257–417 (261–65).

¹¹⁰ Lucio Colletti, *From Rousseau to Lenin: Studies in Ideology and Society*, trans. by John Merrington and Judith White (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1972), 46–108.

¹¹¹ On Western Marxism see: Perry Anderson, *Considerations on Western Marxism* (London: Verso, 1979); Douglas Kellner, 'Western Marxism', in *Modern Social Theory: An Introduction*, ed. by Austin Harrington (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 154–74; Jacoby, *Dialectic of Defeat*.

¹¹² Jay, *Marxism and Totality*, 387–90, 412–17.

the proletariat, of whom it was the theoretical expression. The proletariat's role as the only class that could found a classless society permitted it a special knowledge of history denied to other classes. The proletariat was the subject-object of history, as Lukács argued, to whom the process of history could become transparent because of its particular location within that process.¹¹³ Thus Marxism was a manifestation of a movement present in history towards communism, at which stage the divisions present in the world were set to be reconciled. However elegant such a theory might be, it bears little relation to how scientific knowledge is generally conceived as an objective account that has nothing to say about normative values. Western Marxism denied to itself an adequate scientific account by making historical materialism a justificatory prop for Marxism's political goals. The move was self-defeating, for by doing so it could provide neither science nor a political practice capable of realising its emancipatory ambitions.¹¹⁴

As Elliott notes, 'the scandal of Althusser's assault upon these doctrines was his identification of them as mirror-images, resembling each other in their underlying theoretical structure'.¹¹⁵ The common denominator, in Althusser's view, for all three of these schools was a reliance on Hegelian dialectics. The Marxist dialectic, he argued in *For Marx*, was totally different from the Hegelian one, in which history was the unfolding of Spirit and its eventual reconciliation in a higher unity. It had to be if Marxism was to resemble anything like what can be reasonably called a science. The role of Marxist philosophy was to provide categories that could appreciate history as a dynamic process and which could equip agents with the tools to affect it, without treating history as trending towards a given goal. To do so would be both to damage the potential for understanding the process and for influencing it. The presence of such a view in Marxist thought was the result of *idealist* philosophy. Idealism, of which Hegelian dialectics was an example, hampered this project by introducing elements into the theory that prevented it from being scientific. The task, then, was to make Marxist philosophy as thoroughly materialist as possible in order to make Marxist science as thoroughly scientific as possible so as to, in turn, make Marxist political practice as effective as possible.

There is another notable response from within Marxism to the presence of Hegelianism, namely Analytical Marxism.¹¹⁶ Analytical Marxists identified Hegelian dialectics, like

¹¹³ Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, trans. by Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1971).

¹¹⁴ For accounts of these debates see: Alex Callinicos, *Althusser's Marxism* (London: Pluto Press, 1976), 10–29; Dick Howard, 'The Historical Context', in *The Unknown Dimension: European Marxism since Lenin*, ed. by Dick Howard and Karl E. Klare (New York: Basic Books, 1972), 34–78; Jay, *Marxism and Totality*, 1–20; Peter Thomas, *The Gramscian Moment: Philosophy, Hegemony and Marxism* (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 1–35; Colletti, *From Rousseau to Lenin*.

¹¹⁵ Gregory Elliott, 'Althusser's Solitude', *Economy and Society*, 17:4 (1988), 480–98 (485); Elliott, *Detour of Theory*, 368.

¹¹⁶ For some examples of Analytical Marxism see: Jon Elster, *Making Sense of Marx* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985); G. A. Cohen, *Karl Marx's Theory of History: A Defence* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000); Alex Callinicos, ed., *Marxist Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989); Roemer, *Analytical Marxism*.

Althusser, as the intrusion of ideology into science and, although expressed in very different registers, both Althusser and Analytical Marxists reject Hegelian dialectics on similar grounds. While there is no reason to think Analytical Marxists would have endorsed aleatory materialism, and probably good reason to think otherwise, there seems to be more affinity between the two schools than most of the original Analytical Marxists of the September Group might have liked to admit.¹¹⁷

For Analytical Marxists there are ‘no methods which are *both* defensible *and* uniquely Marxist. What properly divides Marxist and non-Marxist accounts are their substantive concerns and normative commitments, not the methods that they adopt’.¹¹⁸ Althusser is in agreement with Analytical Marxism that Marxist social theory need not be committed to any uniquely Marxist methodological approach. As I will establish in chapter 4, the kind of method Althusser thought was appropriate for investigating the substantive concerns of Marxists can be found in many non-Marxist sources upon which we can fruitfully draw. What Althusser does not share with Analytical Marxism is a positivist view of science. From an Althusserian perspective, Analytical Marxism is insufficiently attentive to the nature of philosophy as a partisan discourse motivated by political conflict, and consequently how politics plays a role in science. Althusser’s view is that Marx did not realise the extent to which he made use of a philosophical apparatus which served as a justification for existing forms of social power.

Marx’s work, according to Althusser, contained elements of both idealist and materialist philosophies, both science and ideology. The question, then, is not one of extracting Marx’s method against its misunderstandings, for the approaches of the Second International and Stalinism might be bad historical materialism but may not be incorrect readings of Marx, but nor is it simply a question of turning to ‘mainstream’ social scientific approaches, as is the main impetus behind Analytical Marxism, which may suffer from the same problems. And one need only note the affinity between Cohen’s non-dialectical ‘development thesis’ and the dialectical evolutionist accounts of the Second International to think that this could be the case.¹¹⁹ There is no means of

¹¹⁷ See: Cohen, *Karl Marx’s Theory of History*, x, xxi–xxii; G. A. Cohen, ‘Complete Bullshit’, in *Finding Oneself in the Other*, ed. by Michael Otsuka (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), 94–114 (91–92). Cf. William Lewis, ‘Is There Less Bullshit in *For Marx* than in *Reading Capital?*’, *Crisis and Critique*, 2:2 (2015), 143–65 (in particular 157–61); Callinicos, ‘What is Living and What is Dead in the Philosophy of Althusser’, in *The Althusserian Legacy*, ed. by Michael Sprinker and E. Ann Kaplan (London: Verso, 1993), 39–49. Erik Olin Wright is an exception to this rule, see Erik Olin Wright, *Class, Crisis and the State* (London: Verso, 1978). Levine has offered an attentive account of Althusser from an Analytical Marxist perspective, writing that ‘analytical Marxism is of great importance if Marxism is to have a future; postmodern Marxism is not. Ironically, it is fair to enlist Althusser in support of this judgment. What is living in his thinking is consistent with and continued by analytical Marxism. Postmodern Marxisms, on the other hand, build on the obscurantist, programmatic and confused side of Althusser’s work’; Andrew Levine, *A Future for Marxism?: Althusser, the Analytical Turn, and the Revival of Socialist Theory* (London: Pluto Press, 2003), 122.

¹¹⁸ David Leopold, ‘Dialectical Approaches’, in *Political Theory: Methods and Approaches*, ed. by David Leopold and Marc Stears (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 106–27 (119).

¹¹⁹ See Cohen, *Karl Marx’s Theory of History*, 134. Additionally, note Cohen’s later abandonment of historical materialism, retaining only the view of socialism as an ethical ideal, a trajectory closely tracking that taken by the Second International; see G. A. Cohen, *If You’re*

proving beyond doubt what is and what is not true; theories can only be assessed by their relative successes in organising the evidence into an explanatory account. The problem is one of learning to recognise what remains ideological about a discourse and challenging it and, in doing so, hopefully improving its knowledge-producing capacity. Consequently, Althusser, unlike Analytical Marxism, thought that the issue of which method is appropriate for the kind of investigations Marxists want to perform remained relevant.

There are two main problems to which I understand Althusser to be directing himself with aleatory materialism. The first is the problem of transitions. How can we think the permanence of structure and its *reproduction*, with the temporariness of conjuncture and the possibility of *production* that it poses? How can we think of one structure becoming another structure without an intermediary moment of deconstruction, a point where no structure is present? This was identified as an open problem in *Reading Capital* but no adequate solution was provided there.¹²⁰ I argue that there is an unresolved tension in Althusser's earlier work between structure and conjuncture and that aleatory materialism is an attempt at a resolution—not the rejection of the former in favour of the latter. Thus I disagree with Yann Moulier Boutang when he says that Althusser moved towards 'the abandonment of historical materialism, with the crisis of Marxism, the scientific apparatus of laws of history (mode of production, succession, transition)', with Yves Vargas' claim that 'Althusser threatened materialism itself, as he risked throwing out the materialist baby with the dialectical bathwater', with Isabelle Garo who argues that 'the materialism of the encounter ... leads to ... the disappearance of the theme of class struggle along with any revolutionary perspective' replacing them a Foucauldian 'micro-politics', and with Tosel's view that 'the sciences and knowledge lose their theoretical interest in front of the recognition of the void as foundations without foundation'.¹²¹ Althusser does not become a relativist, as has been argued, about knowledge of history or any other kind of knowledge.¹²² Contrary to Perry Anderson's 1983 assertion that Althusser 'showed little haste to resolve' the crisis of Marxism he had himself declared, Althusser had already set about trying to do just that when those words went to print.¹²³ Althusser's response to the crisis of Marxism he had acknowledged in 1977 was to abandon dialectical materialism in order to offer a more

an Egalitarian, How Come You're So Rich? (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), 108–9.

¹²⁰ Louis Althusser, 'The Object of *Capital*', in Althusser and others, *Reading Capital*, 215–355 (353).

¹²¹ Yann Moulier Boutang, 'L'Interdit biographique et l'autorisation de l'œuvre', in *Lire Althusser aujourd'hui*, 75–114 (100); Yves Vargas, 'L'Horreur dialectique (description d'un itinéraire)', in *Althusser : une lecture de Marx*, ed. by Jean-Claude Bourdin (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2008), 147–92 (184); Isabelle Garo, "'Il pleut": matérialisme de la rencontre et politique du vide chez le dernier Althusser', in *Autour d'Althusser*, 164–85 (174, 184); André Tosel, 'Matérialisme de la rencontre et pensée de l'événement-miracle', in *Autour d'Althusser*, 19–53 (44); my translations. For other similar interpretations see: Zhang Yibing, *Althusser Revisited*, trans. by Yang Liu and others (Istanbul: Canut International Publishers, 2003), 321–28; Banu Bargu, 'In the Theater of Politics: Althusser's Aleatory Materialism and Aesthetics', *Diacritics*, 40:3 (2012), 86–113 (96).

¹²² Geoff Pfeifer, *The New Materialism: Althusser, Badiou, and Žižek* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 48.

¹²³ Anderson, *In the Tracks*, 30.

consistent materialism that might help to rectify the deficiencies of Marxist social theory.

Nevertheless, even if I disagree that Althusser exchanged historical materialism for 'pure political practice' there is certainly an expansion in the political dimension of Althusser's philosophy from 1967 onwards.¹²⁴ Thus the second main problem is the linked issue of politics. How can we think of the transition from one structure to another in a way such that the second is not the *necessary* consequence of the first? In order to do so, one must turn to politics as the domain in which agents can act in ways that are productive of new social forms. The difficulty, however, lies in conceptualising politics as something other than wholly determined by the existing structure. Novel not just in the sense of not seen before, but also as something that was not contained in the former structure and merely brought to fruition. That there may be many determinations of the structure, and not just one, avoids the problem of the teleological linear trajectory and strict readings of the base/superstructure metaphor of orthodox Marxism, but it continues to efface the possibility of politics as a creative arena with its own effectivity. It is to say that nothing is genuinely *new*, but always-already pre-exists its coming into being. Thus what is objectionable in determinist accounts would not be answered, particularly from the perspective of the creation of a free political order as the conscious choice of the agents, because those agents can do no more than act out imperatives that precede and exclude any influence on their own part.

¹²⁴ Moulier Boutang, 'L'Interdit biographique', 101; my translation.

2. Philosophy and Science

In this chapter, I discuss the evolution of Althusser's definition of philosophy, first as the Theory of theoretical practice and second as the class struggle in theory, before moving to his reinterpretation of historical materialism. The purpose is to highlight some of the arguments and problems that concerned Althusser in order to provide a foundation upon which to interpret aleatory materialism.

In 2.1 I review Althusser's definition of Marxist philosophy as the 'Theory of theoretical practice', his initial and most well-known formulation. The Theory of theoretical practice is a synonym for dialectical materialism, which Althusser proposed be understood as the science of the sciences. Dialectical materialism validated the status of historical materialism as a science. I then move to discuss humanism and empiricism, two kinds of error that Althusser thought had intruded upon historical materialism, making it less scientific than it otherwise could be, by proposing fixed elements that were themselves exempt from explanation. I highlight a number of criticisms levelled at this stage of Althusser's work in order to show that Althusser is unable to provide an interpretation of Marxist philosophy that is not vulnerable to the same criticisms that he makes of other philosophies. Consequently, Althusser is forced to abandon this definition of philosophy. The section closes by showing how Althusser arrives at an alternative way of thinking about science that does not rely on a philosophical guarantee of truth, namely fallibilism, in which sciences can be reasonably assured they are producing knowledge but never that that knowledge is unsurpassable.

In 2.2 I detail the next stage of development of Althusser's definition of philosophy, a shift that occurs in the 1967–68 period, particularly in its interrelation with the domains of science and politics. I demonstrate and justify why Althusser thought Marxist philosophy in particular warranted further investigation. Rather than an arbiter of truth, as with the Theory of theoretical practice, Althusser now defined philosophy as the class struggle in theory: the expression of the relationship of politics to science. Althusser argued that there are two kinds of philosophy, idealism and materialism. The former inhibited the progress of the sciences and was deployed when groups stood to lose out from additional knowledge. The latter aided the development of the sciences and was deployed when groups stood to gain from additional knowledge. Althusser thus drew a link between emancipatory politics and scientific advance.

In 2.3 I survey Althusser's reconstruction of historical materialism in light of his materialist philosophy. I am principally concerned here with his distinctive notion of structure, developed around the concepts of structural causality and overdetermination. I argue that Althusser's work at this point pulls in two different directions, split between structure and conjuncture, and no viable synthesis is presented. I hone in on the problem of transitions between modes of production—how supposedly static structures give way to new structures—as the key problem in

Althusser's account. I present some of Althusser's pre-aleatory thinking on this issue as an indication of what is to come in later chapters.

2.1 Theory of Theoretical Practice

In this section, I outline Althusser's first definition of philosophy as the Theory of Theoretical Practice and why it fails. The aim is to establish the primary characteristics of Althusser's project in the two texts that brought him to fame, *For Marx* (1965) and *Reading Capital* (1965), and contemporaneous work that helps to clarify the issues at stake. This is important in order for us to see what is retained and what is rejected from this stage of Althusser's work and why that is.

It was Marx's innovation, Althusser claimed, to have formulated a philosophy that was scientific. Marx's philosophical ideas were an advance over his predecessors on account of having captured in thought the real structure of the world, hence dialectical materialism stood alone in being 'based on the processes of material nature'.¹ The idea is that 'dialectical thinking only reflects the dialectical structure of the world which is thought about'.² This revolution in philosophy was brought about by Marx's combination of two pre-existing elements: 'dialectics' and 'materialism'.³ Materialism was simply an adherence to realism: the view that there is a reality separate from and prior to an observer.⁴ 'Dialectics' was the name given to the law(s) which governed the structure of reality: the 'law of transformation, the law of the development of real processes'.⁵ Together they constitute a commitment to an objective world that has a particular structure.

Pre-Marxian philosophy, on this view, was *ideological*. The role of ideological philosophy was to act as 'the highest form of the theorization of ideology ... born of ideology, but itself treated as theory'.⁶ Or what Althusser would later call the 'theoretical laboratory in which the fundamentally political problem of ideological hegemony ... is experimentally put to the test'.⁷ Philosophy in this guise provided justifications and rationalisations for systems of ideology. The philosophical component of an ideological system of thought provided it with rational support, and in doing so sought to defend that ideological system from challenge. Ideological philosophy helped to make ideologies appear more plausible than they would otherwise be in their raw, undertheorised, states. Here it is already possible to see an anticipation of the political dimension to Althusser's definition of philosophy that would emerge in his work from

¹ Louis Althusser, 'Theory, Theoretical Practice and Theoretical Formation: Ideology and Ideological Struggle', in *Spontaneous Philosophy*, 1–42 (9).

² Allen Wood, *Karl Marx* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 217.

³ Althusser, 'Theoretical Practice', *Spontaneous Philosophy*, 9.

⁴ Althusser, 'Object of *Capital*', *Reading Capital*, 232; Althusser, 'Theoretical Practice', *Spontaneous Philosophy*, 9; Alex Callinicos, *Marxism and Philosophy* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983), 114–15; Alex Callinicos, *Is There a Future for Marxism?* (London: Macmillan, 1982), 175; John Bellamy Foster, *Marx's Ecology: Materialism and Nature* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2000), 2.

⁵ Althusser, 'Theoretical Practice', *Spontaneous Philosophy*, 9.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 27.

⁷ Althusser, 'Philosophy and Marxism', *Philosophy of the Encounter*, 287.

1967 onwards and is the subject of section 2.2 below. For now, I will focus on Althusser's epistemological definition of philosophy that is dominant at this stage of his work.

Dialectical materialism was what Althusser called the 'Theory of theoretical practice'.⁸ What Althusser meant by theoretical practice was the kind of activities we perform in order to produce knowledge about something.⁹ The reason for emphasising the concept of practice is to break with the idea of reality as something that is pre-given and remains the same even as we encounter it. What we are to understand by foregrounding practice is that the world is continuously being made and remade; indeed, it is only ever undergoing transformation of one kind or another. What was transformed in the process of theoretical practice was not the real object being studied, but a *thought-object*. Henceforth the activity of science should not be understood as observation but as interaction with these thought-objects. The claim is that there is 'an analytical separation of ideas and bodies, each of which must be considered in their peculiarity and irreducibility to the other'.¹⁰ Theoretical practice, Althusser argued, 'constitutes a process that takes place *entirely in thought*' in the same way that 'economic production takes place entirely in the economy'.¹¹

Dialectical materialism was the 'Theory' of this process: it was the knowledge of the mechanism of knowledge production, hence a scientific philosophy, or what we could otherwise call the science of the sciences. Science, in this view, was a social activity like any other in which labour was applied to some raw material to create a new product—hence theoretical *practice*. If economic practice was 'the transformation of nature' then theoretical practice was the transformation of 'representations, concepts, facts'.¹² This view entails a commitment to naturalism, viz. that both the natural and social worlds were both intransitive objects open to scientific inquiry.¹³ Dialectical materialism is

⁸ Althusser, 'Materialist Dialectic', *For Marx*, 171.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 167–73, 182–93.

¹⁰ Hasana Sharp, 'The Force of Ideas in Spinoza', *Political Theory*, 35:6 (2007), 732–55 (737).

¹¹ Louis Althusser, 'From *Capital* to Marx's Philosophy', in Althusser and others, *Reading Capital*, 9–72 (42).

¹² Althusser, 'Theoretical Practice', *Spontaneous Philosophy*, 8; Althusser, 'Materialist Dialectic', *For Marx*, 166–67.

¹³ Callinicos, *Marxism and Philosophy*, 97. A commitment to naturalism does not, however, entail a further commitment to positivism; see Roy Bhaskar, 'On the Possibility of Social Scientific Knowledge and the Limits of Naturalism', in *Issues in Marxist Philosophy: Epistemology, Science, Ideology*, ed. by John Mepham and David-Hillel Ruben (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1979), III, 107–39 (108–9). I understand Althusser to be an adherent of naturalism but not positivism. Positivism is an idea of science defined by four criteria: 1) Rejection of a distinction between essence and phenomenon, 2) nominalism, 3) distinction between facts and values, 4) unity of the scientific method. As will become clear, Althusser assented to the first three of these propositions but rejected the fourth. The fourth is the view that all sciences are essentially the same, and have the potential to be, through their further development, reduced to a single universal science (usually taken to be physics). Althusser thought that sciences accord to specific objects, such that the concepts and logic of one science may not necessarily be appropriate for another. On positivism see Leszek Kolakowski, *Positivist Philosophy: From Hume to the Vienna Circle*, trans. by Norbert Guterman (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972), 9–19. (Cf. Althusser's own definition of positivism as science without philosophy; Louis Althusser, 'Philosophy as a Revolutionary Weapon: Interview conducted by Maria Antoniette Macciocchi', in *Lenin and Philosophy*, 1–9 (3)). For

ultimately a claim that ideas and what those ideas are about have the same structure. It is because those real objects can be reflected in thought that knowledge is possible.

We must then clarify the definition of materialism set out at the start. Althusser is asserting a monist ontology rather than a dualist one and his definition of materialism as the primacy of the being over thought will be misleading unless this is understood.¹⁴ Althusser's materialism exceeds what is strictly necessitated by a realist commitment alone. He does not just assert the primacy of being over thought but understands them as two different aspects of the same reality. The real object and knowledge of it were two attributes of the same thing which never came into contact: 'the two attributes never touch; they never coincide'.¹⁵ The idea of a thing and the thing remained in the form of a relation with one another. The labour of science on knowledge aimed to produce more exact knowledge, but there was never a point of 'Absolute Knowledge' in which the real object became known in its entirety.

This theoretical practice, the transformation of thought-objects, constituted a different level of reality to the objects it studied (which could be political, economic, natural etc.) but it was nevertheless also *real*. The real object that the theoretical practice was attempting to understand was not modified by the process of producing knowledge about it. As Benton puts it, 'in transforming the *concept* of matter, the scientist does not transform matter'.¹⁶ One pertinent example here is history, a word which refers to both the *actual course of events* and the *study of those events*. Althusser was trying to get us to appreciate that these are two entirely different things. Studying the past will not alter it (although knowledge about it may produce effects in the present or future). Both are aspects of reality, but they are separated by an unbridgeable gulf.

Althusser is rejecting a *correspondence* theory of knowledge, in which the activity of science was that of conforming thoughts to objects. As Bhaskar argues, 'thought has a reality not to be confused or identified with the reality of its objects ... there is no correspondence, no conformity, no similarity between objects and thought'.¹⁷ What the activity of science transforms is other thoughts. Dialectical materialism was superior to ideological philosophy because of its supposedly accurate description of what was being done in theoretical practice. Against the 'errors and illusions' of other epistemologies knowledge of theoretical practice would permit the scientist to 'really master his own practice'.¹⁸ It is with dialectical materialism that Althusser set out his answer to one half of philosophy's epistemological question: how it is that we are able to know. The promise of dialectical materialism is to show that what we are doing really is science

those who argue Althusser is a positivist see, for examples: Larrain, *Concept of Ideology*, 195–99; Lewis, 'Althusser Case (Part 2)', *Marxism Today*, 46.

¹⁴ Cf. Althusser, 'Materialist Dialectic', *For Marx*, 201–2 fn. 42.

¹⁵ Knox Peden, *Spinoza Contra Phenomenology: French Rationalism from Cavailles to Deleuze* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2014), 159.

¹⁶ Benton, *Structural Marxism*, 37.

¹⁷ Roy Bhaskar, *A Realist Theory of Science* (London: Routledge, 2008), 241.

¹⁸ Althusser, 'Theoretical Practice', *Spontaneous Philosophy*, 12.

and not ideology.¹⁹

What this Theory of theoretical practice allowed us to do is to demarcate science from ideology by identifying a difference in their *problematic*. A problematic, for Althusser, was the ‘theoretical structure’ which constituted ‘the absolute determination of *the forms in which all problems must be posed*’.²⁰ The problematic of a theory denoted its underlying foundation and determined what was, or could be, visible to a given theory. We see the world through a set of ideas, and these ideas dispose us towards seeing the world in a certain way. A problematic was a *system* of concepts in that it was not only the available concepts that were important but their arrangement and relation to one another.²¹ This organisation of concepts determined what phenomena an adherent was conditioned towards prioritising. The questions we are liable to ask were dependent upon this problematic. To move from one problematic to another was to undergo a shift in vision, such that the same phenomena could appear differently when seen through a different conceptual framework. Equally, new phenomena may become visible where they previously were not.²² The claim is that ‘observations are theory-laden’ and that if you ‘start with different theories, you will see different things’.²³

With this, Althusser challenged the view that meaning could be gleaned from the words of a statement alone. Only by looking at the way words were organised into a system could their meaning be understood. This idea militates against any theory of elements or appearances, in which the meaning of statements is apparent from a simple reconstruction of its components.²⁴ The particular elements that comprise a problematic are not the ultimate bearers of meaning. Meaning is conferred by the relations between these elements. For example, the terms ‘social classes’ or ‘class struggle’ are polysemic—they may mean different things dependent on the context in which they are deployed. For a Marxist, the existence of social classes *necessarily* implies class struggle, and this relationship between the terms ‘classes’ and ‘class struggle’ is a distinctive component of Marxist theory.²⁵ Conversely, others may use the terms in such a way as that it was possible for social classes to exist without there being conflict. In the first case, where classes exist so does struggle between them. In the latter, the classes exist independently of whether or not there is a struggle between them, which they can then choose to engage in or not.²⁶ We have two cases in which these terms relate to each other in different ways, and mean different things as a result of that relationship. Consequently, we can see that while the particular terms may be the same what is actually present is two different *concepts*, and we can only appreciate

¹⁹ Althusser, ‘Materialist Dialectic’, *For Marx*, 172.

²⁰ Althusser, ‘Marx’s Philosophy’, *Reading Capital*, 23.

²¹ *Ibid*, 24.

²² See Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996), 111–35.

²³ Meera Nanda, ‘Against Social De(con)struction of Science: Cautionary Tales From the Third World’, in *In Defense of History: Marxism and the Postmodern Agenda*, ed. by Ellen Meiksins Wood and John Bellamy Foster (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1997), 74–96 (80).

²⁴ Montag, *Louis Althusser*, 45.

²⁵ Louis Althusser, ‘Marx in His Limits’, in *Philosophy of the Encounter*, 7–162 (20); Louis Althusser, “On the Young Marx”, in *For Marx*, 49–86 (68).

²⁶ Louis Althusser, ‘Reply to John Lewis’, in *Self-Criticism*, 33–99 (49–50).

this if we interpret the terms within the discursive system as a whole.

The idea of problematics was a challenge to intentionality as the key to understanding meaning.²⁷ The problematic within which a given author operated structured their own understanding of their task. Once this problematic was revealed, their project may be shown to be of a very different nature to how they had understood it themselves or intended it to be. A theory was not reducible to its author. The proper metric for judging a theory, according to Althusser, was neither what was said, nor what one was trying to say, but the effects, or symptoms, of the discourse. Only then could the assumptions at work be unlocked, and its meaning emerge. Taking cues from Saussurian linguistics, some version of this idea was a common theme in the French structuralist and post-structuralist thought of the period.²⁸

It was on this concept of problematics that Althusser staked his analysis of ideological systems of thought. What made an ideological problematic distinct was its circular, question-begging, structure. For ideologies *problems* were provided for *solutions*, precisely the reverse of how we would expect a genuine quest for knowledge to proceed.²⁹ Ideological problematics were incapable of producing new knowledge beyond the limits imposed by their presuppositions. Althusser is not saying ideologies could not contain elements of truth or pose real problems, only that insofar as knowledge existed within an ideology it was subordinated to ‘a *false conception* of the world’.³⁰ Ideology made ‘*allusion* to the real’ but only in an illusory way.³¹

The function of ideology was to either sustain or to bring about sets of social relations by producing subjects that would reproduce them.³² If the dominant ideology in a class society is that of the ruling class, then its principal function can be thought of as ensuring the reproduction of the prevailing ‘division of labour’.³³ Ideologies assigned individuals, through a process Althusser called *interpellation*, to fulfil particular roles in societies in order that those societies might be sustained over time.³⁴ Ideologies were not chiefly concerned with the production of positive knowledge but with the

²⁷ Montag, *Louis Althusser*, 82–83.

²⁸ See, for examples: Giles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *What Is Philosophy?*, trans. by Hugh Tomlinson and Graham Burchell (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 15–21; Roland Barthes, ‘The Death of the Author’, in *Image, Music, Text*, trans. by Stephen Heath (London: Fontana Press, 1977), 142–48. The concept of *episteme* in Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (London: Routledge, 2002); Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Structural Anthropology*, trans. by Claire Jacobson and Brooke Grundfest Schoepf (New York: Basic Books, 1963), 33.

²⁹ Althusser, ‘Marx’s Philosophy’, *Reading Capital*, 53–55.

³⁰ Althusser, ‘Theoretical Practice’, *Spontaneous Philosophy*, 24.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 29.

³² Althusser, ‘Object of Capital’, *Reading Capital*, 334–35; Althusser, ‘Three Notes on the Theory of Discourses’, in *The Humanist Controversy and Other Writings (1966–67)*, ed. by François Matheron, trans. by G. M. Goshgarian (London: Verso, 2003), 33–84 (54–55); Althusser, ‘Ideology’, *Lenin and Philosophy*.

³³ Althusser, ‘Theoretical Practice’, *Spontaneous Philosophy*, 28; Louis Althusser, ‘Marxism and Humanism’, in *For Marx*, 219–47 (234–35).

³⁴ Althusser, ‘Ideology’, *Lenin and Philosophy*, 115–20. On interpellation see Warren Montag, ‘Althusser’s Empty Signifier: What Is the Meaning of the Word “Interpellation”?’ *Mediations*, 30:2 (2017), 63–68.

production of subjects through the propagation of normative values: ‘a relation that expresses a *will* (conservative, conformist, reformist or revolutionary), a hope or a nostalgia, rather than describing a reality’.³⁵

2.1.1 Humanism and Empiricism

One type of ideological theory that Althusser was particularly eager to target was the problematic of *humanism*.³⁶ Althusser was interested in humanism in particular because he thought that it was the most common type of modern ideological strategy generally, but also because he thought Humanist Marxism was a particularly damaging (and prevalent) version of Marxist theory. Humanist theories were grounded on the view that the individual, or subject, was a privileged vantage point from which to survey the world.³⁷ The problem here, Althusser believed, was that humanism was begging the question: why individuals were the way they were was precisely what had to be explained but, in the humanist version, the explanandum stood in for the explanans. Humanism mistook something produced in the world for something which produced the world.

This anthropocentric view had been displaced in the natural sciences in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The Aristotelian understanding of the natural world as intelligible only insofar as it was conceived of as teleological mistook the way subjects experienced the world as representative of the way the world actually was. Because humans tend to understand themselves as operating in accordance with their intentions, so this must be the right way to understand the operations of other entities in the world. The scientific revolution of Descartes, Copernicus, Galileo, Newton and, later, Darwin replaced this with a view of natural systems as operating according to blind causality, in which categories such as intention, desire, and goal ceased to make any sense.³⁸ The task remained, in Althusser’s view, to exorcise humanism from the social sciences, where it continued to persist in often unrecognised ways.³⁹

³⁵ Althusser, ‘Marxism and Humanism’, *For Marx*, 234.

³⁶ Balibar claimed that humanism ‘only dates from the end of the eighteenth century’. Balibar’s usage accords, however, only with those ‘*explicitly posing* the question “What is man?”’. Althusser made no such qualification and included those for whom an answer to this question may be implicit or assumed; Étienne Balibar, *The Philosophy of Marx*, trans. by Chris Turner (London: Verso, 2007), 28–29; cf. Althusser, ‘Marxism and Humanism’, *For Marx*, 227–28. Althusser admitted to being vague about whom the accusation of humanism was aimed at; see Louis Althusser, ‘The Humanist Controversy’, in *Humanist Controversy*, 221–305 (233).

³⁷ Andrew Collier, *Scientific Realism and Socialist Thought* (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1989), 187. Humanist theories do not need to argue that there is *no* change to the subject that is brought about by external factors, nor do they need to argue that there is only one type of subject, but it is a necessary precept of a theory of this sort that there is an unalterable ‘hardcore’ that constitutes a ‘subject’ or ‘self’ that persists irrespective of its environment.

³⁸ Peter Dear, *The Intelligibility of Nature: How Science Makes Sense of the World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 15–24; Foster, *Marx’s Ecology*, 13–14.

³⁹ Cf. Francis Fukuyama argues that ‘an “end of history” is implicit in the writing of all Universal Histories. The particular events of history can become meaningful only with respect to some larger end or goal, the achievement of which necessarily brings the historical process to a close. The final end of man is what makes all particular events potentially intelligible’;

In order to have a scientific, rather than ideological, social theory Althusser argued that we had to start from the premise that social relations preceded the subjects that existed within them. Humanist theories assessed societies based on the degree to which they accorded with the preferences of the agents within it. But it remained necessary to ask how those preferences arose in the first place. In putting the question this way around we discover that the social order is not the product of the original preferences of the agents, but rather that the agents only have the preferences that they do because of the social order that they are in. Humanism, therefore, simply posed the questions of social theory in such a way as to produce justifications for certain socio-political arrangements.

The implicit motivation behind Althusser's anti-humanism lies here, in his naturalist view that the natural and human worlds were both, in principle, accessible to explanation by the distinct type of discourse we call science. Scientific explanations based on subjective agency were always incomplete because *why* the agent might do something is exactly what required explanation. In humanist accounts of nature, it is the structure of human action that explains the structure of the world. The converse, and now dominant mode of explanation in the natural sciences, is to say that the structure of the world explains human actions. Laws are not the consequences of human wills, rather the actions of agents are shaped by the laws.⁴⁰ Precisely what marks out science as a specific kind of discourse vis-à-vis others is that it 'deploys a process whereby we are able to *know* what may be while we are not'.⁴¹ Science purports to show what is true independently of whether observers know it to be true. Sciences must be by definition anti-humanisms, for science is 'thought's capacity to think what there is whether thought exists or not'.⁴² It is a discourse of this type that Althusser thought we needed to realise in the field of the study of history—agent as *product* rather than *initiator*, the world as *making us* rather than being made *for us*.

It is Marx's rejection of the humanist foundation of political economy in *homo economicus*, the individual with fixed preferences throughout history, that Althusser thought made his theory of history uniquely scientific.⁴³ In making this move, Marx is

Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: The Free Press, 1992), 56. In contrast, for Althusser, to attribute meaning to historical events according to their contribution to some goal is to read into the process of history itself some values or political aspirations—a straightforwardly ideological manoeuvre—thus giving the study of history the form of a story rather than a science. A universal history without the importation of values—a science—is possible, in Althusser's view, and to do so we must abandon both teleology and meaning in its study.

⁴⁰ Andrew Collier, 'Materialism and Explanation in the Human Sciences', in *Issues in Marxist Philosophy: Materialism*, ed. by John Mepham and David-Hillel Ruben (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1979), II, 35–60 (48).

⁴¹ Quentin Meillassoux, *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency*, trans. by Ray Brassier (London: Continuum, 2008), 115.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 116.

⁴³ For examples of this view in Marx's work see: Karl Marx, 'Outlines of the Critique of Political Economy (Rough Draft of 1857–58) [First Instalment]', in Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Marx-Engels Collected Works: Marx, 1857–61* (New York: International Publishers, 1986), XXVIII, 49–537 (195); Karl Marx, 'Theses on Feuerbach', in Marx and Engels, *MECW: 1845–1847*, V, 3–5 (4); Karl Marx, 'Marginal Notes on Adolph Wagner's *Lehrbuch der Politischen*

able to explain capitalism through mechanisms that had nothing to do with naturally-given subjective preferences. Humanism in theories of history had imposed a limit on knowledge in this field, and by escaping it Marx was able to offer a scientific theory. By rejecting the individual as origin Marx was able to demonstrate that the categories that political economy used to explain capitalist society were themselves in need of explanation. In Althusser's reading, then, Marx denies that social theory can validly be constructed from the point of view of the subject. The subject was not a stable vantage point from which to survey the social structure for it was itself coloured by that structure.

There is an upside to humanist theories, namely that they permit one to bridge, via human nature, positive and normative theory. The central claim of Humanist Marxism is that we are alienated from our true nature under class-divided systems because our labour is exploited. It follows that we would be better off if we did not exist in such a society, but rather in one that did correspond to our nature—i.e. one without exploitation. Thus we can reason from an *is* to an *ought*. Althusser's argument is that the structure of this claim is analogous to claims that Marxists have tended to see as justifications for capitalism falsely portrayed as truths. It is a radicalisation of an argument first found in the Scottish Enlightenment, simply switching out capitalism for communism.⁴⁴ Humanism has acted as a powerful justification for capitalism, and whether Marxists might make use of it as part of their own political ideology is an open question. But political expediency should not be mistaken for truth. What it clearly is not is a scientific account of human history. Anti-humanism is a minimum precondition for science. Humanist theories may have other merits, but they are not scientific theories. It is because, on Althusser's account, Marxism is the first anti-humanist account of history that it could claim the specific novelty of being a science of history. Humanist Marxists were, therefore, in the business of denying precisely what made Marx's account of history important.⁴⁵

Humanists, Althusser argued, grounded their epistemology in an innate ability of subjects to know objects by putting them through a process of 'abstraction'. Abstraction referred to the mechanism by which knowledge of something was gleaned by stripping away extraneous features in order to penetrate the 'real essence' of the object—the part of the object in which knowledge of the whole was contained. Althusser dubbed this procedure 'empiricism'. Empiricist theories, he claimed, reduced the distinction between the real object and the thought-object 'to a mere distinction between the parts of a single object'.⁴⁶ Empiricism was an epistemological theory based on the presumption that there was an ontological correspondence between the subject, with its special ability to access the real, and the objects, which existed in a readily knowable form. It supposed that knowledge-of-a-thing is a property of that thing. Consequently, empiricists must be committed to the belief that knowledge of a thing pre-existed the

Oekonomie", in Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Marx-Engels Collected Works: Marx and Engels, 1874–1883* (New York: International Publishers, 1989), XXIV, 531–59 (547).

⁴⁴ See Robert Brenner, 'The Origins of Capitalist Development: A Critique of Neo-Smithian Marxism', *New Left Review*, I, 104 (1977), 25–92.

⁴⁵ Althusser, 'Marxism and Humanism', *For Marx*, 227–28.

⁴⁶ Althusser, 'Marx's Philosophy', *Reading Capital*, 34–40.

act of acquiring it. This puts into doubt the intransitive nature of the objects. It is fallacious to assert that because something is real it is also knowable. That a thing is real is a necessary but insufficient condition for knowledge about it. Althusser's alternative was to think of acquiring knowledge as a *process* of production. Knowledge was the product of labour on thought-objects.

Althusser used the term empiricism in a more expansive sense than it normally might be, and the line of attack is such as to include pre-Spinozist rationalism, Kantianism, and Hegelian idealism all of which were, in Althusser's view, instances of the same problematic.⁴⁷ Empiricism was not, for Althusser, only the view that facts were transparently available to the observer, but also included doctrines that supposed some theoretical work was required to extract the relevant knowledge. The term does not so much refer to a specific philosophical school but rather is 'a concept for the *consequences* of many diverse philosophical positions'.⁴⁸ Some commentators have pointed out that the procedure of abstraction that characterised empiricism for Althusser cannot be applied accurately to all the philosophers he sought to include.⁴⁹ Althusser does indeed overextend himself, and the argument seems poised to rebut Humanist Marxism rather than empiricism in general. Concentrating on the metaphor of abstraction seems, however, to be a diversion from the central point that Althusser is making.

All that is required to sustain Althusser's case is the argument that epistemologies which rely on a universal metric to judge the truthfulness of knowledge propositions can only do so by presupposing the legitimacy of the metric itself.⁵⁰ For empiricists (using Althusser's definition) there is one truth and it can be reached by bringing thought and reality, subject and object, into contact. The correct epistemological theory ensured that thought really was in touch with reality, rather than just appearing to be so. The unifying characteristic and common flaw of what might otherwise be considered distinct epistemological traditions was this problem of *guarantees*: what was known was guaranteed to be known because the world is structured so that we are guaranteed to have known it. Truth claims are grounded in an ontological guarantee which ensured the success of the enterprise in advance. The formulation of the problem as an attempt to provide a guarantee was such that it presupposed the solution that was already in mind, the classical ideological manoeuvre. The subject/object duality, each defined by their given essences, was the principal example of this. There was an entity able to know, and an entity that could be known, and the world was structured either such that this

⁴⁷ Elliott, *Detour of Theory*, 81. For an account of empiricism in its more specific usage see Roger Woolhouse, *The Empiricists* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988). Althusser's label of 'empiricism' is unnecessarily confusing, and is liable to prove misleading to those who approach it through the lens of the empiricism/rationalism distinction in which it would normally be deployed. I will preserve Althusser's terminology here, but it is important to bear in mind that it is distinct from how the term is generally used. Meillassoux has provided the alternative term 'correlationism' to describe the epistemologies Althusser has in mind; Meillassoux, *After Finitude*, 5.

⁴⁸ Paul Hirst, *Marxism and Historical Writing* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1985), 77.

⁴⁹ Collier, *Scientific Realism*, 2–10; Benton, *Structural Marxism*, 37–39.

⁵⁰ Barry Hindess, *Philosophy and Methodology in the Social Sciences* (Hassocks: Harvester Press, 1977), 6.

was immediately possible or was possible with the correct theory in hand.

Althusser's accusation is that the system of classical epistemology is not driven by a quest for the truth, but by an attempt to provide philosophical security for certain social and political views: 'an ideological myth in which a "theory of knowledge" reflects many "interests" other than those of reason: those of the social division of labour, which is precisely a division between power (political, religious or ideological) and oppression'.⁵¹ They are not mechanisms of knowledge production—sciences—but discourses that justified socio-political orders. They are instances of the aforementioned ideological closed-circle. It is this type of thinking that classical political economy was engaged in, and from which Marx sought, with historical materialism, to break.

In contrast, Althusser argued, we should think of science as differentiated from ideology by its open-ended problematic. Science did not claim to know beforehand what could be known, nor to take its present results as unrevisable. By 'open' Althusser seemed to mean a problematic structured in such a way as to invite continual revision rather than insulating itself from it. This distinction might be understood as the difference between a *research programme* and a *dogma*. For a problematic to qualify as open it must, Althusser thought, contain within itself the criteria for its verification. To look for that criteria outside of itself would be to invite closure:

Theoretical practice is indeed its own criterion, and contains in itself definite protocols with which to *validate* the quality of its product, i.e., the criteria of the scientificity of the products of scientific practice They have no need for verification from *external* practices to declare the knowledges they produce to be 'true'.⁵²

The point here is not that sciences were impervious to empirical evidence, but that that evidence was only ever available through the conceptual framework of the science. Knowledge was not derived from the immediacy of experience, but attainable only through the discursive apparatus of the problematic.⁵³ There are no theory-independent facts. The consequence of this view is to decisively reject the possibility of philosophy offering an answer to the other half of the problem of epistemology—verifying that we really know what we think we know.⁵⁴ Dialectical materialism was able to tell us what was a science and what was an ideology, but determining what was true within any given science was the preserve of that science alone. It was concerned with the 'structure' and 'development' of a science in its relation to other practices outside of it. It did not deal with the truth of, for example, 'such and such a result of physics'.⁵⁵ It equipped us with 'a correct idea of science, of its nature, of the conditions of the *production of knowledges*' but it was not itself what produced knowledge.⁵⁶ This was the responsibility of the actual *practice* of science. Dialectical materialism only held

⁵¹ Althusser, 'Marx's Philosophy', *Reading Capital*, 60.

⁵² *Ibid*, 61.

⁵³ Althusser, 'Materialist Dialectic', *For Marx*, 183–84.

⁵⁴ Althusser, 'Marx's Philosophy', *Reading Capital*, 72.

⁵⁵ Althusser, 'Materialist Dialectic', *For Marx*, 170.

⁵⁶ Althusser, 'Theoretical Practice', *Spontaneous Philosophy*, 14.

jurisdiction over ‘the *process of production of knowledges*’.⁵⁷ It maintained the ‘openness of a science against the closure of ideology’.⁵⁸ But it could not tell us, unlike what ideological philosophy claimed to be doing, ‘that we really do know what we know’, only that this is the process by which we could come to know.⁵⁹ Dialectical materialism provides knowledge of the process of knowledge production. Althusser spoke of dialectical materialism as ‘the history of the production of knowledges’ that ‘enables us to understand *how* human knowledges are produced in the history of the succession of different modes of production, first in the form of ideology, then in the form of science’.⁶⁰

2.1.2 The Althusserian Circle

Althusser’s formulation of Marxist philosophy as the Theory of theoretical practice became among the most contested theses of his entire enterprise.⁶¹ The most obvious complaint is what Callinicos calls the ‘circle at the heart of Althusser’s philosophy’.⁶² Dialectical materialism supposedly provided the means to verify a particular discourse as scientific. It was able to do this because it was itself knowledge of the structure of theoretical practice. The issue here is reminiscent of the Cartesian circle objection levelled at Descartes—that the system of clear and distinct ideas is meant to ensure that we are engaging with the external world, but in order to know it really does do this the method of clear and distinct ideas must be presupposed.⁶³ We can only know dialectical materialism is true by verifying it with recourse to dialectical materialism. Or, precisely what Althusser had been objecting to in the attack on empiricism. Reason, provided it was *dialectical* reason, is the absolute grounds of knowledge in this conception. Althusser seemed to be, in some sense, aware of the circular nature of the operation but was initially dismissive of the idea that there was any problem therein.⁶⁴

From the above, it should be clear that, with the Theory of theoretical practice, Althusser had produced nothing more than a Marxist version of the first philosophy that he had been rejecting. When he argues that dialectical materialism is ‘based on the

⁵⁷ Ibid, 8.

⁵⁸ Althusser, ‘Object of *Capital*’, *Reading Capital*, 235–36 fn. 4.

⁵⁹ Althusser, ‘Marx’s Philosophy’, *Reading Capital*, 72.

⁶⁰ Althusser, ‘Theoretical Practice’, *Spontaneous Philosophy*, 8; Althusser, ‘Marx’s Philosophy’, *Reading Capital*, 63.

⁶¹ Elliott, *Detour of Theory*, 86–96; Kolakowski, ‘Althusser’s Marx’, *Socialist Register*, 111–28 (114); Tony Judt, ‘Elucidations: The “Marxism” of Louis Althusser’, in *Reappraisals: Reflections on the Forgotten Twentieth Century* (New York: Penguin, 2008), 106–15 (108–10); Harman, ‘Philosophy and Revolution’, *International Socialism*, 66–67; Thompson, *Poverty of Theory*; Paul Hirst, ‘Althusser and Philosophy’, *Theoretical Practice*, 2 (1971), 16–30 (18–19).

⁶² Callinicos, *Althusser’s Marxism*, 73. See also: Judt, *Marxism and the French Left*, 232; Susan James, *The Content of Social Explanation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 83.

⁶³ John Cottingham, *The Rationalists* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 48.

⁶⁴ Althusser, ‘Marx’s Philosophy’, *Reading Capital*, 33–34; Althusser, ‘Object of *Capital*’, *Reading Capital*, 218; Louis Althusser, ‘Introduction: Today’, in *For Marx*, 19–39 (38–39); Louis Althusser, ‘On Theoretical Work: Difficulties and Resources’, in *Spontaneous Philosophy*, 43–67 (58–61).

processes of material nature' he gives the game away, for this is no different from Engels' dialectics of nature or Hegelian Marxism: *this* is the structure of the world, and we know that this is the case because we have the correct theory in hand. We know the theory is correct because it accurately mirrors in thought the structure of the world.

The Theory of theoretical practice was unable to meet the challenge Althusser had set of demarcating science as a unique kind of discourse without resorting to an epistemological guarantee.⁶⁵ On this count, the project pursued in *For Marx* and *Reading Capital* is a failure. Nevertheless, the value of Althusser's initial attempt to delimit a Marxist philosophy was, as Elliott writes, to 'highlight its *incompleteness*' and to commission, as Badiou observes, a '(re)commencement of dialectical materialism'.⁶⁶ Even Rancière, who moved from Althusserian disciple to scathing critic, found space for a judgement of this sort: 'Althusser had misled us, yes, but he had also opened up paths that we might never have known without him'.⁶⁷

In a way that had little precedent within Marxism, Althusser had tried to specify the conditions that must be met if Marxism's scientific claims were to be taken seriously. The task of Marxist science, historical materialism, was to explain historical change, and the task of its corresponding philosophy, dialectical materialism, was to ensure that this theory was actually scientific. Althusser's charge was that historical materialism, as reconstructed from Marx and Engels' work by later Marxists, had ossified into an ideology, insofar as its explanations for historical change reflected facts about the social world rather than explaining them. The presence of some unchanging criterion upon which historical change could be explained (a 'meaning' in history) provided easy normative justification for the Marxist political project—communism is the system that best accords with human nature—but came at the price of being unable to understand how historical change happened. This, in turn, hampered the ability to influence it. There is thus a connection, for Althusser, between Marxist philosophy, science, and politics. And it is for this reason that he saw a continued remit for Marxist philosophy.

Althusser came to reject the formulation of philosophy as the Theory of theoretical practice. He registered his concern in the introduction to the 1967 English edition of *For Marx*: 'I did not show what it is, as distinct from science, that constitutes *philosophy proper*'.⁶⁸ Above all, 'the definition of philosophy as "Theory of theoretical practice" seems to me quite indefensible, and must be done away with'.⁶⁹ The Italian foreword to *Reading Capital*, also written in 1967, denounced the "'positivist" theoretical effects'

⁶⁵ Callinicos, *Althusser's Marxism*, 73–77; Callinicos, *Future for Marxism?*, 72; Elliott, *Detour of Theory*, 89; Benton, *Structural Marxism*, 50, 85; Glucksmann, 'Ventriloquist Structuralism', *New Left Review*, 74; Descombes, *Modern French Philosophy*, 123–25.

⁶⁶ Elliott, *Detour of Theory*, 91; Alain Badiou, 'The (Re)commencement of Dialectical Materialism', in Alain Badiou, *The Adventure of French Philosophy*, trans. by Bruno Bosteels (London: Verso, 2012), 133–70. See also the judgements of Eric Hobsbawm, 'The Structure of Capital', in *Althusser: A Critical Reader*, ed. by Gregory Elliott (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994), 1–9 (8).

⁶⁷ Rancière, *Althusser's Lesson*, xix.

⁶⁸ Louis Althusser, 'To My English Readers', in *For Marx*, 9–15 (15).

⁶⁹ Althusser, 'Elements of Self-Criticism', *Self-Criticism*, 147.

that were produced by the “theoreticist” definition of philosophy.⁷⁰ It was the omission of the role class struggle played in philosophy that Althusser called ‘the biggest mistake I made in my essays on Marxist philosophy’.⁷¹

2.1.3 Science and Ideology

If epistemological criterions were always doomed to failure because of their circular nature, can there still be such a thing as science, a distinct type of discourse that can grasp the real in thought? Without the Theory of theoretical practice Althusser lacked the means to make a positive case for science.⁷² He therefore arrived at the view that the function of philosophy in demarcating science from ideology was to identify and remove the ideological intrusions into a theory. The emphasis is thus placed on the matter of open (scientific) versus closed (ideological) problematics. There can be no guarantee of truth, but we can try and ensure that is what we are really looking for, rather than confirmations for presuppositions. Thus sciences, on this reading, were problematics that internalised a mechanism of self-interrogation and revision. This says nothing about the degree of their truth-content. It merely claims that they are discourses in which assessment of truth and falsity can meaningfully be made.

What Althusser endorsed is a doctrine of fallibilism in which we must recognise that our knowledge is permanently ‘open to correction and revision’.⁷³ There was not ‘one full, objective, true account’ which science could reach, and thus it should be understood as a process without a final goal.⁷⁴ ‘Every science’, Althusser said, ‘is infinite as far as both its practice and the investigation of its object are concerned’.⁷⁵ The only means of judging the truthfulness of the propositions produced by a theory is relative to those produced by another theory in situations where two or more theories overlapped by claiming to offer knowledge about the same object.⁷⁶ As Imre Lakatos argues, theories can claim superior knowledge of their objects in instances where they offer ‘novel, excess information’ compared to their competitors.⁷⁷ The success of a theory over its competitors can be assessed by the extent that it manages to solve outstanding problems and its transformation of the field of inquiry in such a way as to make previously salient problems non-problems. It is not necessary that a theory be completely successful in doing so, the only requirement is that it does so better than the available alternatives.⁷⁸ For Althusser, Marx’s theory is superior to its competitors because it explains a

⁷⁰ Louis Althusser, ‘Foreword to the Italian Edition’, in Althusser and Balibar, *Reading Capital* (2009), 7–9 (8). See also Althusser, ‘Correspondence’, *Philosophy of the Encounter*, 240.

⁷¹ Althusser, ‘Elements of Self-Criticism’, *Self-Criticism*, 146.

⁷² Elliott, *Detour of Theory*, 120–21.

⁷³ Callinicos, *Future for Marxism?*, 178. Cf. Karl R. Popper, *The Logic of Scientific Discovery* (London: Routledge, 2002), 18; Popper, *Open Universe*, 46.

⁷⁴ See Kuhn, *Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 171–73, 206–7.

⁷⁵ Althusser, *Marxist in Philosophy*, 24. See also Resnick and Wolff, *Knowledge and Class*, 52–62.

⁷⁶ Callinicos, *Future for Marxism?*, 178–79; Kuhn, *Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 77.

⁷⁷ Imre Lakatos, *The Methodology of Scientific Research Programmes: Philosophical Papers*, ed. by John Worrall and Gregory Currie (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 1, 36. Cf. Althusser, ‘Humanist Controversy’, *Humanist Controversy*, 287; Althusser, ‘Materialist Dialectic’, *For Marx*, 217.

⁷⁸ Kuhn, *Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 23.

phenomenon that they could not: human nature.

One consequence of this fallibilist view is that we can thus judge whether ruptures in problematics are advances or retreats over others, but never that they are the end of the road.⁷⁹ There is no Absolute Knowledge, no coincidence between the thought-object and real-object, for even if we had it we could not know we had it. This accords with the sense in which Althusser spoke of sciences being identified by their ‘open-ended’ problematics: it is precisely this incompleteness, the acceptance of the tentative nature of its claims, that marked a discourse out as a science.⁸⁰ This matter of openness is the point on which Althusser’s account of scientificity rests. Sciences were separated out from ideologies in events Althusser termed ‘epistemological breaks’ (see 3.3). These breaks denoted those points at which closed ideological problematics became transformed into open scientific ones.⁸¹ The judgement as to whether a problematic was open could not be made once and for all but must be subject to an ongoing assessment.

The merit of this position lies in permitting us to sift between scientific and non-scientific propositions without relying on a criterion of verification of the sort that may reflect the social relations of a particular time and place. It also provides us with sufficiently good reason to continue to think of historical materialism as a science, as Althusser did.⁸² The test of historical materialism is not whether it adhered to a particular pattern (such as the dialectic), but whether other theories that lay claim to knowledge of the same object provided superior resolutions to outstanding problems. The task of Marxist philosophers is to try to ensure the openness of the historical materialist problematic by identifying and removing elements of ideological closure. Philosophers cannot assure the success or accuracy of the results of Marxist science in advance; they can only try and specify the concepts of historical materialism in such a way as improve the theory’s knowledge-generating capacity. Openness does not guarantee knowledge; it just ensures the best chance of getting it. One thing we can be sure about is that an open-ended problematic will (eventually) produce scientifically superior results to a closed one.

None of this is to say that, in transforming an ideological problematic into a scientific one, ideology is either removed or superseded, for Althusser ceased to think of these terms as simple opposites.⁸³ It is the famous ‘Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses’ (1969) that calls time on a science/ideology antithesis and Marxist philosophy as epistemology guarantee. Here Althusser distinguished between particular ‘ideologies’ (which ‘always express *class positions*’) and ‘ideology *in general*’ which was ‘the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of

⁷⁹ Michael Roberts gives the example of Einsteinian physics supplanting Newtonian physics as an example of this process; Michael Roberts, *The Long Depression* (Chicago: Haymarket, 2016), 3.

⁸⁰ Louis Althusser, ‘The Historical Task of Marxist Philosophy’, in *Humanist Controversy*, 155–220 (1965). Cf. Kuhn, *Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 146.

⁸¹ Althusser, *Non-Philosophers*, 64.

⁸² Cf. Benton, *Structural Marxism*, 91; Elliott, *Detour of Theory*, 187.

⁸³ Allen Wood’s account of Marx’s view about this is similar to my account of Althusser view; Wood, *Karl Marx*, 123–24.

existence'.⁸⁴ Ideology was not error that was overcome by science, and knowledge did not constitute an escape from ideology. As Robert Pfaller describes, 'science does not destroy ideology when it breaks with it. Ideology persists in a conflictual coexistence with the new science'.⁸⁵ Identifying ideology as ideological did not simultaneously situate one outside of it and claiming as such constituted a deeply ideological move. Althusser held that 'there is no practice except by and in an ideology'.⁸⁶ If there were breaks between problematics these were not between science and ideology in general—'the finished contrast between before and after, between the truth (or truths) discovered and the errors rejected'—but, between particular ideologies and particular sciences, such that scientists, just like everyone else, continued to live in and through ideology.⁸⁷ 'All theoretical errors', Althusser says, 'are scientific ones'.⁸⁸

Aristides Baltas explains that Althusser's view was that knowledge of something is scientific in that such knowledge is '*independent* from the ideological (and thence social) conditions within' which it is produced. *But* 'knowledge cannot function as knowledge if it cannot be related to' and consequently scientific knowledge is always conveyed through ideology: 'thus ideology can never be completely done away with and within scientific knowledge the ideological element remains always present'.⁸⁹ Althusser's view was that science—empirical facts and the theories that purport to explain them—can only be thought and transmitted alongside, in relation to, and through ideas that are not scientific. 'No idea is "omnipotent" simply by virtue of the fact that it is a true idea', Althusser argued, 'the influence of ideas makes itself felt only under ideological and political conditions that express a given balance of class forces'.⁹⁰ The relation between ideology and science should not be understood as a succession from the former to the later. Rather, as Giddens describes, 'science breaks with ideology in instituting its own autonomous level of discourse, producing new knowledge which can then react back upon ideology'.⁹¹ It seems any strong epistemological claim on Althusser's behalf can be safely abandoned without excessively jeopardising his continued defence of science as a distinct kind of discourse.

While Althusser believes that there can be, in principle, objective knowledge, he did not think that knowledge could exist other than as socially situated and expressed through

⁸⁴ Althusser, 'Ideology', *Lenin and Philosophy*, 107–9.

⁸⁵ Robert Pfaller, 'Negation and Its Reliabilities: An Empty Subject for Ideology?', in *Cogito and the Unconscious*, ed. by Slavoj Žižek (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1998), 225–46 (230).

⁸⁶ Althusser, 'Ideology', *Lenin and Philosophy*, 115.

⁸⁷ Althusser, 'Elements of Self-Criticism', *Self-Criticism*, 122.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 142. See also Louis Althusser, 'The Tbilisi Affair', in *Writings on Psychoanalysis: Freud and Lacan*, ed. by François Matheron and Olivier Corpet, trans. by Jeffrey Mehlman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 79–124 (110).

⁸⁹ Aristides Baltas, 'Louis Althusser and Joseph D. Sneed: A Strange Encounter in Philosophy of Science?', in *Imre Lakatos and Theories of Scientific Change*, ed. by Kostas Gavroglu, Yorgos Goudaroulis, and Pantelis Nicolacopoulos (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1989), 269–86 (273). See also Louis Althusser, 'The Transformation of Philosophy', in *Spontaneous Philosophy*, 241–65 (256).

⁹⁰ Althusser, 'Marx in His Limits', *Philosophy of the Encounter*, 47.

⁹¹ Anthony Giddens, *Central Problems in Social Theory: Action, Structure and Contradiction in Social Analysis* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1979), 180.

ideologies.⁹² The dissemination of scientific ideas was wholly dependent on their mediation through ideology. ‘Ideas’, he wrote, ‘no matter how true and formally proven, can never be historically active in person but only in the form of a mass ideology, adopted in the class struggle’.⁹³

2.2 Class Struggle in Theory

The purpose of this section is to show why Althusser continued to think philosophy was important despite his rejection of its epistemological role. Althusser shifts from offering an epistemological to a political definition of philosophy. The fundamental points were laid down in a series of lectures delivered in 1967, published as ‘Philosophy and the Spontaneous Philosophy of the Scientists’, receiving their definitive formulation the following year as ‘class struggle in theory’.⁹⁴

What distinguishes philosophy from ideology and science, and how does Marxist philosophy fit into this? Althusser’s definition is based on two claims about philosophy that should be both uncontroversial and widely recognisable. The first is that where science works with empirical data, philosophy works with other philosophical theses in order to support or challenge them via rational argument. The second is the Lockean view that ‘the progress of science generates puzzlements of a conceptual nature’ and then ‘philosophy is an effort to dissipate these puzzlements by restructuring the prevailing conceptual space’.⁹⁵

From these, however, Althusser drew a conclusion that will be both more controversial and less widely recognised than these initial claims. Althusser reasoned that since philosophy has no real object, for its object is itself, it cannot be a knowledge-producing discourse like a science. A philosophy does not work on other philosophies in order to obtain truth about them, but to alter them through dispute or additional support. It follows that the standards by which a philosophy is assessed cannot be neutral rationality nor adherence to the real. What philosophy does, Althusser argued, is to dispute what does and does not count as science or truth. Philosophy drew lines ‘of demarcation between *the scientific and ideological*’.⁹⁶ It did so as a theoretical expression of political interests to a) help or hinder the development of sciences, according to the requirements of those political interests b) to provide arguments that as far as possible resembled the rational model of the sciences in order to justify those interests. This is what Althusser called ‘class struggle in theory’.⁹⁷ Thus philosophy acted

⁹² Louis Althusser, ‘Marxism Today’, in *Spontaneous Philosophy*, 267–80 (275).

⁹³ Cf. Maurice Campbell Cornforth, *Communism and Philosophy: Contemporary Dogmas and Revisions of Marxism* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1980), 175–76; Hamza, *Althusser and Pasolini*, 73; Lorraine, *Concept of Ideology*, 173, 195–99 who all argue that for Althusser science and ideology are antithetical to one another.

⁹⁴ Louis Althusser, ‘Philosophy and the Spontaneous Philosophy of the Scientists’, in *Spontaneous Philosophy*, 69–165; Althusser, ‘Revolutionary Weapon’, *Lenin and Philosophy*, 6.

⁹⁵ Levine, *Future for Marxism*, 82.

⁹⁶ Althusser, ‘Philosophy of the Scientists’, *Spontaneous Philosophy*, 98–99. See also *ibid*, 83, 106–107.

⁹⁷ Althusser, ‘Revolutionary Weapon’, *Lenin and Philosophy*, 6.

as a link between politics and science. Philosophies wrestle over what to admit as truth. And they do so because they are motivated by class interests. In what follows, I will explain and defend this view.

Some philosophies, Althusser suggested, made use of the sciences for their own ends. These *idealist* philosophies did not seek to unleash science to pursue the task of producing knowledge, but sought to *exploit* them in the furtherance of their own values and goals: to 'ends extrinsic to the interests of scientific practice'.⁹⁸ Idealist philosophies subverted sciences by repurposing them for political ends. They turned the search for value-neutral knowledge into support for particular socio-political ideals:

The vast majority of philosophies, be they religious, spiritualist or idealist, maintain a relation of *exploitation* with the sciences. Which means: the sciences are never seen for what they really are; their existence, their limits, their growing pains (baptized 'crises') or their mechanisms, as interpreted by the idealist categories of the most well-informed philosophies, are *used* from outside; they may be used crudely or subtly, but they are used to furnish arguments or guarantees for extra-scientific values that the philosophies in question objectively serve through their own practice, their 'questions' and their 'theories'. These 'values' pertain to *practical ideologies*, which play their own role in the social cohesion and social conflicts of class societies.⁹⁹

Materialist philosophies, in contrast, allowed the sciences to pursue the production of knowledge free from the need to act in support of some socio-political values. Idealist philosophies either supposed that everything was the product of the mind (Berkeley), in which case their epistemological claims are arbitrary, or, in their dualist versions (Descartes), they made it necessary to provide a link between the two types of being, matter and mind, which opened up the problem of guarantees. Only materialism held out the possibility of avoiding the requirement for a universal guarantee of the relation between knowledge of the real and the real itself. Idealism sets the problem up in such a way as to award an overly grand role to philosophy as a guarantee of truth, and by doing so smuggles in ideology. Materialism, in Althusser's account, fought for openness against idealist closure.

Nevertheless, Althusser argued that

it is highly probable that *every* philosophy, even if it is not religious, spiritualist or idealist, maintains an organic relation with the 'values' of some practical ideology, with the values in question in the ideological struggle (which takes place against the backdrop of the class struggle). Which implies that *materialist* philosophies, of which we have not spoken, obey the same law themselves. Even if they do not exploit the sciences to prove the existence of God or to shore up great moral and aesthetic values, even if they are devoted, as they most certainly are, to a materialist *defence* of the sciences, they are not without a relation to a *practical* ideology, usually *political*

⁹⁸ Althusser, 'Philosophy of the Scientists', *Spontaneous Philosophy*, 120.

⁹⁹ *Ibid*, 129.

ideology.¹⁰⁰

Materialism is not neutral vis-à-vis politics either. Philosophy, generally conceived, is the expression of a relationship between science and politics. Althusser suggested that materialist philosophy tends to be turned to in instances where the goals promoted by an ideology would be furthered by the advance of one or more sciences. The motivation behind the use of materialist philosophy was not a pure quest for knowledge, but a marriage of convenience between moral and political values and scientific progress. It is simply that some social groups stood to benefit from scientific advance and some did not. ‘All philosophy’, Althusser argued, ‘acts to change the world (reactionary, revolutionary) or conserve its state’.¹⁰¹

Althusser contended that Enlightenment philosophy, tied to the rise of the bourgeoisie, tended towards materialism insofar as it aided a fight against feudal ideology but ended up ‘no less *idealist* in’ its ‘conception of history’.¹⁰² The expulsion of idealism in the domain of history fell to Marxism. The type of philosophy selected as the theoretical laboratory of an ideology was dependent upon the social class which was represented by that ideology: it was a political, not purely rational, question. Marxist philosophy is, for Althusser, avowedly a politically motivated position within the ‘perpetual war of ideas’ that constituted the field of philosophy.¹⁰³ It was a practice that acted on the world to produce some effect—conservation or change.

Consequently, Althusser saw what is often considered among the most important dictums in Marxism, and a founding idea of Marx’s philosophical outlook, that ‘the philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways; the point is to change it’ as a truism.¹⁰⁴ On the contrary, Althusser argued, ‘*every philosophy is active*, and always aims to *act upon the world* (by way of its work on the ideologies), by orientating it in a revolutionary direction (Marx) or in a *reactionary* direction’.¹⁰⁵ All philosophers ‘*wanted to act upon the world*, to make it progress just as to make it regress, or to maintain the status quo’.¹⁰⁶ There is nothing particularly special about Marxists on that count.

The differences between science and philosophy, in Althusser’s account, are as follows. Sciences were practices that produced knowledge about a real object, an object which was separate from knowledge about it and left unchanged when knowledge about it was produced. Because a science sought access to the real it made sense to talk of its product as knowledge. Philosophy, on the other hand, had no such object that preceded its own practice. Thus it made no sense to assess a philosophical thesis as true or not, for there

¹⁰⁰ Ibid, 130.

¹⁰¹ Althusser, ‘Matérialisme aléatoire’, *Multitudes*, 182; my translation.

¹⁰² Althusser, ‘Philosophy of the Scientists’, *Spontaneous Philosophy*, 138. See also Louis Althusser, ‘Marx’s Relation to Hegel’, in *Politics and History*, 161–86 (180).

¹⁰³ Althusser, ‘Transformation of Philosophy’, *Spontaneous Philosophy*, 255.

¹⁰⁴ Marx, ‘Theses on Feuerbach’, *MECW: 1845–1847*, V, 5.

¹⁰⁵ Althusser, ‘Correspondence’, *Philosophy of the Encounter*, 240.

¹⁰⁶ Althusser, ‘On Marxist Thought’, *Viewpoint Magazine*, §26.

was nothing that philosophy offered knowledge about.¹⁰⁷ There was neither a true philosophy nor a philosophical truth. Rather, philosophy consisted of a war of position vis-à-vis other philosophical theses in which politics was expressed. Philosophy was, therefore, the object of its own practice.¹⁰⁸ The task of philosophy was not to offer knowledge about a real-object but to strive to resolve distinctively philosophical problems. As Elliott puts it ‘philosophical theses were amenable to rational justification, but unsusceptible of scientific proof.’¹⁰⁹ Consequently, the relevant way of assessing a philosophical thesis was, for Althusser, its correctness or incorrectness, which was a judgement about whether it aided the ends of the class which it represented in theory.¹¹⁰ Whereas in the sciences errors were progressively eliminated, this was not the case with philosophy—for if there is no truth neither does it make sense to speak of falsity.¹¹¹ Philosophical discourse was circular in contrast to the successive advance of scientific knowledge. The application of the criterion true/false to philosophy was a category mistake.

Nevertheless, philosophy, Althusser thought, can play a productive role in science. At certain points in the development of a science, it must turn to philosophy for help. The function of philosophy in this respect was to classify new types of objects, provide new concepts, and formulate problems which the sciences then take up.¹¹² The scientific revolution initiated by Galilean physics could not be accounted for by Aristotelian causality in which effects were the result of the transmission of qualities present in their causes. It took Descartes to propose a new metaphysics, in which a cause could not be inferred from the simple experience of its effect.¹¹³ Only in doing so was the way cleared for the further development of science within the Galilean problematic. At certain points in their development, sciences encounter conceptual problems that it is up to philosophy to resolve. Therefore, philosophy itself does not make factual or true statements about the real world but it can provide tools which assist the sciences in doing so.

There are, in Althusser’s view, two possible responses to such impasses in science: It is only materialist philosophy that can effectively clear the way and allow sciences to resume their work.¹¹⁴ Alternatively, idealist philosophy would seek to resolve the crisis

¹⁰⁷ Althusser, ‘Philosophy of the Scientists’, *Spontaneous Philosophy*, 102. This should not be taken to exclude knowledge in the history of philosophy. Presumably one can offer a true or false *interpretation* of a philosophical thesis. That is, to be correct about the meaning of a statement. In this case, philosophy is the *object* not the *practice*.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid*, 77.

¹⁰⁹ Elliott, *Detour of Theory*, 181.

¹¹⁰ Althusser, ‘Philosophy of the Scientists’, *Spontaneous Philosophy*, 102–4; Althusser, *Marxist in Philosophy*, 41–42; Althusser, *Non-Philosophers*, 181–82.

¹¹¹ Althusser, ‘Philosophy of the Scientists’, *Spontaneous Philosophy*, 122.

¹¹² *Ibid*, 109–15; Althusser, ‘Historical Task’, *Humanist Controversy*, 176–77, 199–200; Althusser, ‘Object of *Capital*’, *Reading Capital*, 341.

¹¹³ Althusser, ‘Historical Task’, *Humanist Controversy*, 177; Louis Althusser, ‘Lenin and Philosophy’, in *Lenin and Philosophy*, 11–43 (23); Althusser, *Non-Philosophers*, 105; Desmond M. Clarke, ‘Descartes’ Philosophy of Science and the Scientific Revolution’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Descartes*, ed. by John Cottingham (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 258–85 (260–70); John Cottingham, *A Descartes Dictionary* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), 27.

¹¹⁴ Althusser, ‘Philosophy of the Scientists’, *Spontaneous Philosophy*, 137.

by trying to restrict the aspirations of a science to further growth.¹¹⁵ If a science comes into conflict with the dominant ideology by producing knowledge which might undermine or contradict the views promoted by that ideology, idealist philosophy acts to stymie the development of that science and provide the dominant ideological with theoretical means to resist the destabilising effect of new knowledge. It acts as ‘a defensive manoeuvre, the purpose of which was to restore the jeopardized unity of the dominant ideas’ by ‘putting things in order and reinforcing the order of things so that everyone stays in his place and performs his social function’.¹¹⁶

Science could not, in Althusser’s view, exist without philosophy and philosophy could not exist with science. The two practices were co-dependent:

All scientific practice is inseparable from a 'spontaneous philosophy' which may, depending upon which philosophy is involved, be a materialist aid or an idealist obstacle; that this spontaneous philosophy alludes, 'in the last instance', to the secular struggle that unfolds on the battlefield (*Kampfplatz*, Kant) of the history of philosophy between idealist tendencies and materialist tendencies; and that the forms of this struggle are themselves governed by other more distant forms, those of the ideological struggle.¹¹⁷

Competing over the domain of science, each type of philosophy pursued its attempts at demarcating the sciences from the ideologies by trying to minimise the influence of its philosophical opponents.

Science may be placed in the service of certain social or political objectives, but those objectives are not the objectives of science itself. Althusser maintained an orthodox view of science as, strictly conceived, a value-neutral system of thought. He was just sceptical that it can ever be *only* that, but not that we should strive for it. Philosophy, on the other hand, is orientated on systems of class domination, and therefore of politics, such that philosophy, Althusser argued, ‘represents the class struggle in theory’.¹¹⁸ Social antagonisms between classes are embodied in theory by competing philosophies. Different philosophical approaches are, at bottom, representative of different class positions.¹¹⁹ Philosophy acted as the intermediary between science and politics, carrying politics into science and science into politics. As Sotiris puts it ‘the specificity of philosophical battles is that although they refer to real stakes, in the sciences or in other social practices, at the same time these stakes do not appear “in person” on the terrain of philosophy’.¹²⁰ Individuals take their positions as subjects through ideology, and the function of philosophy was to transform ‘*the ideologies under the domination of which the various social practices produce their specific effects*’ in line with the aims of a class.¹²¹ Philosophy in this sense is “performative”: ‘a philosophical proposition is an

¹¹⁵ Ibid, 111.

¹¹⁶ Althusser, *Non-Philosophers*, 42–43.

¹¹⁷ Althusser, ‘Philosophy of the Scientists’, *Spontaneous Philosophy*, 116.

¹¹⁸ Althusser, ‘Revolutionary Weapon’, *Lenin and Philosophy*, 6.

¹¹⁹ Althusser, ‘Lenin and Philosophy’, *Lenin and Philosophy*, 40.

¹²⁰ Panagiotis Sotiris, ‘The Laboratory of Philosophy. Gramsci and Althusser on Philosophy’, *Décalages*, 2:1 (2016), 1–29 <<http://scholar.oxy.edu/decalages/vol2/iss1/4/>> (19).

¹²¹ Althusser, *Non-Philosophers*, 157.

active proposition which produces a certain effect of existence'.¹²² Philosophy directs science according to the needs of a class, either restricting it (idealism) or freeing it (materialism). To ignore philosophy was to fall into the trap Hilferding had, of conceiving Marxism as pure science without any political dimension. The alternative error, Lukács serves as a representative, was to think that philosophy could do the work of science.¹²³

If philosophy is a necessary counterpart to science, and science is a process without an end, then, by implication, philosophy is also without end. Althusser's point here is that there is not a true philosophy, as he had formerly claimed for dialectical materialism, but that the struggle between materialism and idealism is an ongoing one over the terrain of science. Philosophy is '*going nowhere*', he argued.¹²⁴ It has no goal of its own. For every new idealist thesis that blocks scientific advance, a materialist counterpart will be required to identify and dislodge it. There will be no final guarantee of scientificity, but a never-ending play between sciences and ideologies that is theoretically represented by philosophy.

2.2.1 The Persistence of Philosophy

In *The German Ideology* Marx and Engels attempted to abandon philosophy in favour of science.¹²⁵

Where speculation ends, where real life starts, there consequently begins real, positive science, the expounding of the practical activity, of the practical process of development of men. Empty phrases about consciousness end, and real knowledge has to take their place. When the reality is described as self-sufficient philosophy loses its medium of existence. At best its place can only be taken by a summing-up of the most general results, abstractions which are derived from the observation of the historical development of men.¹²⁶

Althusser's view was that Marx was wrong to think that he could transcend philosophy.¹²⁷

The need for philosophy was generally not apparent in the early stages of a science's development, but as this science advanced it would encounter diminishing returns and require philosophy to come and break the deadlock. There was, Althusser thought, a propensity for scientific milestones to be shadowed by philosophical ones: Thales' mathematics was followed by Platonic philosophy, Newtonian mechanics by Kant, and

¹²² Ibid, 158.

¹²³ Althusser, 'Revolutionary Weapon', *Lenin and Philosophy*, 3; Rudolf Hilferding, *Finance Capital*, ed. by Tom Bottomore, trans. by Morris Watnick and Sam Gordon (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981), 23–24; Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*.

¹²⁴ Althusser, 'Lenin and Philosophy', *Lenin and Philosophy*, 33.

¹²⁵ See Daniel Brudney, *Marx's Attempt to Leave Philosophy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998).

¹²⁶ Marx and Engels, 'German Ideology', *MECW: 1845–1847*, V, 37.

¹²⁷ Althusser, 'Lenin and Philosophy', *Lenin and Philosophy*, 21.

Marx's historical materialism by dialectical materialism.¹²⁸

While Althusser once thought that dialectical and historical materialism had emerged simultaneously, in 'Theory, Theoretical Practice, and Theoretical Formation (1965), he came to argue, in 'The Historical Task of Marxist Philosophy' (1967), that Marxist philosophy had lagged behind the development of Marxist science.¹²⁹ This delay meant that Marxist science had had to borrow concepts from non-Marxist philosophies to get started. Their borrowed nature, however, made them inadequate. The progress of Marxist science had been hampered by the underdevelopment of its philosophical counterpart:

Some of these theoretical limits depend, in the final analysis, on the *philosophical categories*, in which the science must think its new objects. For there comes a moment in the progress of a science when certain old philosophical categories objectively constitute a theoretical obstacle to the solution of new problems. It is this properly philosophical obstacle which then stands in the way of the development of the science, by preventing it from solving certain precisely identifiable scientific problems.¹³⁰

Althusser devoted attention to Marxist philosophy because he thought historical materialism had encountered problems that required philosophical tools to resolve. In the absence of an adequate materialist philosophy, idealist philosophy—humanism, for example—had filled the void. 'The place of philosophy', Althusser claimed, 'is never empty'.¹³¹ The supposition here seems to be that since scientific activity was always dependent on some philosophical commitments, there is an advantage to be gained from actively interrogating those commitments. The aim, then, is to develop a materialist philosophy that can dislodge idealism and allow historical materialism to improve its knowledge-generating capacity.

Althusser's view was that Marxist philosophy had been in a persistent state of underdevelopment. His case is as follows: Marx's break with ideologies of history to found a science of history had not immediately generated an accompanying philosophy of equal stature. The eleventh Thesis on Feuerbach (1845) heralded 'a major event in philosophy', but after that there was virtual silence on the matter until the arrival of Engel's *Anti-Dühring* (1878), a silence punctured only in the interim by the implied philosophy of *Capital* (1867).¹³² The urgency of directly waging the class struggle in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries had meant all the Marxist philosophical works issuing from that era had a polemical rather than systematic character. In respect to those philosophical texts issued in the aftermath of the revolutionary wave in Europe—Lukács, Gramsci, the Frankfurt School—Althusser implied they were never

¹²⁸ Althusser, 'English Readers', *For Marx*, 14; Althusser, 'Historical Task', *Humanist Controversy*, 173; Althusser, *On The Reproduction*, 15.

¹²⁹ Althusser, 'Historical Task', *Humanist Controversy*, 173; Althusser, 'English Readers', *For Marx*, 14; Althusser, 'Lenin and Philosophy', *Lenin and Philosophy*, 24; Althusser, 'Marx's Relation to Hegel', *Politics and History*, 167.

¹³⁰ Althusser, 'Historical Task', *Humanist Controversy*, 199.

¹³¹ *Ibid*, 174.

¹³² Althusser, 'Lenin and Philosophy', *Lenin and Philosophy*, 23–25.

able to break sufficiently from idealism to really develop Marxist philosophy.¹³³

It is not that Althusser believed that Marx and Marxists did not hold important philosophical views, it is that they had failed to think systematically about the kind of philosophy appropriate to their project. In short, Althusser thought that all these attempts at Marxist philosophy had been written in circumstances that were unfavourable to deep philosophical thinking. Unfavourable either or both because a) there were tasks on the agenda that were at that time more important b) the theoretical resources that needed to be drawn upon to break the mould were not available. And since a philosophy was always present and required by any system of thought, like it or not, the gap in Marxist philosophical thinking was filled mainly (but not only) by Hegelianism.¹³⁴ It was only now, at his own time of writing, Althusser thought that it had again become possible to advance Marxist philosophy.¹³⁵ This was at least in part because some crucial non-Marxist resources that spoke to some of the key problems faced by Marxist philosophy were now available: Bachelardian philosophy of science, Freudian psychoanalysis, and Saussurian structuralism.¹³⁶

The first task of Marxist philosophy was, as discussed above, to protect historical materialism from the encroachment of ideology, principally humanism and its associated pitfalls, which might prevent it from producing knowledge.¹³⁷ The view that a subject with fixed characteristics lay at the centre of everything (humanism) went hand in hand, Althusser argued, with the idea that science could solve the problems of politics or philosophy (technicism), that there was a philosophical guarantee of truth (empiricism), and that history was a progression towards a fixed end (teleology/evolutionism). The consequence of idealist philosophy was social scientific errors. The impact of these philosophical positions on historical materialism directly impacted on political practice, such that they were responsible, Althusser thought, for many of the failings of Marxism in the first half of the twentieth century: ‘everything that happens in philosophy has, in the last instance, not only political consequences in theory, but also political consequences *in politics*’.¹³⁸ Idealist philosophy had restricted scientific comprehension which had, in its turn, meant that the political practitioners were poorly informed and resultantly acted in ineffective ways. It was the responsibility of Marxist philosophy to expel these notions from Marxist science, thereby permitting it to generate more accurate knowledge of its object.

It was not, however, only an external threat that demanded the presence of philosophy but also an ‘inner need that the science perceives when it tries to overcome the

¹³³ Althusser, ‘Historical Task’, *Humanist Controversy*, 170–72. See also Althusser, *Non-Philosophers*, 186.

¹³⁴ Althusser, ‘Historical Task’, *Humanist Controversy*, 183–89.

¹³⁵ ‘Marxist philosophy is not just a problem, but *the number 1 problem*, the reason is, above all, the current conjuncture—not just the political and ideological conjuncture, but the theoretical conjuncture as well’; *Ibid*, 182.

¹³⁶ *Ibid*, 181.

¹³⁷ *Ibid*, 183.

¹³⁸ Althusser, ‘Reply to John Lewis’, *Self-Criticism*, 38. See also Althusser, ‘Historical Task’, *Humanist Controversy*, 183–94.

theoretical limits it encounters in its own work and field'.¹³⁹ This second task was the clarification of the 'theoretical lacuna' that remained present in historical materialism: class, the state, mode of production, ideology, politics, transitions between social forms.¹⁴⁰ These were the areas that Althusser identified as those which were being hindered by their use of outdated philosophical concepts. In order for historical materialism to advance in these directions, dialectical materialism must, he argued, develop its conceptions of causality, determination in the last instance, dialectics, a theory of discourses, and overdetermination.¹⁴¹

2.2.2 A Defence of Class Struggle in Theory

We have been confronted by two views about what philosophy is:

- 1) Philosophy is an epistemology. It is the Theory of theoretical practice, which provides the rules to which a theory must conform if it is to be considered scientific.
- 2) Philosophy is class struggle in theory. It represents the interests of classes within theoretical practice.

There is no way to square these two views without resorting to a kind of 'standpoint theory', such as that of Lukács, in which particular experiences (in Lukács case, proletarian ones) provide superior access to knowledge. Althusser was at least partially motivated by rejecting such implausible attempts to attach knowledge to particular social locations and showing instead that Marxism can be understood as a science in a more conventional sense. Althusser abandoned the first definition decisively in favour of the second.

Althusser's first definition of philosophy was vulnerable to the same criticisms he had levelled at others: it set up a standard for scientificity, a standard that took its own truth for granted. With his second definition philosophy is understood as competition over the terrain of science driven by socio-political interests. Idealism made use of the sciences for non-scientific ends, and thus had the function of blocking further scientific progress. Materialism, accepting the realist premise that made sciences possible in the first place, enabled their further growth. Idealism was made use of in instances where dominant social classes had an interest in hampering the development of further knowledge in one or more areas of scientific investigation.

The point Althusser was making here is the bourgeoisie had an interest in preventing scientific knowledge of history, and the proletariat had an interest in gaining it. In the same way, enlightenment materialism was an attack on feudal religious thought in aid of the natural sciences. The interests of bourgeois class power and natural science were aligned. In the field of history, however, Enlightenment philosophy nevertheless stayed idealist for the notion of the individual subject as free agent and bearer of right was

¹³⁹ Althusser, 'Historical Task', *Humanist Controversy*, 199.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid*, 183, 195–97.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid*, 198–202.

central to bourgeois class power.¹⁴² Now, the interests of the proletarian class power and social science were aligned.

The relation of science to politics is thus contingent on the circumstances in which that science exists. The social function of science is, on Althusser's account, *variable*. It may in some circumstances be driven by attempts to unlock the real processes at work, and in others by attempts to vindicate some political ends. This division is what appears in philosophy under the banners of materialism and idealism. The social sciences are the principal terrain over which this dynamic is fought out in capitalist societies.¹⁴³ There is a close link, Althusser thought, between social conflict and scientific conflict.

While Althusser could be prone to overstating the case the argument being made is defensible.¹⁴⁴ It is plausible to believe that certain social groups hold an interest in blocking the development of knowledge in certain areas, just as they may have an interest in promoting the development of knowledge in others. This interest results from the legitimisation strategies used by a particular class. A feudal ruling class which derives its legitimacy, at least in part, from the divinely ordered hierarchy of a Great Chain of Being might plausibly be thought of as having an interest in undermining ideas that violated religious teaching. The bourgeoisie, for their part, had cause to justify their ascent as the bearers of reason, in both natural science and social organisation.¹⁴⁵ If these natural sciences contradicted religious thought (as they frequently have) the two classes are incentivised to deploy, respectively, idealist and materialist philosophies. Justifications for the legitimacy of capitalist relations of production tend to rely on arguments about the free and fair conditions under which contracts are entered into. Any view (such as Marx's) which claims those conditions are neither free nor fair will likely be unpalatable to those dependent on capitalism for their elevated social status.¹⁴⁶ Such views challenge, as Enlightenment thought once did with respect to feudal rights, the ideological basis by which contemporary hierarchies are justified. And far from accepting this the dominant ideology which served 'the emancipation of humanity' by challenging the ideological foundations of feudal domination becomes transformed into 'a principle of authority and order'.¹⁴⁷

We can see here why the question of Marxism's scientific status is not simply a matter of stating the criterion of scientificity and seeing if it measures up, but has a socio-political dimension insofar as there are—as there once were for physics—strong incentives to deny its validity. As Wood has argued, 'the rejection of the Marxian theory

¹⁴² Althusser, 'Philosophy of the Scientists', *Spontaneous Philosophy*, 138.

¹⁴³ The opposition between sociology and Marxism that Anderson suggests serves as an example of this conflict; Perry Anderson, *English Questions* (London: Verso, 1992), 52–56.

¹⁴⁴ For example, 'it is no accident that a reactionary bourgeois or "technocratic" government prefers half-knowledge *in all things*'; Louis Althusser, 'Student Problems', trans. by Dick Bateman, *Radical Philosophy*, 170 (2011), 11–15 (15); my emphasis.

¹⁴⁵ Althusser, *Marxist in Philosophy*, 61–62; Althusser, *Non-Philosophers*, 95–98.

¹⁴⁶ It could be objected that knowledge rarely, if ever, only helps one side. Knowledge of exploitation may not just help undermine it, but also to reinforce it. In this case, it seems reasonable to answer that, on balance, it helps one side more than the other. Exploitation can proceed happily without any help from Marxists.

¹⁴⁷ Althusser, *Non-Philosophers*, 98.

of value has always been motivated by ideology and politics at least as much as by any concern for “good science”. Neoclassical economics sought to discredit Marx’s theory of surplus value in order to ‘reject the subversive idea that profit on capital arises from the exploitation of labour’.¹⁴⁸ Our choices about social scientific theories are far more likely to be politically influenced than many practitioners care to admit. When Levine argues that the act of faith involved in the selection of historical materialism as the best social scientific theory is different to that involved in selecting chemistry or physics, because the latter two have ‘indisputable cognitive achievements’ that the former does not, he misses the point.¹⁴⁹ Not only is it reasonable to assert that the social world is resistant to the kinds of controlled experimentation, and with it predictive sureties, that are available in physics, thus an unjustified metric sets an unreachable bar, it is also to misconstrue the problem if it is thought physics and chemistry became the most widely accepted bodies of knowledge about their respective objects through weight of results alone.¹⁵⁰ Ruben makes the case well: ‘what is regarded as “scientific” in the natural sciences is in principle no more free of being susceptible to ideology and the effects of class struggle than is what is regarded as “scientific” in the human sciences’.¹⁵¹

The success of the natural sciences was not simply a matter of rational evaluation but contributed to by class struggle. The rising bourgeoisie made use of the natural sciences, both as a weapon against feudal legitimacy and to assist their own drive to develop the productive forces. This socio-political dimension contributed to the eventual widespread acceptance of the natural sciences, and there is no reason to think the question of the validity of social scientific theories will be settled any differently—given their object, this factor is probably even more important. Even if science is value-free, the reasons for selecting one theory over another are rarely purely rational.

We should additionally leave open the possibility that idealism might also be generated in other, more localised, ways. This ‘spontaneous idealism’, as Wal Suchting calls it, denotes a general tendency for idealism to ‘take root at points where it is a question of coping with the unfamiliar by means of inadequate theoretical tools’.¹⁵² This might be in everyday popular thought, but it might also occur among scientists. For example, in instances where the status of expert groups suffers from path-dependency because they are invested in defending particular theories or methods, thereby causing other lines of enquiry to be written off. The current state of macroeconomics might serve as an example of this sort of behaviour.¹⁵³

¹⁴⁸ Wood, *Karl Marx*, 239.

¹⁴⁹ Andrew Levine, ‘Althusser’s Marxism’, *Economy and Society*, 10:3 (1981), 243–83 (262).

¹⁵⁰ Bhaskar argues that physics and chemistry ‘sometimes’ submit to ‘very special conditions’ of experimentation that ‘are not normally possible in the other natural sciences from cosmology to biology’ and this is what ‘accounts for the prima facie plausibility of these theories’; If other natural sciences cannot stack up against physics and chemistry, it is not clear why social science should need to; Bhaskar, *Realist Theory*, 94–95.

¹⁵¹ David-Hillel Ruben, *Marxism and Materialism: A Study in Marxist Theory of Knowledge* (Sussex: Harvester Press, 1979), 103.

¹⁵² Wal Suchting, *Marx and Philosophy: Three Studies* (Houndmills: Macmillan, 1986), 71–72.

¹⁵³ See: Paul Romer, ‘The Trouble with Macroeconomics’, *The American Economist*, Forthcoming; Joe Earle, Cahal Moran, and Zach Ward-Perkins, *The Econocracy: The Perils of*

We need, however, only concern ourselves here with those systematic forms of idealism that influence the direction of entire societies. If it is true that any class society is one based on some form of exploitation, as Althusser took for granted, then it is credible to argue that the dominant class will likely make use of legitimation strategies that veil this fact. If that is the case then, assuming that class wishes to maintain its position, that class has an interest in resisting new ideas that might reveal this exploitation. Cohen puts this view as follows:

If the exploited were to see that they are exploited, they would resent their subjection and threaten social stability. And if the exploiters were to see that they exploit, the composure they need to rule confidently would be disturbed. Being social animals, exploiters have to feel that their social behaviour is justifiable. When the feeling is difficult to reconcile with the truth, the truth must be hidden from them as well as from those they oppress.¹⁵⁴

The “error” of bourgeois ideology was that it ‘had no reason to recognize the “truth”—not that it did not possess the capacity to (as with standpoint theories) but that there were incentives not to.’¹⁵⁵ This is merely a special case of the view that those with an elevated status that is justified by some set of beliefs are incentivised to resist challenges to those beliefs. The case is not that those inhabiting certain class positions were unable to come to this understanding, but that certain classes had a vested interest in denying ideas that would threaten their power.

Rancière’s interpretation that ‘the principle capable of subverting this [class] domination belongs to the opposite of ideology, that is, to science’, attributing to Althusser the view ‘that scientific knowledge is, by its very nature, subversive of bourgeois domination’, is too rigid.¹⁵⁶ If Althusser were saying developments in physics challenged capitalist society the argument would be implausible. There is nothing subversive about scientific knowledge in an abstract sense, but in certain *specific* circumstances *specific* sciences might undermine justifications for the existing social system. In such a situation, a dominant class would have cause to reject that science and other classes may have cause to advance it. The argument should be understood in the sense that O’Hagan proposes: ‘in class-dominated societies *particular* scientific breakthroughs make *particular* threats to the monopoly of ruling ideas by the ruling class at *particular* historical moments.’¹⁵⁷

Leaving Economics to the Experts (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2017); John Rapley, *Twilight of the Money Gods: Economics as a Religion and How It All Went Wrong* (London: Simon & Schuster, 2017).

¹⁵⁴ Cohen, *Karl Marx’s Theory of History*, 400. See also Daniel Little, *The Scientific Marx* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 100.

¹⁵⁵ Althusser, ‘Tbilisi Affair’, *Writings on Psychoanalysis*, 110.

¹⁵⁶ Rancière, *Althusser’s Lesson*, 135, 140.

¹⁵⁷ O’Hagan, ‘How to be a Marxist in Philosophy’, *Marx and Marxisms*, 258.

2.3 Structure and Conjuncture

In response to what he saw as errors and gaps in historical materialism, Althusser developed a new conceptual apparatus that he thought could help to rectify these problems. The argument is directed against evolutionist conceptions of historical change, principally associated with the Second International but also persisting, Althusser thought, in much of Western Marxism.¹⁵⁸ In evolutionist readings, the superstructure emerges as a result of the functional requirements of the base. Modes of production change into different modes of production at such a time when the tension between the expansion of the forces of production and the prevailing relations of production passed a threshold: ‘at a certain stage of development, the material productive forces of society come into conflict with the existing relations of production then begins an era of social revolution’.¹⁵⁹ The theory of structure that is utilised in this conception relies on a single articulating principle, the level of development of the forces of production, that underpins it as an organic unity.

In contrast, Althusser was concerned with crafting an alternative to the idea that there was an essence or singular origin of social structures, of which the various component parts of the structure were the epiphenomena. Only in doing so, he thought, could we appreciate the diversity of mechanisms that influenced the overall direction of the system. There are three positions Althusser was trying to avoid: The view that the base exhaustively determines the superstructure. The view that the base and superstructure are of equal causal importance to the overall direction of the structure. And the view that structure was not a meaningful object of inquiry. The way to think about structures, he said, was as a ‘*complex whole*’ which ‘*has the unity of a structure articulated in dominance*’.¹⁶⁰ What did he mean by this?

For Althusser, a social structure was the articulation of various levels or instances, different kinds of social activities (practices). These instances were neither reducible to one or some of the others, nor were they extraneous to the continued existence of the system. Possessing their own effectivity and patterns of change, each practice simultaneously expressed influence on the others and was influenced by them. They changed at different rates, not necessarily at a pace common to the whole structure. Nevertheless, the whole for Althusser remained a structure and a *unity*, not an arbitrary grouping composed of fleeting interactions. Althusser wanted to dispense with the idea that knowledge of the structure was the equivalent to knowledge of its essence but also maintain that the object being dealt with was a structured one, with some identifiable causal mechanisms, such that it was open to scientific comprehension.

Althusser sought to establish the nature of this structure by arguing that social structures were governed ‘in the last instance’ by the economy which provided a hierarchical ordering to the instances: it ‘fixes the real difference of the other instances,

¹⁵⁸ See Althusser, ‘Object of *Capital*’, *Reading Capital*, 268–69.

¹⁵⁹ Marx, ‘Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy’, *MECW: 1857–1861*, XXIX, 263.

¹⁶⁰ Althusser, ‘Materialist Dialectic’, *For Marx*, 202.

their relative autonomy and their own mode of reacting on the base itself.¹⁶¹ The concept of determination in the last instance by the economy guarded Althusser's conception of structure from collapsing into a pluralism, in which there is no overarching logic to the structure (and hence no science of it). The other instances have a relative autonomy, but not an absolute autonomy, from the economy. The economy imposes limits on the other instances, but they change within those limits according to timetables and logics of their own. For example, we might argue, based on an economic reading alone, that the American and French revolutions, asserting the kind of ideals and institutional arrangements that they did, were only possible at a certain stage of economic development, in late feudal societies rather than, say, in a hunter-gatherer system, but not that they would begin in 1765 and 1789 respectively. Explaining why they occurred on those dates and in those places cannot be established purely by examining the economy. A full account would involve examining the condensation of a number of trends and events occurring across a number of fields into those specific moments.

While the economy had a preponderant role, it was also dependent on the presence of the other instances (law, politics etc.). One cannot understand, Althusser argued, the specific nature of those instances except in their relation to other instances. Hence 'the economic cannot have the qualities of a given (of the immediately visible and observable, etc.) ... the concept of the economic must be constructed for each mode of production, as must the concept of each of the other "levels"'.¹⁶² What is being asserted is, for example, that a nation's culture cannot be extrapolated from its economy but, rather, its economic relations are influenced by its cultural relations, and its cultural relations further by its economic relations in such a way that they exist in a state of co-dependency. Economic practice involves not just technology plus mental or manual effort, but also involves a *culture of production*: working practices differ around the world for reasons often extraneous to the brute fact of economic production itself. Even more importantly, economic practice always involves certain forms of property ownership. Legal and political relations are present within the relations of production, and there can be no relations of production without those legal and political components. Thus why Althusser contended that the components of a structure had to be appreciated in view of the structure as a whole—the structure consists of relations between relations that mutually characterise one another. To talk about the economy is then to isolate some phenomena in thought that in reality are situated in a dependent interaction with other (non-economic) phenomena.

Hence why Althusser was at such pains to emphasise that determination by the economy occurred only in the *last* instance. The economy always selected the dominant instance, but it was only with capitalism that that selected instance was also the economy. In the words of Étienne Balibar, one of Althusser's co-authors, in *Reading Capital* (1965):

¹⁶¹ Louis Althusser, 'Is it Simple to be a Marxist in Philosophy?', in *Spontaneous Philosophy*, 203–40 (215).

¹⁶² Althusser, 'Object of *Capital*', *Reading Capital*, 338.

In different structures, *the economy is determinant in that it determines which of the instance of the social structure occupies the determinant place*. Not a simple relation, but rather a relation between relations; not a transitive causality, but rather a structural causality. In the capitalist mode of production it happens that this place is occupied by the economy itself; but in each mode of production, the ‘transformation’ must be analysed.¹⁶³

The economy nominated the part of the structure that was most prominent in legitimising the distribution of wealth.¹⁶⁴ The economy *determined* this but was not necessarily itself *dominant* within any particular structure.¹⁶⁵ The explanatory power of the economy is, in Althusser’s version of historical materialism, highly restricted. It is not meant to establish an explanation for everything within a social structure.¹⁶⁶ The economic instance thus also provides the means for a periodisation of structures—that is, history as a ‘discontinuous succession of modes of production’—because it gives us a point from which to make comparisons.¹⁶⁷ Two *social formations*—specific societies—could look very different, but the economic instance, as their most fundamental characteristic, provided a means of grouping or dividing them according to their dominant *mode of production*.

Ellen Wood is wrong to assert that Althusser retained the ‘conceptualization of social structure in terms of discrete, discontinuous, externally related “factors”’ that is common to those versions of historical materialism that were overly reliant on the base/superstructure distinction.¹⁶⁸ In her view, it is a distinguishing feature of Marxism that it refuses the pre-given distinctions between instances, most importantly politics and economics for it is the ‘intervention by the state on behalf of the expropriating class’ that reproduces capitalist social relations. The social relations that constitute a mode of

¹⁶³ Étienne Balibar, ‘On the Basic Concepts of Historical Materialism’, in Althusser and others, *Reading Capital*, 357–480 (385–86); I draw on Balibar’s work here as this topic was left to him to discuss in the collective enterprise of *Reading Capital*.

¹⁶⁴ ‘The Middle Ages could not live on Catholicism, nor the ancient world on politics. On the contrary, it is the mode in which they gained a livelihood that explains why here politics, and there Catholicism, played the chief part’; Karl Marx, ‘Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, Volume I’, in Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Marx-Engels Collected Works: Capital, Volume 1* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1996), xxxv, 43–761 (93).

¹⁶⁵ Balibar’s terminology in the above-quoted passage which uses ‘determinant’ [déterminante] for both the selecting instance (the economy) and the selected instance (which varies) is unhelpful. Althusser distinguished between the selecting instance which *determines* and the selected instance which is *dominant*. See Anonymous [attributed to Althusser], ‘Cultural Revolution’, *Décalages*, 12–13.

¹⁶⁶ While Althusser seems to endorse restricted historical materialism (as opposed to inclusive historical materialism) in the sense that historical materialism cannot explain *everything* in a social formation (this being the only reasonable sense in which historical materialism can be construed) he does not endorse restricted historical materialism in the sense Cohen uses the term: ‘a theory about the course of material development itself, rather than about the relationship *between* that development and other developments’. ‘Material’ is here used by Cohen synonymously with ‘economy’. For Althusser, like Cohen, there are important processes at work other than the economy but for Althusser, unlike Cohen, these also fall within the purview of historical materialism, which is a science of social structures not a science of economic phenomena; see G. A. Cohen, *History, Labour, and Freedom: Themes from Marx* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), 159–60.

¹⁶⁷ Balibar, ‘Basic Concepts’, *Reading Capital*, 362.

¹⁶⁸ Wood, *Democracy Against Capitalism*, 51.

production are not external relations between enclosed elements but reach into those elements in order to (re-)form them. Politics does not intervene in the economy from the outside, the economy is politically constituted in the first place and could be nothing but. This point is intended as one of the major correctives offered by Wood's 'Political Marxism', but it is a view that is also central to Althusser's Marxism. The crux of the issue is that the economic field and others 'do not represent two essentially different and discontinuous orders of reality' as the base/superstructure metaphor can be taken to imply.¹⁶⁹

2.3.1 Structural Causality and Overdetermination

According to Althusser, existing theories of causality were unable to deal with this picture of the mutual interactivity of instances that were organised into a whole. Linear, or transitive, causality (in which a cause was separate and external to its effect) and expressive causality (in which effects were the by-products of an essence) were insufficient to capture the process at work.¹⁷⁰ Linear causality was unable to underpin a concept of structure that was more than a simple summation of its components. It was liable to produce either a pluralism in which society could be treated as a whole only in the sense of an accumulation of effects, rather than an object in its own right, to which there was an anterior cause external to the structure, or a structure that changed only in a pre-determined way, thus putting inevitability and teleology centre stage. The base/superstructure model of classical Marxism is one such example: the base is cause and the superstructure is effect. The development of the forces of production gives rise to a superstructure which is the institutional and ideological representation of that development. Expressive causality failed to provide a viable alternative: it relied on a simple original unity, in which the parts were expressions of the development of this origin. Expressive causality was an attempt to think causality within the confines of a determinate whole, but it only achieved this by envisaging the parts of the whole as expressions of its essence.¹⁷¹ Within Marxism, linear causality is associated with the economism of the Second and Third Internationals, and expressive causality with the historicism of Western Marxism.¹⁷² For Althusser it seems that these attempts to model causality in the social world had the same consequence: the parts of a social structure were extraneous to understanding that structure, because they could be reduced to a single cause. All that was necessary was to strip away the inessential components and view the cause in its simplicity. The task, for Althusser, was to account for causes which are neither external to their effects—as with linear causality—nor located in an inner essence distinct from its effects—as with expressive causality.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid, 20–28.

¹⁷⁰ Althusser, 'Object of *Capital*', *Reading Capital*, 342; Peter Hallward, 'Introduction: Theoretical Training', in *Concept and Form: Selections from the Cahiers pour l'Analyse*, ed. by Peter Hallward and Knox Peden (London: Verso, 2012), 1, 1–56 (17); Resch, *Marxist Social Theory*, 50; Saül Karsz, *Théorie et Politique : Louis Althusser* (Paris: Fayard, 1974), 118–24.

¹⁷¹ Ed Pluth, 'Freeing Althusser from Spinoza: A Reconsideration of Structural Causality', *Crisis and Critique*, 1.3 (2014), 337–52 (341–45).

¹⁷² Gareth Stedman Jones and Robin Blackburn, 'Louis Althusser and the Struggle for Marxism', in *Unknown Dimension*, 365–87 (371).

Althusser's proposed alternative of structural causality was intended to show how the superstructure also plays a role in forming the base. Both cause and effect are internal to the entity we are attempting to understand.

The effects are not outside the structure, are not a pre-existing object, element or space in which the structure arrives to *imprint its mark*: on the contrary, it implies that the structure is immanent in its effects, a cause immanent in its effects in the Spinozist sense of the term, that the *whole existence of the structure consists of its effects*, in short that the structure, which is merely a specific combination of its peculiar elements, is nothing outside its effects.¹⁷³

The structure is *only* its effects; there is not a separate cause that produces those effects. The structure thus includes both the causes and effects. Change is not caused by something outside of it (as in linear causality). Nor is there an originary component—e.g. the economy, the individual—that gives rise to the rest of the structure (as with expressive causality). Rather, structural causality is meant to describe a kind of feedback mechanism.¹⁷⁴

Structural causality attempts to 'account for the action of the Whole on its parts, and of the parts on the Whole—an unbounded Whole, which is only the active relations between its parts'.¹⁷⁵ There is no structure *except for* the articulation of its elements with one another, and the nature of the elements are determined by their formation into a structure. The determinations of the structure are not given by the regional structure of the economic but 'by *the (global) structure* of the mode of production'.¹⁷⁶ The idea is to show how a structure can be understood as a coherent entity without casting it as the effect of something independent of it.

In contrast to the simple developmental schema of the Second International model, in which accumulative changes in the forces of production leads to the generation of new relations of production, Althusser proposed the idea of overdetermination. Overdetermination referred to the way that contradictions were subject to their 'conditions of existence', their 'situation in the structure in dominance of the complex whole'.¹⁷⁷ The point is to show how historical events were caused by the interaction of multiple factors that lacked a single, common, denominator. The economic instance was never active alone but refracted through the prism of the other levels of the structure each, we should recall, with their own specific efficacy. The consequence is an '*accumulation of effective determinations*' in which

the economic dialectic is never active *in the pure state*; in History, these instances, the superstructures, etc.—are never seen to step respectfully aside when their work

¹⁷³ Althusser, 'Object of *Capital*', *Reading Capital*, 344.

¹⁷⁴ Ruben makes some helpful comments on this topic, even if they do not quite amount to what Althusser is getting at. Ruben does not, for example, distinguish between a Marxist conception of causality and a Hegelian one as Althusser does. Ruben, *Marxism and Materialism*, 118–27.

¹⁷⁵ Althusser, 'Elements of Self-Criticism', *Self-Criticism*, 141.

¹⁷⁶ Althusser, 'Object of *Capital*', *Reading Capital*, 340.

¹⁷⁷ Althusser, 'Materialist Dialectic', *For Marx*, 209.

is done or, when the Time comes, as his pure phenomena, to scatter before His Majesty the Economy as he strides along the royal road of the Dialectic. From the first moment to the last, the lonely hour of the 'last instance' never comes.¹⁷⁸

The principal contradiction 'between the forces of production and the relations of production, essentially embodied in the contradiction between two antagonistic classes' could not be disentangled from the rest of the structure.¹⁷⁹ There was no original purity of a contradiction that allowed it to be isolated, but rather contradictions could only be understood in light of their relations to the other contradictions in the structure. Any given contradiction is at once the overdetermined site of a condensation of the effectivity of all the other contradictions to which it stands in relation, and part of the chain of overdetermining contradictions acting on other contradictions.¹⁸⁰ They cannot be disassembled and viewed independently because 'every process is at one and the same time constituted (passive) and constituting (active)' and consequently would not exist as it does without the presence of the others.¹⁸¹ Thus 'only overdetermination enables us to understand the concrete variations and mutations of a structured complexity such as a social formation'.¹⁸²

If structural causality is meant to foreground the regularities of a system that can be designated a 'structure', in which something must persist over time (else it would not be the same entity), then overdetermination highlights the uniqueness of moments of the structure. It permits 'the analysis of the structure of a *conjuncture*, the displacements and condensations of its contradictions and their paradoxical unity'.¹⁸³ The concept of overdetermination is meant to underpin a theory of conjuncture, a means of accounting for the specific compositions brought about by shifting relations between different elements of a structure and their irreducibility to any individual regularity. Events, on this account, are not explained by resort to the economy alone, but rather by the *conjuncture* of multiple factors. It is only on this basis, Althusser argued, that we might think about agents being able to act in ways that transform the structure and that the Marxist proposition that "*class struggle is the motor of history*" can be maintained.¹⁸⁴ It is the capacity to appreciate the contours of a conjuncture that enabled effective political action. A conjuncture was not, then, simply a moment in the development of a structure but also the presence of the possibility for altering its course. Understood in this way Marxist dialectics, Althusser argued, is 'a revolutionary method, rather than the theory of the *fait accompli*'.¹⁸⁵ If the notion of structure implied the necessity of continuity then conjunctures are its opposite, unique historical moments that hold the potential for altering that continuity.

¹⁷⁸ Louis Althusser, 'Contradiction and Overdetermination', in *For Marx*, 87–129 (113).

¹⁷⁹ Althusser, 'Contradiction and Overdetermination', *For Marx*, 99.

¹⁸⁰ Althusser, 'Is it Simple', *Spontaneous Philosophy*, 221.

¹⁸¹ Stephen Resnick and Richard Wolff, 'On Overdetermination and Althusser: Our Response to Silverman and Park', *Rethinking Marxism*, 25.3 (2013), 341–49 (342).

¹⁸² Althusser, 'Materialist Dialectic', *For Marx*, 210.

¹⁸³ *Ibid*, 179.

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid*, 215.

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid*, 180.

2.3.2 The Problem of Transitions

The classical Marxist solution to the problem of how one structure changed into another is to invoke a fixed element—forces of production (Second and Third International) or human nature (Western Marxism)—that caused the rest of the structure to change. As we have seen, Althusser argued that arguments of this kind were not scientific ones, because they assume things that it is incumbent on social theory to explain. Althusser's response was to argue that it is structures that make agents and not vice versa. The structure produces agents that will reproduce it, hence why it is able to endure over time. It creates, as one of its effects, the subjects that are required of it, such that those within a structure are 'supports' for its relations. Only then is science, as the study of intransitive objects, possible, because we can explain why it is that agents act in certain ways, and crucially in *different* ways at different times in history.¹⁸⁶ Structures are what Althusser called '*an authorless theatre*'.¹⁸⁷ The subjects were the products of processes into which they were inserted and acted as agents *of*. Agents acquire their preferences from the requirements of the reproduction of the structure but tend to misrecognise these goals as originating with themselves. It is that misrecognition that idealism had carried into Marxist theory.

In making this move, Althusser brought the main insight of structuralism into Marxism—that for social theory to be scientific in the conventional sense of the term the subject had to be explained as an effect of the structure. To treat it as something external or prior to that structure was an illegitimate supposition, one which might have upsides for normative theorising but had no place in science. But if subjects were just functional supports for reproducing the structure, how could one structure be changed into another?

In Wood's assessment, Althusser offers 'a choice between structure and history, absolute determinism and irreducible contingency, pure theory and unalloyed empiricism ... the absolute and unconditional determinations of structure gave way to the absolute and irreducible contingency of the particular "conjuncture"'.¹⁸⁸ Structural causality, Elliott claims, had 'so utterly excluded history in its prioritization of social reproduction ... that it rendered social change inconceivable'.¹⁸⁹ Structural causality is, for Benton, '*far too effective*' such that 'if Althusser is to be taken strictly at his word, then a central feature of the Marxist project—the fluid, the essentially transient and transformable character of the social world—is abandoned'.¹⁹⁰ Althusser's invocation of class struggle as the 'motor' of history had 'all the signs of an ad hoc importation designed to disrupt the eternal reproduction inscribed in the initial concept of mode of production'.¹⁹¹ Determinism thus supposedly gives way to voluntarism, where the will

¹⁸⁶ Althusser, 'Object of *Capital*', *Reading Capital*, 260.

¹⁸⁷ *Ibid*, 349.

¹⁸⁸ Wood, *Democracy Against Capitalism*, 51–52.

¹⁸⁹ Elliott, 'Althusser's Solitude', *Economy and Society*, 493.

¹⁹⁰ Benton, *Structural Marxism*, 65.

¹⁹¹ Elliott, *Detour of Theory*, 200–1.

of a class can override the determinations of a structure.¹⁹² Rather than being explained by it, history occurs only against the self-reproducing structure. In Becker's judgement, for Althusserian Marxism 'structure refers to true history; conjuncture—where the autonomy of politics and ideology is effective—to a deviation from true history'.¹⁹³ 'Where there is no simple, absolute and mechanical determination', Wood says, 'there is absolute contingency. So much for Marx and historical materialism'.¹⁹⁴ Overdetermination has sometimes been deployed without structural causality in an attempt to rid Marxism of its deterministic aspects.¹⁹⁵ The most notable example of this remains Laclau and Mouffe's *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (1985), in which politics is rendered autonomous from economic determination and the key task becomes the construction of a discursive political project.¹⁹⁶

Thus Althusser stands accused of failing to unite the overdetermination and class struggle of *For Marx* with the structural causality of *Reading Capital*.¹⁹⁷ This problem was considered irreconcilable enough for Balibar to propose a division between 'Althusserians of the Conjuncture and Althusserians of the Structure'.¹⁹⁸ Compare, for example, the competing statements of Resnick and Wolff—'the concept of overdetermination, for Althusser ... is the key concept shaping the difference and distance between Althusser and the empiricist, rationalist, and determinist currents in the Marxist tradition'—and Collier—Althusser was 'absolutely right that Marx's "great theoretical revolution" was precisely the "Spinozan" conception of structural causality ... This is perhaps the central achievement of Althusser's work'.¹⁹⁹

The consequence of this problem was, as Perry Anderson describes, the collapse of the Althusserian project as a viable alternative to technological determinism and Hegelian humanism:

Since the overall direction of Althusser's enquiries was neither corrected nor developed, the introduction of the problem of the historical subject into the machinery of structural causality set out in *Reading Capital* simply resulted in incoherence. No new synthesis comparable to his earlier work appeared. The

¹⁹² Glucksmann, *Structuralist Analysis*, 130; Callinicos, *Future for Marxism?*, 133, 158–59; Callinicos, 'What is Living', *Althusserian Legacy*, 41–42; John Grant, 'Multiple Returns: Althusser on Dialectics', in *Karl Marx and Contemporary Philosophy*, ed. by Andrew Chitty and Martin McIvor (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 221–35 (228–29); Benjamin Ardit, 'Louis Althusser', in *Palgrave Advances in Continental Political Thought*, ed. by Terrell Carver and James Martin (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 182–95 (193); Creaven, "'Two Marxisms'", *Journal of Critical Realism*, 24–26.

¹⁹³ Becker, 'Class Theory', *Debate on Classes*, 131.

¹⁹⁴ Wood, *Democracy Against Capitalism*, 52.

¹⁹⁵ Stefano Pippa, 'The Necessity of Contingency', *Radical Philosophy*, 199 (2016), 15–25 (19).

¹⁹⁶ Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*.

¹⁹⁷ Elliott, *Detour of Theory*, 203.

¹⁹⁸ Étienne Balibar, 'Althusser's Object', trans. by Margaret Cohen and Bruce Robbins, *Social Text*, 1994, 157–88 (166). The best example is the trajectory of Paul Hirst and Barry Hindess who managed to be, at different times, both Althusserians of the structure and the conjuncture; see: Wood, *Retreat from Class*, 77–78. Gregory Elliott, 'The Odyssey of Paul Hirst', *New Left Review*, I, 159 (1986), 81–105.

¹⁹⁹ Resnick and Wolff, *Knowledge and Class*, 105; Collier, *Scientific Realism*, 83.

consequence was the progressive effacement and dissolution of Althusserian Marxism, as a current, by the mid-seventies.²⁰⁰

The task that follows, then, is to assess whether Althusser was able to resolve this in his later work.

2.3.3 Towards a Resolution

In fact, Althusser had been far more attentive to the issue outlined above than he has been given credit for. At this stage, I will only indicate a pre-aleatory (pre-1982) pedigree for ideas that I will examine more fully in chapter 4. The problem is that if subjects are products of structures, then agents can only be conceptualised as acting according to intentions bestowed on them by the structure. Thus the future trajectory of the structure is already contained within it, and the abolition of the subject leads straight back to the expressive totality with all its implications of inevitability. The question is how to explain the emergence of something without presupposing its existence? Only then can then history *qua* history be accounted for.

Balibar's attempt at a solution to this, in his contribution to *Reading Capital*, is unsatisfactory. He argued that all modes of production were variations on the relations between a set of invariant elements, such that we could produce 'a comparative table of the forms of different modes of production which all combine the same "factors"'.²⁰¹ This conception of a mode of production as the 'variation of the connections between a small number of elements which are always the same' is intended to break 'the identity between *chronology* and a law of the internal development of forms which is at the root of evolutionism as of all historicisms of "supersession"'.²⁰² In order to 'think the nature of periods of transition from one mode of production to another' Balibar invoked the idea of transitional modes of production 'characterized by the *coexistence* of several modes of production'.²⁰³ The idea of transitional modes of production, however, leads to an infinite regression (how does a mode of production transition to a transitional mode of production?) and reintroduces a teleology in that transitional modes of production necessarily lead to new, stable, modes of production.²⁰⁴ Additionally, the table of invariants fails to account 'for the priority of the relation over the elements of the relation and how they are actually conditioned by the relation itself' thus suggesting 'some form of transhistorical essences that are combined in different ways in different historical modes of production'.²⁰⁵ Such a view is obviously counter to exactly what Althusser was seeking to establish.

²⁰⁰ Anderson, *In The Tracks*, 39.

²⁰¹ Balibar, 'Basic Concepts', *Reading Capital*, 377.

²⁰² *Ibid*, 387–88.

²⁰³ *Ibid*, 479. See also *ibid*, 473–80.

²⁰⁴ Elliott, *Detour of Theory*, 149; Barry Hindess and Paul Hirst, *Pre-Capitalist Modes of Production* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1975), 272–78.

²⁰⁵ Panagiotis Sotiris, 'Rethinking Structure and Conjuncture in Althusser', *Historical Materialism*, 22:3/4 (2014), 5–51 (21).

Nevertheless, Balibar demonstrated a clear awareness of the problem:

The movement of accumulation of capital is only possible because a surplus-value susceptible to capitalization exists. This surplus-value itself can only be the result of a previous production process, and so on, apparently indefinitely. But in given technical conditions the minimum sum of value capable of functioning as capital and its division into constant and variable capital are also given, and condition every extraction of surplus-value. The production of this original capital therefore constitutes a threshold and crossing this threshold cannot be explained by the action of the law of capitalist accumulation alone.²⁰⁶

What Balibar is pointing to in this passage is the dilemma that for the principal regularity of the capitalist mode of production—capital accumulation—to occur, this law of accumulation had to be thought to exist prior to the existence of the capitalist mode of production *and* be alone sufficient to generate everything else required to stabilise and sustain it (a corresponding superstructure): capitalism had to precede itself.

Explanations of this sort resorted to the classic idealist manoeuvre of the ‘*retrospective projection*’ of the outcome on to the origin, or what Althusser called the ‘genetic method.’²⁰⁷ What Althusser had in mind here is similar to the ‘obstetric metaphor’ found in Marx’s work, in which each mode of production created, by its own action, a new mode of production to supersede it.²⁰⁸

The alternative to the genetic method was to think the emergence of structures as the consequence of the intersection of multiple independent sources, or as the subtitle to Althusser’s ‘On the Materialist Dialectic’ put it ‘the unevenness of origins’.²⁰⁹ As Balibar explained:

The elements combined by the capitalist structure have different and independent origins ... the unity possessed by the capitalist structure once it has been constituted is not found prior to it. Even when the study of the prehistory of the mode of production takes the form of a genealogy, i.e., when it aims to be explicitly and strictly dependent, *in the question that it poses*, on the elements of the constituted structure, and on their identification, which requires that the structure is known as such in its complex unity—even then the prehistory can never be the mere retrospective projection of the structure. All it requires is that the encounter should have been produced, and rigorously thought, between those elements which are identified on the basis of the result of their conjunction, and the historical field within which their peculiar histories are to be thought The relative independence and historical variety of the constitution processes of capital are gathered together by Marx into a single word: the constitution of the structure is a ‘find’ ... This find obviously does not imply chance; it means that the formation of the capitalist mode of production is completely indifferent to the origin and genesis of the elements which it needs, ‘finds’ and ‘combines’. Thus it is impossible for the reasoning whose

²⁰⁶ Balibar, ‘Basic Concepts’, *Reading Capital*, 444.

²⁰⁷ *Ibid*, 445. On the genetic method see: Louis Althusser, ‘Letters to D.’, in *Writings on Psychoanalysis*, 33–77 (54–64); Althusser, ‘On Genesis’, *Décalages*.

²⁰⁸ On the ‘obstetric metaphor’ see Cohen, *If You’re an Egalitarian*, 58–78.

²⁰⁹ Althusser, ‘Materialist Dialectic’, *For Marx*, 161.

movement I have retraced to be looped into a circle: the genealogy is not the other side of a genesis. Instead of uniting the structure and history of its formation, the genealogy *separates* the result from its prehistory. It is not the old structure which itself has transformed itself, on the contrary, it has really ‘died out’ as such.²¹⁰

A new structure emerges from a plurality of events which are unrelated to each other prior to their consolidation into a stable reproducing structure. The new structure does not owe its existence to the laws of the antecedent structure.

In a 1966 text titled ‘On Genesis’, unpublished at the time, Althusser made the same points. The alternative to the theory of genesis was a “theory of encounter” or theory of “conjunction”. The capitalist mode of production was the result of the combination of three previously unrelated elements—accumulated capital, labour-power without access to means of production, and developments in the means of production:

The genealogies of the three elements are independent of one another, and independent (in their co-existence, in the co-existence of their respective results) of the existing structure (the feudal mode of production). Which excludes any possibility of a resurgence of the myth of genesis: the feudal mode of production is not the ‘father’ of the capitalist mode of production in the sense that the latter would be contained ‘as a seed’ in the first.²¹¹

Capitalism should not, therefore, be thought about ‘as the effect of a filiation, but as the effect of a conjunction’. It is not’, Althusser argued, ‘the feudal mode of production that, by itself, and through a providential finality, engenders at the same time the three elements necessary for the new structure to “take hold”’. The formerly independent elements, upon meeting, “conjoin” and form a new structure.²¹² Structural causality describes this mechanism of the new structure imposing its logic on the parts which exist neither *for* it nor *because* of it. We will see later how Levine’s judgement that structural causality acts as a ‘placeholder term’ is perceptive given that it was offered without knowledge of ‘On Genesis’ or Althusser’s aleatory work.²¹³

These two theories of transition—genesis and encounter/conjunction—are connected to two different conceptions of structure, totality and complex whole respectively. When talking of a ‘*totality*’ there was always a temptation, in Althusser’s view, to see a closed system structured around an essence. The closed system suggested by the term totality ‘presupposes that one can grasp all the phenomena, exhaustively, and then reassemble them within the simple unity of its centre’.²¹⁴ The idea of a complex whole, in contrast, helped us to appreciate that a structure changed and mutated through the interaction of its parts. As he sought to clarify, in ‘Is it Simple to be a Marxist in Philosophy?’ (1975), there was a perpetual unevenness and conflict that pervaded the structure:

I talked about *a whole*, to make it clear that in the Marxist conception of a social

²¹⁰ Balibar, ‘Basic Concepts’, *Reading Capital*, 450–52.

²¹¹ Althusser, ‘On Genesis’, *Décalages*, 2.

²¹² *Ibid.*, 1.

²¹³ Levine, *Future for Marxism*, 117; Levine, ‘Althusser’s Marxism’, *Economy and Society*, 278.

²¹⁴ Althusser, ‘Is it Simple’, *Spontaneous Philosophy*, 220.

formation everything holds together, that the independence of an element is only ever the form of its dependence, and that the interplay of the differences is regulated by the unity of a determination in the last instance ... It is this interplay, this unevenness, which allows us to understand that something real can happen in a social formation and that through the political class struggle it is possible to get a hold on real history ... the Marxist topography refers any questioner to his place in the historical process: *this* is the place which you occupy, and *this* is where you must move to in order to change things. Archimedes wanted only a single fixed point in order to lift up the world. The Marxist topography names the place where you must fight because that is where the fight will take place for the transformation of the world. But this place is no longer a point, nor is it fixed—it is an articulated system of positions governed by the determination in the last instance.²¹⁵

The structure was always in movement, within limits imposed by the economic instance. Indeed, precisely what Althusser was trying to hammer home with the concept of overdetermination was that unevenness was endemic to social structures, and it is because of this unevenness that singular historical moments, and not just endless repetition or predictable linear development, occurred.²¹⁶

The claim is that unevenness, and with it disorder, is an endemic fact about social structures. It is thinking structure as never successfully existing in a fully stable equilibrium state that permits Althusser to begin to reintroduce a theory of transitions into the supposedly static mechanism of structural causality. Insofar as subjects are bearers of the demands of the structure, they reflect its conflictual existence. A structure was composed of different tendencies which, developing according to their own schedules, placed different imperatives on the subject, imperatives that were not necessarily coherent with one another. A given subject was a unique condensation of the diverse imperatives of a given structure. ‘Thus the individual’, Althusser later clarified, ‘has at his disposal a “play of manoeuvre” between several positions, between which he can “develop”, or even, if you insist, “choose”, determine his course ... in the play of the plurality of interpellations’.²¹⁷ The error is to see Althusser’s conception of structure as functionalist, but this is precisely what the critique of essences was meant to head off.²¹⁸ The question is not why it is that some subjects desire something other

²¹⁵ Ibid.

²¹⁶ Althusser, ‘Materialist Dialectic’, *For Marx*, 213–14.

²¹⁷ Althusser, ‘Correspondence’, *Philosophy of the Encounter*, 241. In fact, this view had been present from the very inception of Althusser’s theory of ideology, even as it sits alongside functionalist claims. In the 1966 text in which the term ‘interpellation’ first appeared Althusser said that ideological interpellation was ‘not a pure and simple injunction, but an enterprise of conviction-persuasion: accordingly, it must *provide its own guarantees* for the subject it interpellates’; Althusser, ‘Three Notes’, *Humanist Controversy*, 33–84 (52).

²¹⁸ Hirst, *Law and Ideology*, 43–45; Larrain, *Concept of Ideology*, 154–64. Functionalist explanations explain phenomena by their *consequences* rather than their *causes*. On the debate over the legitimacy of functional explanations in social science see: Cohen, *Karl Marx’s Theory of History*, 249–96; Jon Elster, *Explaining Technical Change* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 49–68; Elster, *Making Sense of Marx*, 27–37; Jon Elster, ‘Marxism, Functionalism, and Game Theory: The Case for Methodological Individualism’, in *Marxist Theory*, 48–87; G. A. Cohen, ‘Reply to Elster on “Marxism, Functionalism and Game Theory”’, in *Marxist Theory*, 88–104; Elster, ‘Further Thoughts’, in *Analytical Marxism*, 202–20; Erik Olin Wright, Andrew Levine, and Elliott Sober, *Reconstructing Marxism: Essays on*

than the present system.²¹⁹ Rather, it is why most subjects *do not*. And to this Althusser provided an answer that centred on the role of the state and its dissemination of ideology via the Ideological State Apparatuses. On this I concur with Pippa, who has argued that ‘it is by reflecting on the problem of reproduction that Althusser provides a correction to his own incipient functionalism’.²²⁰

What Althusser set out to establish in *On the Reproduction of Capitalism* (1970) was that the continued existence of a structure only takes place as the effect of a persistent struggle by a dominant class through various institutions and discourses—the state, ideology, philosophy etc.—that work to secure and reproduce the prevailing relations of production.²²¹ ‘Marxism and Humanism’ (1963) had already set the stage:

If, as Marx said, history is a perpetual transformation of men’s conditions of existence ... then men must be ceaselessly transformed so as to adapt them to these conditions; if this ‘adaptation’ cannot be left to spontaneity but must be constantly assumed, dominated and controlled, it is in ideology that this demand is expressed.²²²

The dominant class must work to hold the structure together, which is ever liable to disintegrate in one way or another. It is the degree of success of the struggle of the dominant class that is the condition of possibility for the continued reproduction of the structure. The state and ideology are active organisers of the coherence of the structure, not the reflection of an essence. Structures are not, then, the spontaneous production of a perfect order, but objects within which conflict is endemic. Institutions and apparatuses have been developed by which to suppress and control this conflict, in doing so securing its ongoing reproduction. Structures are not so much latent orders but *latent disorders*, a crucial point of differentiation between Marxist and structuralist concepts of structure, that are not reproduced effortlessly but only with great difficulty.

2.4 Conclusion

I began this chapter by recounting Althusser’s initial attempt to define Marxist philosophy as the Theory of theoretical practice. Marx supposedly discovered the logic of how entities changed, allowing him to present a scientific account of history. This reconstruction of Marxist philosophy failed on account of its circularity: we can only know it to be correct if we already know it is correct.

In the second section, I argued that Althusser’s second definition of philosophy as ‘class

Explanation and the Theory of History (London: Verso, 1992), 63–67; Alex Callinicos, *Making History: Agency, Structure, and Change in Social Theory* (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 58–69.

²¹⁹ James, *Content of Social Explanation*, 115–16; Little, *Scientific Marx*, 56–59. Althusser had previously endorsed a functionalist interpretation of historical materialism; see Louis Althusser, ‘Les Problèmes de la philosophie de l’histoire’, in *Politique et histoire de Machiavel à Marx : cours à l’École Normale Supérieure de 1955 à 1972*, ed. by François Matheron (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2006), 27–192 (179).

²²⁰ Pippa, ‘Althusser and Contingency’, 138.

²²¹ Althusser, *On the Reproduction*.

²²² Althusser, ‘Marxism and Humanism’, *For Marx*, 235.

struggle in theory' is more successful. The circularity of epistemology need not put into peril the distinctive nature of science as knowledge-producing. The apparent paradox of science is that it is distinguished by its embrace of mechanisms that place its claims into doubt. It is its lack of certainty that sets it apart. Philosophy, Althusser argued, is best thought about as a conflict over what counts as truth, or what is science and what is ideology. Philosophy's engagement in this conflict expresses particular social interests. The stakes of philosophy are on the one hand political—legitimation strategies, justification for normative principles—and on the other scientific—(re)organisation of the conceptual field, posing of problems, clearing out ideological assumptions. Sciences could only develop on the basis of materialist philosophy, compared to ideologies which took their cues from idealist philosophy. It is this definition of philosophy that persisted in Althusser's work right through to his aleatory phase.²²³

If Marxists were to be able to engage in effective political practice, it was necessary to advance their understanding of the social structures they wished to change. Althusser argued that philosophy was Marxism's present point of weakness. Historical materialism had developed to the point where it now required additional philosophical assistance. Althusser thus made a case for the continued necessity of philosophical thinking in order to make political advances: 'the development of historical materialism today depends on the solution of crucial, theoretical problems, both scientific and philosophical, which can be posed and resolved only with the help, and through the intervention, of dialectical materialism'.²²⁴ '*Marxist philosophy today*' he wrote, '*represents the "decisive link" on which depend the future of Marxist theory and, consequently, the "correctness" of the union of Marxist theory and the workers' movement*'.²²⁵

Science, therefore, is not a self-sufficient activity, but dependent upon the work of philosophical inquiry (among other things). Materialist philosophy was that form of inquiry appropriate to removing the presence of ideology from within science, an activity that generally took the form of illuminating hidden value-based assumptions. Undertaking this task could help Marxists maximise their chances of successfully enacting their political project. The reasons, then, for a) being materialists in philosophy b) selecting historical materialism as *the* theory of history, were political. It is important to note the *validity* of a science is not derived, for Althusser, from its political efficacy (to do so would be a wholesale regress to the positions he had set out to criticise), but that there are strong sociological reasons for why some people have an interest in developing science, and others in denying this status to particular theories. The rejection or acceptance of particular sciences is not a question purely of rational assessment.

In the final section, I examined Althusser's reconstruction of historical materialism. Althusser's account revolves around two key categories: structural causality and

²²³ For example see Althusser, 'Correspondence', *Philosophy of the Encounter*, 240.

²²⁴ Althusser, 'Historical Task', *Humanist Controversy*, 182.

²²⁵ *Ibid*, 169.

overdetermination. Althusser's aimed to demonstrate an alternative theory of social structures to those of the development of the productive forces or a pre-given subject. Subjects are the *products* of structures; they do not pre-exist the structure and then only later enter into it. The superficial plausibility of humanist explanations does not stand the test of scrutiny. Such explanations were reflections of the self-understanding of particular socio-economic orders. What it is not possible to explain, on this basis, is how particular kinds of subjects came to be; and it is by ruling out such questions that humanism performs the role of sustaining particular distributions of social power. A social structure is, in Althusser's view, neither an aggregation of pre-existing elements nor an organic unity, but a *complex whole*.

Commentators have argued that Althusser failed to reconcile structural causality and overdetermination, self-reproducing structure and changing process, thereby forcing us to opt for either determinism or voluntarism, and collapsing back into the very problems he sought to root out in Marxist theory. In the face of an all-encompassing structure which produces the subjects that inhabit it, it becomes difficult to see how the agents are able to make meaningful choices. Agents, in Althusser's anti-humanist conception, are reduced to expressions of the structure, in which their agency is simply the expression of the imperatives of the structure. Althusser's aim of offering a non-deterministic social theory that avoids offering the preferences of agents as foundational and can inform an emancipatory political practice appears to be self-defeating. Transitions between structures are only conceivable (if at all) if they are considered to pre-exist themselves in 'embryo'. Nevertheless, we saw that the problem might not be as severe as it first appeared. Althusser does not think of the structure as a harmonious order, destined to reproduce itself in perpetuity, but a conflictual whole in which class struggle has an influence over its trajectory.

3. Three Shifts

In this chapter, I examine three shifts in Althusser's thinking that precipitate the formulation of aleatory materialism. The aim is to show how and why Althusser moved in this direction. The first shift is Althusser's turn away from epistemological problems and towards ontological problems. This permits Althusser to clarify what he found objectionable in idealist philosophy. The idealist problematic is arrayed around 'origin' categories from which a philosophical system is derived. He argued that most materialisms had failed to escape this problematic. I show that Althusser came to see dialectical materialism as a pseudo-materialism of this sort and that he consequently abandoned it as a philosophy suitable for Marxism. Althusser argued that we should pay closer attention to how claims about origins continued to persist in supposedly materialist philosophy. The second shift is towards a new materialism. I look at the emerging alternative Althusser developed to idealist philosophy. This is to be found principally in the concept of 'process without a subject or goal' and the idea of a new practice of philosophy. Althusser argued that we should treat everything in the world as without an originary state. Only then can we have a sufficiently materialist philosophy that can sustain a scientific theory. The third section explores Althusser's changing ideas about the status of the epistemological break in Marx's work. Althusser moved from thinking of this break as chronological, with a before and after, to a permanent fracture running through Marx's corpus and, by extension, Marxism.

3.1 examines Althusser's critique of materialism. In 3.1.1, I discuss Althusser's view of philosophy as divided between idealist and materialist camps. Based on whether mind or matter was seen as more important philosophies could be labelled as such, but no philosophy, he argued, is ever *completely* materialist or idealist. I make a qualified assent to this view on the grounds that these two types of philosophy share a problematic; they are distinctive answers to the same question, and thus each position sustains the existence of the other. Althusser objected to this way of doing philosophy. In proposing themselves as ultimate and final truths philosophies of this sort tended to restrict rather than sustain scientific activity. In 3.1.2 I argue that 'origins' are, for Althusser, the central unifying feature of this problematic in both its idealist and materialist versions. Posing an origin, a fixed element itself without need of explanation, was the main way in which idealist philosophy organised the hegemony of the dominant class and imposed limits upon sciences, by refusing knowledge that put into question the origin itself. In 3.1.3 I consider the consequences of applying these criticisms of materialist philosophy internally, to Marxist philosophy. Althusser argued that dialectical materialism was vulnerable to the critique of materialism he had set out. While dialectical materialism had been envisaged as a philosophy without origins, it had failed in this ambition. By supposing the world operated according to certain laws that dialectical materialism had discovered, dialectical materialists had failed to break from the idealist problematic. Consequently, it provided philosophical legitimation for evolutionist and teleological versions of historical materialism. Althusser concluded that dialectical materialism had to be abandoned if historical materialism was to realise

its promise as a science of history.

In 3.2 I examine Althusser's attempts during the mid-1970s to specify a new materialist philosophy that would meet the challenge set. 3.2.1 discusses the idea of a 'process without a subject or goal' as the key category of a new materialism without origin, in which entities are to be understood as in constant motion. In 3.2.2 I survey Althusser's idea of a new practice of philosophy, a philosophy that understood its status as a partisan practice within a social formation rather than a disinterested science.

In the final section, 3.3, I look at the evolution of Althusser's concept of the epistemological break. This idea had begun as a way of dividing Marx's work into an early phase marked by Hegelian idealism, a transitional phase in which Marx gradually moved away from this, and a mature phase in which Marx became fully Marxist, with a materialist philosophy that underpinned a science of history. While Althusser continued to maintain that an epistemological break is present in Marx's work, he revised his view in important ways. He came to argue that the progress of this break was not progressively linear, but that Marx shifted back and forth throughout his work between a Hegelian idealism and a new practice of philosophy. What the break showed was the presence of two different philosophies in Marx's work that competed for prominence. The main reason for divergent readings of Marx was the presence of these two different philosophies, both of which constituted valid readings by the letter of the texts.

3.1 The Critique of Materialism

3.1.1 Idealism and Materialism

I have thus far defined materialism as the primacy of being over thought, with the qualification that this is understood as a monist doctrine in which being and thought are both aspects of the same substance—matter. Observed objects are independent of observing subjects, but thoughts are also a material process both in the narrow sense that they are physical and the expansive sense that they involve mechanisms of dissemination, experimentation etc. This understanding of materialism is one that is found throughout Althusser's work.¹

What I want to establish in this section, however, is that if this is all Althusser's view of materialism is taken to be then what is interesting and potentially controversial about it will not be appreciated. In the previous chapter, I examined how Althusser sought to reject taking a position concerning philosophy's epistemological question. Here we will see more fully the impact of this rejection of guarantees on philosophy's ontological question, the nature of being—or as Althusser sometimes put it '*why is there something*

¹ Althusser, 'Theoretical Practice', *Spontaneous Philosophy*, 9; Althusser, 'Historical Task', *Humanist Controversy*, 186; Althusser, 'Humanist Controversy', *Humanist Controversy*, 265; Althusser, 'Reply to John Lewis', *Self-Criticism*, 54; Althusser, *Marxist in Philosophy*, 113.

*rather than nothing?*²

To say a philosophy is materialist or idealist is to say its particular response to this question falls within one of two broad approaches to the problem. Althusser thought that no philosophy could be neatly categorised as either materialism or idealism, but was always some combination of the two.³ Focusing solely on explicit responses given to the ontological question of what substance(s) made up the world might obscure something important about the philosophies that we seek to understand. Within philosophies that formally adhered to the ontological positions associated with idealism, Althusser argued, we will find elements of materialism and vice versa. Cartesian philosophy provides one example, as a philosophy that supported and drove scientific advance but simultaneously invoked the dominant religious idealism of the day to do so.⁴ Althusser held this view at least implicitly in ‘Philosophy and the Spontaneous Philosophy of the Scientists’ (1967) and made it explicit in ‘Elements of Self-Criticism’ (1972). It is a claim that Althusser continued to make in his aleatory phase.⁵ We are dealing, then, with a claim that runs the length of Althusser’s second definition of philosophy.

In saying that philosophies were never purely materialist or idealist, Althusser was building on a view expressed by Engels, in *Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy* (1886), that ‘the great basic question of all ... philosophy, is that concerning the relation of thinking and being’. There are two ways of looking at this relation, Engels argued, and philosophies can be classified according to their respective answers. Idealist philosophies ‘asserted the primacy of the mind over nature’. Materialists, in contrast, gave the opposite answer, asserting the primacy of matter over mind.⁶ Some idealists, like Berkeley, resolve that there is only mind and materialists, like Spinoza and Althusser, understood mind as only a function of matter, but monism did not go beyond the basic question being posed. All philosophy, Engels argued, is arrayed around this question and philosophies were classifiable according to which substance they saw as more important. Engels is saying that materialism and idealism are not differentiated by the questions that they posed, but by the different answers that they gave to the same question.⁷ These positions may not be exhaustive in the history of philosophy—Althusser does not think so, and the conception undoubtedly conflates Western philosophy with philosophy in general—but I think it is right to claim that *if*

² Ibid, 77; Althusser, *Non-Philosophers*, 27.

³ Althusser, ‘Elements of Self-Criticism’, *Self-Criticism*, 142–50; Althusser, *Marxist in Philosophy*, 58.

⁴ Karsz, *Theorie et Politique*, 83.

⁵ Althusser, ‘Philosophy and Marxism’, *Philosophy of the Encounter*, 268; Althusser, ‘Les 2 grands courants’, IMEC, ALT2. A29-04.09, 1–2; Althusser, ‘Matérialisme aléatoire’, *Multitudes*, 182–85.

⁶ Friedrich Engels, ‘Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy’ in Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Marx-Engels Collected Works: Engels, 1882–1889* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1990), xxvi, 353–98 (365–66).

⁷ Jean-Claude Bourdin, ‘The Uncertain Materialism of Louis Althusser’, trans. by Charles T Wolfe, *Graduate Faculty Philosophy Journal*, 22:1 (2000), 271–87 (280); Jean-Claude Bourdin, ‘Matérialisme aléatoire et pensée de la conjoncture. Au-delà de Marx’, in *Althusser : une lecture de Marx*, 193–228 (216); I owe this instructive comparison with Engels to Bourdin.

that is the question then we can categorise all the possible answers to that question within the materialism/idealism distinction. The argument that Althusser is putting here is what Ilya Prigogine has claimed is an oscillation in Western thought 'between the world as an automaton and a theology in which God governs the universe ... these visions are connected. An automaton needs an external God'.⁸

Engels does not seem to rule out that a philosophy can be wholly materialist or idealist, so how can we substantiate Althusser's view that materialisms and idealisms are never pure? We have already established that Althusser thought:

a) Philosophy is class struggle in theory. Those classes are represented in theory by idealist and materialist philosophies. Philosophy is a site of struggle between those tendencies.

b) Philosophy has no object aside from itself. All philosophy is a comment on other philosophy: '*every thesis is thus by its nature an anti-thesis*'.⁹

Given these two views about philosophy it follows, Althusser argued, that materialisms contained idealisms and vice versa. In the act of advancing positions against opponents each type of philosophy preserved something about the opposing philosophy. Althusser repeatedly referred to this operation as preventative: 'the war of philosophies, in which systems come into conflict, presupposes the preventive strike of positions against one another, and thus the necessary use by a philosophy of a detour via other philosophies in order to define and defend its own positions'.¹⁰ What Althusser seemed to mean by this is that for philosophies to successfully counter opposing philosophies they must do so with reference to their opponents—if not specifically by name then by answering some of the same questions or using some of the same concepts. In one sense this is not a controversial point, for it is simply to say that the prerequisite for being part of the same domain—philosophy—is speaking a common language. Even in cases of disagreement (perhaps especially in such cases) a dissimilarity can only be understood as such if it is made clear what is being rejected. This is why one type of philosophy preserves within it the other type. And this is precisely what happens, Althusser thought, when materialism inverted the idealist claim of the primacy of mind over matter in order to assert the primacy of matter over mind.

The claim Althusser makes, however, is stronger than this: it is that *by necessity* predominantly materialist philosophies were partly idealist and vice versa.¹¹ As he put it in 'Philosophy and Marxism' (1984–87) 'in any philosophy, one finds idealist and

⁸ Ilya Prigogine and Isabelle Stengers, *Order Out of Chaos: Man's New Dialogue with Nature* (Toronto: Bantam Books, 1984), 7. See also Ilya Prigogine, *The End of Certainty: Time, Chaos, and the New Laws of Nature* (New York: The Free Press, 1997), 11.

⁹ Althusser, *Non-Philosophers*, 160.

¹⁰ Althusser, 'Is it Simple', *Spontaneous Philosophy*, 206; Althusser, *Marxist in Philosophy*, 37, 59; Althusser, 'Correspondence', *Philosophy of the Encounter*, 223.

¹¹ Althusser does not always pose the problem in these terms. E.g. 'the positions of the two sides are *usually* mixed up together'; my emphasis. Cf. 'idealist and materialist tendencies ... are *never realized in a pure form in any "philosophy"*'; Althusser, 'Elements of Self-Criticism', *Self-Criticism*, 143–44.

materialist elements ... What is certain is that no absolutely pure philosophy exists'.¹² It is probably true that most philosophies sit somewhere between the absolute poles of materialism and idealism, perhaps for the aforementioned reason, but also because many philosophers have not seen themselves in such terms, and thus not sought purity along these lines, or because they have consciously attempted to be both.¹³ We are given, however, no good reason to rule out extremely rigorous idealist and materialist positions in philosophy that extend the underlying claims of these philosophies to their logical conclusions. This is not also to suggest that in the actual history of philosophy we are sure to find examples, only that I cannot see how the possibility can be excluded.

Althusser did more effectively defend the claim that idealism contains materialism and vice versa because they replicate the ground on which the other operates: 'every philosophy bears within itself the spectre of its opposite: idealism contains the spectre of materialism'.¹⁴ The two philosophies are inter-dependent, each cannot exist without the other, therefore any materialist philosophy can be said to contain idealism (and vice versa) in the sense that rather than defeating its opponent it sustained its continued existence. If one can be said to contain the other, it is in the sense of *containing the potential for*, which would not rule out the possibility of a particular philosophy adhering completely to a materialist or idealist position. As Wal Suchting puts it 'the idea of struggle is *constitutive* of the materialism/idealism couple ... the very ground of their unity, their inseparability—that they continuously generate each other—is also the ground of the conflict between them'.¹⁵ To practice philosophy meant to practice it as a war of tendencies, to take a position in respect to another philosophy.¹⁶

The salient point is that while these two types of philosophy may oppose each other, they only do so by virtue of sharing the same presupposition—that *the* distinctively philosophical problem is the relation between mind and matter, thought and nature, theory and practice. But, Althusser argued, the difficulty with this is that the question being asked is ultimately an idealist question. Thus when materialist philosophies, the apparent opponents of idealism, tried to pose their own answers to this question they had already conceded the legitimacy of exactly what they were seeking to reject. Materialism is only required to pose a solution to the problem because it already

¹² Althusser, 'Philosophy and Marxism', *Philosophy of the Encounter*, 268; See also Althusser, 'Matérialisme aléatoire', *Multitudes*, 182.

¹³ Althusser referenced Pascal as a philosopher whose thought included both materialist and idealist elements; Althusser, 'Philosophy and Marxism', *Philosophy of the Encounter*, 269. Lenin provided the example of Kant as someone who has attempted 'the reconciliation of materialism with idealism ... the combination within one system of heterogeneous and contrary philosophical trends'; Vladimir I. Lenin, 'Materialism and Empirio-Criticism', in *Lenin Collected Works: 1908*, ed. by Clemens Dutt, trans. by Abraham Fineberg (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1962), XIV, 17–361 (198). Althusser argued that Kant, in doing this, recognised that philosophy was a struggle between materialism and idealism, and was trying to escape this struggle by providing 'a conflict-free philosophy'; Althusser, 'Philosophy and Marxism', *Philosophy of the Encounter*, 271.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 268.

¹⁵ Suchting, *Marx and Philosophy*, 72.

¹⁶ See: Pierre Raymond, *Le Passage au matérialisme* (Paris: Maspero, 1973); Pierre Macherey, 'L'Histoire de la philosophie considérée comme une lutte de tendances', *La Pensée*, 185 (1976), 3–25.

accepted the terms of the debate: the starting point of materialist philosophy is that there is a case to answer, and this is a case brought forward by idealism. Within this problematic idealism has had the advantage. This is because once one admits there is an epistemological problem, of bringing thought and reality into contact, it is impossible to demonstrate the existence of a mind-independent reality. Materialism rests on an unprovable *assumption*, that there is a real world and it is amenable to understanding. Idealists have the weight of argument on their side within philosophy because they present a resolution to the question put (the guarantee), even if it is an unsatisfactory one.¹⁷

Althusser had made an argument like this in *Reading Capital* (1965):

We must leave the ideological space defined by this ideological question, this *necessarily* closed space ... in order to open a new space on a different site—the space required for a *correct posing of the problem, one which does not prejudge the solution* ... It is impossible to leave a closed space simply by taking up a position merely *outside it*, either in its exterior or its profundity; so long as this outside or profundity remains *its* outside or profundity, they still belong to *that* circle, to *that* closed space, as its ‘repetition’ in *its* other-than-itself. Not the repetition but the non-repetition of this space is the way out of this circle.¹⁸

The problematic of idealist philosophy was a closed space of this type. In posing its own answer to this question materialism remained inside the idealist problematic, a problematic in which idealism had the whip hand. In this way materialism always preserved, irrespective of the rigour with which it asserted its position, idealism within itself. The challenge, then, was to articulate a philosophy which was a ‘non-repetition of this space’—a philosophy that evaded the question entirely. But not only that, for the similarity of the closed structure of the problematics of idealism in philosophy and ideology in theoretical discourses is more than coincidental. The philosophical strategy Althusser is after, then, is one that reflects the openness of scientific discourses. It is not immediately obvious what this requires, but one way of reading Althusser’s endeavour is as striving for this.

Engels’ way of posing the problem of dividing materialism and idealism does not, however, quite get to the bottom of what Althusser finds objectionable in the problematic of traditional philosophy. The terms Engels used are in a distinctly Cartesian idiom, whereas Althusser thought the materialism/idealism distinction divided the entirety of Western philosophy, from Plato onwards.¹⁹ To pose the question in the specifically Cartesian way that most modern philosophy does, as an epistemological problem of the relation between mind and matter, is to presuppose this duality of substances. A classic materialist solution is to try and efface the problem by arguing that there is one type of substance in the world: matter. Consequently, it might look as if materialisms were making a more radical move than they really were. In order

¹⁷ Levine, *Future for Marxism*, 86.

¹⁸ Althusser, ‘Marx’s Philosophy’, *Reading Capital*, 54–55.

¹⁹ Althusser, ‘Philosophy and Marxism’, *Philosophy of the Encounter*, 271–73; Althusser, ‘Correspondence’, *Philosophy of the Encounter*, 216, 224.

to understand Althusser's case against materialism as it is usually conceived, we have to appreciate a bit more about how he understood the problematic of traditional philosophy.

The current of philosophy that Althusser was attacking is that which took the world as its object and claimed to enunciate the truth of it. He provided some examples of the kinds of questions that philosophies of this sort ask and answer: 'Why is there something rather than nothing? What is the origin of the world? What is the world's *raison d'être*? What is man's place in the ends of the world?'.²⁰ Theology is an example of this kind of thinking that will be familiar, and Althusser's charge was that the vast majority of philosophical thought including most materialisms, their atheistic pretensions notwithstanding, had not escaped the religious heritage of modern philosophy.²¹ We have already seen Althusser's criticisms of some examples of this type of philosophical thought: the epistemological accord of empiricism, between a subject which can extract knowledge and objects which contain it, humanism and its interpretation of causal laws in terms of the ends of human action, philosophy as truth when it is really a partisan discourse in the interests of classes.

3.1.2 Origins

Althusser awarded most attention to one particular angle by which we can understand all these cases as variations of the same problematic, what he called *origins*. It is by posing an origin that philosophies avoided rigorous investigation of the questions they set for themselves, but instead prejudged the solutions in exactly the manner that Althusser argued distinguished ideology from science. As Montag summarises:

Althusser regarded the concept of the origin as perhaps the most common strategy by which a philosophy could conceal from itself the historical and political realities of its own practice, taking as a starting point that it discovers what in fact is a product of its own labor ... and as such a result rather than a beginning.²²

Edward Said called the origin an 'inaugural delimitation' in which some component of a whole was prioritised as the essential representation of that whole, 'an act of delimitation by which something is cut out of a great mass of material, separated from the mass, and made to stand for, as well as be, a starting point, a beginning'.²³ The principal contention is that any philosophy of origin only permitted an understanding of things as variations of that origin. Consequently, anything in the world was such that it was subject to the ordering imposed by this origin category. These origins might not

²⁰ Althusser, 'Underground Current', *Philosophy of the Encounter*, 170.

²¹ Althusser, *Non-Philosophers*, 26–28; Althusser, 'Correspondence', *Philosophy of the Encounter*, 216–17. This may not be the full story as far as religious thought goes. Stolze claims that 'biblical creation-stories arguably lend themselves to a materialist interpretation'; Ted Stolze, 'What Is a Philosophical Tendency?', *Historical Materialism*, 23:4 (2015), 3–38 (14–15).

²² Warren Montag, 'On The Function of the Concept of Origin: Althusser's Reading of Locke', in *Current Continental Theory and Modern Philosophy*, ed. by Stephen H. Daniel (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2005), 148–61 (148).

²³ Edward Said, *Orientalism* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978), 16.

be simply crude supports for existing social, political and economic arrangements. If materialisms are included, it implies that many emancipatory philosophical discourses also functioned in the same way. But it is in this way that philosophies—dominant or aspirant—tacitly conveyed values while portraying themselves as neutral. Insofar as these philosophies can account for difference or novelty at all it is only within the boundaries set out by the origin category, for everything that is conceivable must be explained by way of this origin.

This might have a variety of effects, dependent on the particular philosophy, in politics, the sciences, ideologies, and other practices. In general terms, origins served to restrict the development of scientific thought in order that, to quote Marx, social processes that go on ‘behind the backs of the producers’ remain so ‘and, consequently, appear to be fixed by custom’.²⁴ Origins ensured that the mechanisms of reproduction remained opaque to the agents that were the subjects of those processes, thereby helping to place those mechanisms beyond the reciprocal influence of the agents. It is in this way that traditional philosophy imposed itself as a ‘science of the Whole’.²⁵ Origins are *imaginary* beginnings. And they were not innocent: they produced political effects by veiling exploitative and oppressive social relations.

The way that traditional philosophy functioned, Althusser argued, is by providing itself with some object of which it then claimed to be the science. This object was not just any object, but the foundation of all the other objects on which sciences worked:

Philosophy ... declares that it is a science ... in the sense of the supreme science, the science of sciences, the science of the a priori conditions of any science ... In other words, philosophy borrows the model for its pure rational discourse from the existing sciences. Thus it is subjected to the ‘real sciences’, which are its condition of possibility. Yet within its own discourse, an inversion occurs: philosophical discourse transforms its act of submission to the sciences and situates itself, as ‘philosophy’, above the sciences, assuming power over them.²⁶

It is in this sense that Althusser spoke of philosophy as ‘a kind of theoretical laboratory in which the fundamentally political problem of ideological hegemony ... is experimentally put to the test’.²⁷ Philosophy produced the categories required, in the form of the rational structure of science, that could sustain the kind of ideological thought required either to hold together a society or to re-organise it in some manner.

Philosophy thus ‘patches up’ or ‘sutures’ the tear produced in the dominant ideology by the subversive irruption of science, which is always directly or indirectly associated [sic] with atheism and materialism; if philosophy thus philosophically restores order to an ideology which, clearly dominant though it may be, suddenly feels itself threatened by a mysterious danger, the reason is that philosophy is in league with this dominant ideology, performing, even if it is not purely ideological,

²⁴ Marx, ‘Capital, Vol. I’, *MECW: Capital, Volume 1*, xxxv, 54.

²⁵ Althusser, ‘Transformation of Philosophy’, *Spontaneous Philosophy*, 245.

²⁶ *Ibid*, 244.

²⁷ Althusser, ‘Philosophy and Marxism’, *Philosophy of the Encounter*, 287.

an undeniable ideological function.²⁸

If the dominant ideology functioned as a kind of common sense, providing a received wisdom about how that society came to be and why it should continue to be that way, then its counterpart philosophical system provided those deep justifications that, as far as possible, insulated the dominant ideology from theoretical challenge.

It is the origin that transforms the presentation of a *particular* way of organising a society into a *natural* and *just* form of organisation that accorded with the ends of humanity *in general*. Origins enabled philosophies to present the world as ordered totalities, and in doing so contributed to reproducing prevalent forms of domination. Bourgeois humanist thought furnished Althusser with his example *par excellence*, in its treatment of the individual as legal and commercial subject—the possessor, by virtue of its true nature as self-interested rational individual, of legal rights to own and to buy and sell what it owned. Capitalist relations of production—private property and its exchange on the market—are consequently cast as unleashing from feudal restriction that which the individual always-already was, thereby bringing freedom where there was servitude, and of being the culmination of history insofar as it is the society that conforms with the true nature of individuals. This is what Balibar calls ‘*the principle of social homoeomery ... the idea that, in the social (or political, or cultural) “whole”, the “parts” or the “cells” are necessarily similar to the whole itself.*’²⁹ What Althusser was contesting is the idea that the parts are created *for* the whole. Rather, they just appear to us as if they were.

The critique of origins is among the most consistent themes in Althusser’s work. Compare ‘On the Materialist Dialectic’ (1963):

What Marxism refuses is the (ideological) philosophical pretension to coincide exhaustively with a ‘root origin’, whatever its form (the *tabula rasa*; the zero point in a process; the state of nature; the concept of the beginning that for example, Hegel sees as being immediately identical with nothingness; the simplicity that, for Hegel once again, is the starting-point—and restarting-point, indefinitely—for every process, what restores it to its origin, etc.).³⁰

With ‘Philosophy and Marxism’ (1984–87):

We can recognize idealism, I think, by the fact that it is haunted by a single question which divides into two, since the principle of reason bears not only on *the origin*, but also on *the end*: indeed, the Origin always, and very naturally, refers to the End. We can go further still: the question of the Origin is a question that arises on the basis of the question of the End. Anticipating itself, the End (the meaning of the world, the meaning of history, the ultimate purpose of the world and history)

²⁸ Althusser, *Marxist in Philosophy*, 130.

²⁹ Étienne Balibar, ‘Foucault and Marx: The Question of Nominalism’, in *Michel Foucault Philosopher*, trans. by Timothy J. Armstrong (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1992), 38–57 (44).

³⁰ Althusser, ‘Materialist Dialectic’, *For Marx*, 198.

projects itself back on to and into the question of the Origin.³¹

Although the full extent of the importance of the idea of origins to Althusser only emerges from the mid–1970s (from ‘Is it Simple to be a Marxist in Philosophy’ (1975) onwards) the critique of origins is present in his work much earlier. It is no exaggeration to say that it is the critique of origins and an attempt to escape them that is the thread that unites Althusser’s entire corpus.

Althusser argued that every theory that based itself on an origin was bound to be teleological: ‘if the end is already, in itself, in germ, virtually, etc., present from the beginning-origin, it is because every process is *governed by its end*, tends towards its end’.³² Origin and end were mirror images of each other. The former predetermined the course of events such that the latter was an inevitable result. And if it is the case, as Althusser argued, that traditional philosophy’s principal role was to sustain the worldview of a class, either dominant or aspirant, it is really the end that gives rise to the origin: the origin was there to justify the ends.

Hegelian dialectics served Althusser with an example of this in its claim that the world was the unfolding of an original unity, through the persistent negation of the negation, towards a pre-given end which was the restoration of the original unity.³³ Negation brought about its opposite, position, which gave it its character (‘being’ is only meaningful when compared to ‘nothing’) but also made its further negation (the negation of the negation) inevitable. These two moments stood in *contradictory* opposition. They were two parts of a single whole, an unstable opposition internal to the entity in question. With the negation of the negation, the two preceding moments were dissolved into a higher unity in which the preceding tension was resolved and a new opposition formed. The movement continued until the *telos* was reached—Absolute Knowledge for Hegel, or communism for Hegelian Marxism. All the features of a given totality are understood to be expressions of the level of development of the original unity, Spirit (Hegel) or species-being (Hegelian Marxism), stages in its unfolding through the categories that were the reality of the world.³⁴ It is in this way that a philosophical origin also dictated the moral and political ends of society—or, rather, that the political ends of a class dictated the origin proposed by a philosophy.

In rejecting origins, Althusser was trying to reject the legitimacy of philosophy’s ontological question. What lay behind his rejection of epistemology examined in the previous chapter was an aversion to the view that the world was made in such a way that knowledge of the things in it was conveniently accessible. When idealist philosophy supposed this was the case it did so by erecting circular guarantees: the origin implied the end, the end implied the origin. In doing so it could not support the generation of knowledge in perpetuity, but only insofar as that knowledge did not run into conflict with the limits imposed by philosophy. In this, Althusser was only preceding in the way

³¹ Althusser, ‘Philosophy and Marxism’, *Philosophy of the Encounter*, 272–73.

³² Althusser, ‘Letters to D.’, *Writings on Psychoanalysis*, 57.

³³ Althusser, ‘Materialist Dialectic’, *For Marx*, 197–204.

³⁴ Althusser, ‘Contradiction and Overdetermination’, *For Marx*, 103.

that philosophy had since Descartes, of prioritising the epistemological problem. Descartes reasoned that the world must be composed of mind and matter, with the mind given assigned the dominant role, because this is the only way to resist the sceptical challenge to our ability to know. Materialists, in contrast, might suppose that everything is matter, and the real object is independent of our thought about that object, because this looks like the only way to account for the activity of science. Claims about *what* things are result from a desire to demonstrate our capacity to *know* what things are. Althusser's most instructive formulations of this, however, date from the mid-1970s, particularly *How to Be a Marxist in Philosophy* (1976) onwards, and are the product of formulating the issue more explicitly in ontological terms, as straightforward claims about the nature of beings in the world independently of trying to respond to the epistemological problem.

Ontology demanded an equally circular answer to those prevalent in epistemology. Traditional philosophy privileged, Althusser argued, Being over beings. Being

serves it as a basis and ground on which to plant all the visible beings in the world, inanimate, animate, or spiritual, in their characteristic existence and determinations ... And it is because Being is what it is (omnipotent as well as omnipresent) that every being is determined as it is.³⁵

No doubt Althusser again has Hegel and the expressive totality in mind here, but his charge was that ontological claims generally are liable to do this: to conceive everything in the world as a variation of its origin category. This move effaces the possibility of genuine difference, for everything that can be can only be an instance of the origin. Thus the peculiar structure of idealist philosophy was to essentialise a particular identity at the ontological level: such an identity is not a contingent product passing in and out of history but is located as the foundation of everything that is. In Althusser's reading, Hegel was just the clearest modern example of a way of thinking about the world that went back to the Ancient Greeks, in which the function of philosophy is to define the range of the possible content of all the other practices.³⁶ Its role is to restrict knowledge by obscuring the uniqueness of things: they become, as Saül Karsz puts it in respect to humanism, 'local incarnations of Man in general'.³⁷ Ontological statements are thus not to be understood as eternal facts about the world but rather statements about the success of particular socio-political projects which *impose* those facts on the world. The task is, correspondingly, to present concepts that permit the production of knowledge rather than presupposing it.

Althusser's case against materialism, as it is traditionally conceived, was that it was, in its essentials, no different to this. In inverting the idealist claim of the primacy of mind over matter, materialism merely replaced one origin with another—mind with matter. Consequently, it failed to break out of a problematic defined by idealism:

The evocation of materialism is the index of an exigency, a sign that idealism has to

³⁵ Althusser, *Marxist in Philosophy*, 78–79.

³⁶ On origins in Ancient Greek philosophy see Althusser, *Marxist in Philosophy*, 92–96.

³⁷ Karsz, *Théorie et Politique*, 261; my translation.

be rejected—yet without breaking free, without being able to break free, of the specular pair idealism/materialism; hence it is an index, but, at the same time, a trap, because one does not break free of idealism by simply negating it, stating the opposite of idealism, or ‘standing it on its head’. We must therefore treat the term ‘materialism’ with suspicion: the word does not give us the thing, and, on closer inspection, most materialisms turn out to be inverted idealisms.³⁸

Even if materialism could be subversive to existing social, political, and economic arrangements, there were eventual limits to the extent of that subversion based on its own origin category. What Althusser seemed to imply by this, a point I will examine more closely in 3.2.2 below, is that while traditional materialisms can aid struggles against forms of domination (e.g. enlightenment materialism as a philosophical weapon against religious idealism) the problem becomes particularly acute when it comes to ending structures of domination in general.

3.1.3 Dialectical Materialism

In this section, I will demonstrate how dialectical materialism supplied Althusser with an example of precisely what he criticised about the failure of materialism to escape the problematic of idealist philosophy. I trace his criticisms of Hegelian Marxism from the early 1960s onwards in order to show why Althusser thought a Marxist materialism could not be based on a simple *inversion* of the Hegelian dialectic. With reference to a debate between Callinicos and Colletti, I try to illuminate what is novel about the Althusserian concept of contradiction in his reformulation of the materialist dialectic. Althusser’s criticism of adopting an inverted form of the Hegelian dialectic for Marxism began with his rejection of the negation of the negation, a mechanism that Althusser argued was idealist. He eventually came to the view, however, that the negation of the negation was not the only problem, and that dialectical materialism was irretrievable. At least in the version derived from Engels, dialectical materialism was a philosophy of the laws of matter. In this way, it was a philosophy of origin in the sense outlined in the previous section. While we might retain the notion of dialectic in a weaker sense, if we do this then we have no reason to speak of a specifically *dialectical* materialism.

In ‘Contradiction and Overdetermination’ (1962) Althusser made the case that Marx’s dialectic was not an inversion of the Hegelian idealist dialectic, but a comprehensive reformulation.³⁹ The idea that the Marxian dialectic was the opposite of the Hegelian version is seemingly endorsed by Marx in *Capital*:

My dialectic method is not only different from the Hegelian, but is its direct opposite. To Hegel, the life process of the human brain, i. e., the process of thinking, which, under the name of ‘the Idea’, he even transforms into an independent subject, is the demiurgos of the real world, and the real world is only the external, phenomenal form of ‘the Idea’. With me, on the contrary, the ideal is nothing else than the material world reflected by the human mind, and translated into forms of thought ... The mystification which dialectic suffers in Hegel’s hands, by no means

³⁸ Althusser, ‘Philosophy and Marxism’, *Philosophy of the Encounter*, 272.

³⁹ Althusser, ‘Contradiction and Overdetermination’, *For Marx*, 87-128.

prevents him from being the first to present its general form of working in a comprehensive and conscious manner. With him it is standing on its head. It must be turned right side up again, if you would discover the rational kernel within the mystical shell.⁴⁰

Althusser contended, however, that this should not be construed as a simple reversal of the (idealist) primacy of thought over matter for the (materialist) primacy of matter over thought, but in fact entailed a *transformation* of the structure of the dialectic:

If the Marxist dialectic is 'in principle' the opposite of the Hegelian dialectic, if it is rational and not mystical-mystified-mystificatory, this radical distinction must be manifest in its essence, that is, in its *characteristic determinations and structures*. To be clear, this means that *basic structures of the Hegelian* dialectic such as negation, the negation of the negation, the identity of opposites, 'supersession', the transformation of quantity into quality, contradiction, etc., *have for Marx (in so far as he takes them over, and he takes over by no means all of them) a structure different from the structure they have for Hegel.*⁴¹

Only in this materialist transformation is it possible to maintain the 'rational kernel' of dialectics as the method by which the real can be captured in thought while avoiding the determinist and teleological pitfalls contained in its idealist version. The tortured attempt to maintain congruence with the passage of Marx's quoted above aside, Althusser can still reasonably argue that a rigorously materialist dialectic must be different to its idealist counterpart and it is this materialist dialectic that must be at work in any viable science of history. It is this version of dialectical materialism that was given the role of, as we saw in 2.1, the Theory of theoretical practice on the basis that it captured in thought the structure of reality. Althusser was concerned to maintain a rigorous separation of the Marxist philosophy of dialectical materialism from its science of historical materialism, in contrast to historicist Marxists (e.g. Lukács, Gramsci, Korsch) whom he accused of collapsing one into the other.⁴²

In order to successfully transform Hegel's idealist dialectic into a materialist dialectic, Althusser argued that it was necessary to reject one of Engels' proposed three laws: the negation of the negation. This was the point at which idealism was located in the Hegelian dialectic:

What irremediably disfigures the Hegelian conception of History as a dialectical

⁴⁰ Karl Marx, 'Afterword to the Second German Edition', in *MECW: Capital, Volume 1*, xxxv, 12–20 (19). See also Karl Marx, 'Marx to Ludwig Kugelmann, 6 March 1868', in Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Marx-Engels Collected Works: Marx and Engels, Letters, 1864–1868* (New York: International Publishers, 1987), xlii, 543–44 (544).

⁴¹ Althusser, 'Contradiction and Overdetermination', *For Marx*, 93–94.

⁴² In failing to differentiate science from philosophy sufficiently, Althusser argued, a 'logically necessary chain reaction' was unleashed in which history's complexities are reduced to the expression of a single essence, and thus the Hegelian version of totality is restored. By eliding the distinction between philosophy and science, the consequence is an inability to distinguish between objective knowledge and subjective belief. All discourses become equivalent, such that the self-understanding of a historical moment becomes the same as knowledge of it; Althusser, 'Object of *Capital*', *Reading Capital*, 268–95. See also Althusser, 'Á Gretzky', in *Écrits sur l'histoire*, 91–98.

process is its *teleological* conception of the dialectic, inscribed in the very *structures* of the Hegelian dialectic at an extremely precise point: the *Aufhebung* (transcendence-preserving-the-transcended-as-the-internalized-transcended), directly expressed in the Hegelian category of the *negation of the negation*.⁴³

The reason that the negation of the negation attracted Althusser's attention is because it demanded that contradictions produce their own resolutions automatically and assuredly. Thus the movement of the process is fixed from the outset and 'the End is already there in the Origin'.⁴⁴

Althusser's view was that this logic is unable to account for the diversity of historical events and the role of political practice in bringing about those events. The negation of the negation suggested that the resolutions to the contradictions of capitalism should occur first at the point at which they were most advanced.⁴⁵ It was in the capitalist West that the next stage, socialism, should emerge. But, Althusser contended, this is not what took place. The world's first rupture with capitalism took place in Russia, at the time a predominantly feudal country. Not only this, but similar events failed to materialise at all in the more developed capitalist countries. Althusser proposed that in order to make sense of this we needed to think of the historical process as the uneven development of its component parts.

Moreover, it was only by thinking about history in this way that an effective revolutionary political practice was possible. That Lenin and Mao are, aside from Marx and Engels, those Althusser credited with being his most important antecedents on this point is no coincidence. Althusser's claim was that their more successful political practices were possible as a result of having grasped this problem.⁴⁶ And this is not the only example, for every event was an exception from what would be expected based on the Hegelian schema:

For, after all, *are we not always in exceptional situations?* The failure of the 1849 Revolution in Germany was an exception, the failure in Paris in 1871 was an exception, the German Social-Democratic failure at the beginning of the twentieth century pending the chauvinist betrayal of 1914 was an exception ... exceptions, but *with respect to what?* To nothing but the *abstract*, but comfortable and reassuring idea of a pure, simple 'dialectical' schema, which in its very simplicity seems to have retained a memory ... of the Hegelian model and its faith in the resolving 'power' of the abstract contradiction as such: in particular, the 'beautiful' contradiction between Capital and Labour.⁴⁷

Althusser made this same point again in 'Is it Simple to be a Marxist in

⁴³ Althusser, 'Marx's Relation to Hegel', *Politics and History*, 181. See also: Althusser, 'Materialist Dialectic', *For Marx*, 197–99; Althusser, 'Humanist Controversy', *Humanist Controversy*, 237–39; Louis Althusser, 'Preface to *Capital* Volume One', in *Lenin and Philosophy*, 45–70 (62); Althusser, 'On Marxist Thought', *Viewpoint Magazine*.

⁴⁴ Althusser, 'Marx's Relation to Hegel', *Politics and History*, 184.

⁴⁵ For a consideration of Marx's view on this see Elster, *Making Sense of Marx*, 288–99.

⁴⁶ Althusser, 'Materialist Dialectic', *For Marx*, 210–12; Althusser, 'Contradiction and Overdetermination', *For Marx*.

⁴⁷ *Ibid*, 104.

Philosophy?' (1975):

In all cases the practice of this dialectic runs up against the implacable test of the facts: the revolution did not take place in nineteenth-century Britain, nor in early twentieth-century Germany; it did not take place in the advanced countries at all, but elsewhere, in Russia, then later in China and Cuba, etc.⁴⁸

Equally, we might add, the trajectory of Western European societies from the breakdown of the Roman Empire, to feudalism, to capitalism is the exception rather than the rule, and Marx's principal project is explaining this development as a *unique* and *novel* one without equivalent.⁴⁹ 'What requires explanation', as Wood puts it, 'is the aberrant, uniquely "autonomous" development of the economic sphere that eventually issues in capitalism'.⁵⁰ These kinds of transition events—both abortive and successful—are not the only examples that could illustrate the point, but they are where the issue becomes particularly acute.

The idea that there was a normal course from which to deviate was, in Althusser's view, an ideological fantasy. A scientific approach to history must be capable of accounting for the uneven development of the different parts of social structures.⁵¹ It is this characteristic that made history an open-ended process rather than a linear progression and what, among other things, made emancipatory transformations possible. Therefore, if Marxists were to be able to think adequately about how social structures could be transformed they needed to jettison the negation of the negation.

The charge is that the negation of the negation led to an understanding of history as an *evolutionism*, a linear trajectory that proceeds more or less smoothly along a single track. The model of contradiction offered by the negation of the negation made use of the 'genetic' method that we encountered in chapter 2. The genetic method attempts to explain phenomena by supposing that they exist in some form prior to their complete manifestation. There are, in these antecedents, the 'prefiguration, germ, draft, promise, etc.' of the entity: the cause contains its effect within itself. The supposition for tracing a history in this way is that there is a commonality of identity between the entity and the embryonic forms in which it is contained in its antecedents—there can be no discontinuity in the process, for the identity must be stable through time. For example, the claim is that there is a subject that precedes the action of history upon it and continues to exist throughout that process. There is nothing, then, that is truly new, for everything that can be is already present in some preceding form: 'the oak is contained in the acorn; the oak is already entirely within the acorn'. The only thing to be done, then, when agents act within the historical process, is to bring out what already exists in some partial form. To 'undertake the genesis of A is to explain through what mechanism not-A (what is *other than* A) produces A' by saying that not-A always already contained A. All of the things in the world must have already been present in the origin, and there must be an origin point else it would be impossible to provide a

⁴⁸ Althusser, 'Is it Simple', *Spontaneous Philosophy*, 223.

⁴⁹ Wood, *Democracy Against Capitalism*, 35.

⁵⁰ *Ibid*, 36.

⁵¹ Althusser, 'Is it Simple', *Spontaneous Philosophy*, 221–22.

genesis of any of the things in the world. The logic is that any given thing is 'to a certain extent already identifiable, already exists in some manner before its own birth in order to be born'.⁵² If it is to exist at all, it must pre-exist itself.⁵³ Therefore, the end was contained in the origin.

The idea is that each new entity emerges from a tension contained in a preceding entity that is internally divided between two attributes, A and –A. The entity is thus a unity of opposites, the oppositional nature of which indicates that it is never static, but dynamic. This conflict produces a new entity, a new unity of opposites, now 'enriched by its fragmentation, by its alienation, in the negation of the abstraction which negated their previous unity'.⁵⁴ Each unity becomes negated, producing a new opposition that starts the process anew and generates a new negation: 'it is always the bad side that in the end triumphs over the good side. It is the bad side that produces the movement which makes history, by providing a struggle' as Marx put it.⁵⁵ In this passage from *The Poverty of Philosophy* (1847) Marx is gesturing towards the ideological representations of the two components as a 'good' side, representing the status quo and its self-presentation as normality and stability, and a 'bad' side which comes to supplant it, in turn coming to present itself as good. Marx does this in order to, Balibar claimed, reject a '*moralizing, optimistic ... version of history*' as the uninterrupted development of the 'good' side.⁵⁶ As a polemical statement about nineteenth-century ideas of progress this may be fine. But Althusser's point was that Marx does not escape the problematic that he was criticising. He merely inverts the terms. Marx's formulation implies that not only is there only one possible force that can instigate change (the negative aspect), but that it will always (at least eventually) be capable of doing so. And this change will happen, and happen in this way, as a necessary outcome of the functioning of the 'good' side which produces its counterpart. Thus the logic of the negation of the negation does not just pre-determine the possible outcomes, it fixes a single course along which history must travel.

It may be helpful, to illustrate this point, to contrast this with another passage of Marx's, to which I suspect Althusser would be more ready to assent. In *Capital* Marx argued that under capitalism 'accumulation of wealth at one pole is, therefore, at the same time accumulation of misery, agony of toil, slavery, ignorance, brutality, mental degradation,

⁵² Althusser, 'Letters to D.', *Writings on Psychoanalysis*, 54–64; Brenner provides a helpful critique of the use of the genetic method, citing Adam Smith as the principal inspiration of this form of reasoning in accounting for the rise of capitalism. On Brenner's account, the tendency is to explain capitalism by resort to the expansion of the productive forces but, Brenner argues, pre-capitalist modes of production lack incentives to constantly improve those productive forces. To explain capitalism like this is to take a feature of capitalism to explain its origin. See Robert Brenner, 'The Social Basis of Economic Development', in *Analytical Marxism*, 23–53. Cf. Cohen's development thesis: 'the productive forces tend to develop throughout history'. Cohen, *Karl Marx's Theory of History*, 134.

⁵³ For an example of the genetic method at work in an account of historical materialism, see Wood's critique of Roemer; Wood, *Democracy Against Capitalism*, 113–14.

⁵⁴ Althusser, 'Materialist Dialectic', *For Marx*, 197.

⁵⁵ Karl Marx, 'The Poverty of Philosophy', in Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Marx-Engels Collected Works: Marx and Engels, 1845–1848* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1976), VI, 105–212 (174).

⁵⁶ Balibar, *Philosophy of Marx*, 98.

at the opposite pole'.⁵⁷ Here Marx is saying that the gains of the bourgeoisie (A) are made at the expense of the working class (-A): they are locked in a relation of contradiction. But he makes no claim (in the immediate context of his passage) that by itself the accumulation of misery is the sufficient condition to bring about an end to the accumulation of misery. We might reasonably take from this, on Althusser's view, both that this relationship is morally wrong and that understanding how it works is useful if we want to change it. What we should not suppose is that this relationship itself would produce its own end. *Ceteris paribus* accumulation of misery may be just that—accumulation of misery, and no more.

Contradictions, for Althusserians, reproduce themselves rather than bring about their own end.⁵⁸ Contradiction did not refer to entities that were 'in themselves self-contradictory', but rather the production of seemingly '*contradictory effects of a single cause ... there is only a contradiction between the effects, the cause is not divided in itself, it cannot be analysed in antagonistic terms. Contradiction is therefore not original, but derivate*'.⁵⁹ For example, as above, the capital relation (cause) on the one hand enriches its owners, capitalists (effect I), and on the other impoverishes those without it, workers (effect II). A limit is placed on effect I to the extent that effect II takes place. Accumulation of capital is dependent on the purchase of commodities by workers, but an increase in capital accumulation reduces the power of workers to purchase commodities. The cause of effect I is also the cause of that which counteracts it, effect II.⁶⁰ The 'result of the contradiction is always a certain *equilibrium*', a variable balance between the two effects.⁶¹ Contradiction, on this account, should be understood as the production of different effects from a cause, the cause being the structural relations between elements which originate separately. Rather than producing their own overcoming contradictions trend towards their own reproduction.

In contrast to the Hegelian version contradictions treated as such might be understood as Colletti proposes: 'the formula that expresses it is "A and B". Each of the opposites is real and positive. Each subsists for itself'.⁶² Rather than the Hegelian position and negation, these are simply two entirely different phenomena which encounter one another. Hence, Colletti argues, contradiction is better understood as a 'real opposition', for there is nothing strictly *contradictory* about it—there is no affinity to contradiction in its logical sense, and consequently the terminology is unhelpful. This understanding of contradiction has been attacked by Callinicos who, writing from within an Althusserian perspective, considers it insufficient to capture Marx's method. Callinicos agrees with Colletti that contradiction does not denote, for Marxists, logical contradictions—that is, violations of the law of non-contradiction.⁶³ Nevertheless,

⁵⁷ Marx, 'Capital, Vol. I', *MECW: Capital, Volume 1*, xxxv, 640.

⁵⁸ Balibar, 'Basic Concepts', *Reading Capital*, 461.

⁵⁹ Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *The Science of Logic*, trans. by George Di Giovanni (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 377; Balibar, 'Basic Concepts', *Reading Capital*, 458–60.

⁶⁰ Balibar, 'Basic Concepts', *Reading Capital*, 457.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 460.

⁶² Lucio Colletti, 'Marxism and the Dialectic', trans. by John Mathews, *New Left Review*, I, 93 (1975), 3–29 (6).

⁶³ Callinicos, *Future for Marxism?*, 114; Callinicos, *Marxism and Philosophy*, 54.

Callinicos argues we should retain a concept of contradiction:

For Marx the statement that reality is contradictory means that class struggle, social conflict, and economic crises are not epiphenomena, not products of accident, merely incidental to the workings of society, but are *endemic* to every social formation divided into classes, revealing its historically specific, and temporary nature. Contradiction is the moving principle of social life.⁶⁴

Callinicos' challenge is that the different elements involved in a contradictory relationship cannot exist outside of this relationship:

Marx often insists that wage-labour and capital are each inconceivable without the other; more generally, Althusser and Poulantzas in their later writings argue that the class struggle is anterior to classes, i.e. that classes take shape only within their antagonistic mutual relations ... So we are not dealing here with a real opposition in the sense of a relation of mutual exclusion between essentially distinct and independent entities, but of a relation whose terms are constituted by virtue of their mutual antagonism.⁶⁵

What Callinicos appears to be referring to here is the following statement by Althusser, in his 'Reply to John Lewis' (1972):

The *primacy of contradiction* over the *terms* of the contradiction. The class struggle is not a product of the existence of classes which exist *previous* (in law and in fact) to the struggle: the class struggle is the historical form of the *contradiction* (internal to a mode of production) which *divides* the classes into classes.⁶⁶

This view, however, seems to be contradicted by what Althusser would say three years later in 'Is it Simple to Be a Marxist in Philosophy?' (1975) where he claimed the relevant classes do in fact exist prior to the struggle they would eventually enter:

Because the working class is not the opposite of the capitalist class, it is not the capitalist class negated, deprived of its capital and its powers—and the capitalist class is not the working class plus something else, namely riches and power. They do not share the same history, they do not share the same world, they do not lead the same class struggle, yet they do come into confrontation, and this certainly is a contradiction since *the relation of confrontation reproduces the conditions of confrontation* instead of transcending them in a beautiful Hegelian exaltation and reconciliation.⁶⁷

The division (into classes) precedes the contradiction (class struggle) into which the classes enter and are sustained (reproduction). It is this conception that persists in Althusser's late work, and the conception that is consistent with Althusser's criticisms of the problematic of origins.⁶⁸ The mistake here is to confuse, as Althusser wrote, *'the*

⁶⁴ Ibid, 55.

⁶⁵ Callinicos, *Future for Marxism?*, 131.

⁶⁶ Althusser, 'Reply to John Lewis', *Self-Criticism*, 50 fn. 12.

⁶⁷ Althusser, 'Is it Simple', *Spontaneous Philosophy*, 221–22.

⁶⁸ Cf. for example Althusser, 'Underground Current', *Philosophy of the Encounter*, 199.

production of the proletariat with its capitalist reproduction on an extended scale, as if the capitalist mode of production pre-existed one of its essential elements, an expropriated labour force'.⁶⁹ To be sure, the various classes are indeed constituted in struggle—that is, within a relationship of contradiction—but the struggle that created a given class and the struggle it may eventually enter into *are not one and the same struggle*. While the elements are only constituted in their relations with other elements—they acquire properties relationally—the very point about historical transitions is that they involve the reconfiguration of the elements into new relationships between previously unrelated elements. Wage-labour and capital are not, in Althusser's view, inconceivable without the other; they are not two sides of the same coin, the negations of each other. What is the case, however, is that these elements may not persist or acquire significant importance without such a counterpart, but they do not themselves bring their counterpart into existence. Their expanded reproduction is dependent on being locked into a structure with the other: the capitalist class would not have been able to launch a capitalist mode of production and extend it over the globe if it had not been joined with, in early modern England, a class of landless labourers. And those landless labourers would not have become the wage-labourers of the *proletariat* without having met a capitalist class which required, for its own reproduction, the introduction of labour-power in order to expand its capital.

In my view, it is reasonable to refer to contradiction in the sense Althusser uses it as a real opposition since it is established between the elements of a structure. And this is indeed what he actually said in 'On the Materialist Dialectic' (1963): 'to say that contradiction is a motive force is to say that it implies *a real struggle, real confrontations*'.⁷⁰ Classes really do oppose each other in the sense that they compete over the distribution of the product of society. Althusser's point, however, is that they are constituted as classes only in their antagonistic relations with other classes. Colletti does not take this further step, seeing the elements as isolated whereas for Althusser while they are *conceptually* separable they are not *actually* separable: they can only ever exist within a system of relations, relations which transform the elements. Nevertheless, it is not clear that there is anything meaningfully *contradictory* about the mechanisms Althusser describes. It is unsurprising that he ends up rejecting, in 'Du matérialisme aléatoire' (1985) the idea of contradiction as an 'ideological notion'.⁷¹

And it is not just contradiction that Althusser eventually abandoned, but the entire enterprise of dialectical materialism. What began as a rejection of the negation of the negation as inherently teleological becomes a wholesale repudiation of dialectical materialism as a materialist philosophy. For it turns out that if there is no negation of the negation, then neither can there be a unity of opposites nor a law of quantity into quality.⁷² The dialectic in Althusser's work becomes something equivalent to the status

⁶⁹ Althusser, 'Underground Current', *Philosophy of the Encounter*, 200.

⁷⁰ Althusser, 'Materialist Dialectic', *For Marx*, 215.

⁷¹ Althusser, 'Matérialisme aléatoire', *Multitudes*, 185; my translation.

⁷² On these laws of the dialectic see Friedrich Engels, 'Dialectics of Nature', in Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Marx-Engels Collected Works: Engels, Anti-Dühring, Dialectics of Nature* (New York: International Publishers, 1987), xxv, 313–587 (356).

it retained in Analytical Marxism. That is, descriptions of “not infrequent patterns of change” rather than a system of laws to which everything must adhere.⁷³ There remains a dialectic of sorts for Althusser. He continued to refer to this concept in his late works. But it is relegated in status, no longer the definitive element of a *sui generis* philosophical system.

In Althusser’s first definition of philosophy as the Theory of theoretical practice, he defended dialectical materialism in its classical form as a statement of the laws of reality. The same ambiguity is present in this view as afflicted classical Marxism: On the one hand, Marx clearly attempted to derive the laws of the capitalist mode of production from empirical analysis in *Capital*. On the other, everything was subject to the laws of the dialectic as laid out by the later Engels. We are presented with two systems of laws, the first internal to the mode of production and the second, which governs the first, are the transhistorical laws, unchanging laws of reality. Dialectical materialism functioned as a system of laws of history positioned above the internal laws of the structures in history.

Althusser rejected this formulation of dialectical materialism from 1967 but he continued to defend dialectical materialism as *the* Marxist philosophy into the 1970s, even as its role for him became less clear. The last positive references I can find are in ‘Reply to John Lewis’ (1972) and ‘Elements of Self-Criticism’ (1972).⁷⁴ It is difficult to say why Althusser hung on to this term for so long since the framework by which he would make its disappearance explicit in the mid- to late-1970s was already long in place by this stage. It is beyond our scope here, but in the absence of theoretical reasons it must be presumed that there was a political rationale behind its persistence.⁷⁵ In one respect, dialectical materialism became simply a terminological leftover, an irrelevance as far as Althusser’s thought went since, as we have seen, he had long moved away from dialectical materialism in its Engelsian guise. Dialectical materialism persists without receiving a defence of its persistence. In another respect, however, it levied a theoretical price.

Althusser had long defended the view that the Marxist dialectic can only be understood if it ‘is subjected to the primacy of materialism’.⁷⁶ He had coupled this with a continued defence of dialectical materialism. The main shift in this respect takes place from 1976 onwards, after which Althusser rejects dialectical materialism. In *Philosophy for Non-Philosophers* (1976–78) Althusser explained why he had formulated the relationship between dialectic and materialism in the way he had:

Marx and Engels ... to think their own relationship to Hegel, they used an unhappy

⁷³ Elster, *Making Sense of Marx*, 40. This is also the position of E. P. Thompson. The description Thompson gives of dialectics as a form of practice that evades codification is extremely similar to how Althusser presents the problem in *Philosophy for Non-Philosophers*; cf. Thompson, *Poverty of Theory*, 151–53; Althusser, *Non-Philosophers*, 188–91.

⁷⁴ Althusser, ‘Reply to John Lewis’, *Self-Criticism*, 37, 54; Althusser, ‘Elements of Self-Criticism’, *Self-Criticism*, 115, 126, 147–48.

⁷⁵ Cf. Colletti, ‘Interview’, *New Left Review*, 16.

⁷⁶ Althusser, ‘Is it Simple’, *Spontaneous Philosophy*, 217.

formula: in Hegel, the content was reactionary, but the method was revolutionary. The method was the dialectic. Engels went on to develop this distinction in *Dialectics of Nature*, where he said that, in the new ‘philosophy’, materialism (or the theory of matter and its properties) was the theory and dialectic was the method; and he came close to affirming the primacy of the dialectic over materialism, begging the question as to how materialism managed to elude the law of change and universal relativism without contradicting the dialectic. By proceeding in this way, let us add, Engels merely abstracted, and called method, an essential property of matter, *movement*, whose laws he then studied (the famous ‘laws of the dialectic’) applying this property, movement, to all forms of matter and their transformations.⁷⁷

Dialectical materialism is the merger of two otherwise distinct claims: ‘that Being is matter in motion’, the materialist thesis, and that there are laws of that movement, the dialectical thesis.⁷⁸ The dialectical method makes knowledge of Being possible (epistemological claim) because that method mirrors the actual ways in which Being changes (ontological claim). Thus in the mid-1970s Althusser repeated precisely the reasoning that had inspired the defence of dialectical materialism as the Theory of theoretical practice, only now he had an entirely negative view of this line of argument.

Challenging the distinction between subject and object dialectical materialism proposed, in contrast, that categorising entities as such was only to identify what were really temporary moments in processes of constant change. This claim was necessary to sustain historical materialism, which challenged prevailing theories of history on the grounds that they were insufficiently scientific because they accounted for capitalism as a necessary outcome. Defenders of capitalism tended to think of it as the realisation of natural attributes of subjects. This proposition was the main way in which bourgeois philosophy aided the dominant ideology. In order to clear the space for historical materialism in the sciences, dialectical materialism had to challenge this view in the *kampfplatz* of philosophy. So far, so good; but this is where Althusser thought dialectical materialism had taken a misstep.

In order to justify its claims to superior knowledge, dialectical materialism had staked its case on the accord between method and ontology. This involved transforming its philosophical *theses* into scientific *laws*, and consequently into a science of the whole.⁷⁹ What were only interventions in the field of philosophy were read into the world—in a classically idealist manoeuvre—as facts about it. In this narrow sense, the materialist credentials of dialectics were impeccable: true knowledge was possible because we had discovered how matter changed, and thus our method (thought) now accorded with reality (matter). Matter had primacy over thought.

Dialectical materialism was, then, only materialism in the restricted sense of being the inverse of idealism that was outlined in the previous section. It continued to operate

⁷⁷ Althusser, *Non-Philosophers*, 189. Cf. Althusser, ‘Theoretical Practice’, *Spontaneous Philosophy*, 9.

⁷⁸ Althusser, *Marxist in Philosophy*, 116.

⁷⁹ Althusser, *Non-Philosophers*, 188–90.

within the idealist problematic. The dialectic in dialectical materialism was not one method among many, but the ‘the universal method’ to which all others could be reduced.⁸⁰ As we saw in 2.2, Althusser argued that there are many methods that might produce scientific knowledge, and it is not possible to offer a guarantee of knowledge that might once and for all settle the question of *the* method. What idealist philosophy did is take a method and make it ‘a Truth prior to all truth’, the method that permitted ‘the discovery of every new truth’.⁸¹ This is precisely what dialectical materialism was engaged in. And thus its formal adherence to the primacy of matter over thought did not escape idealism. Consequently, it served Althusser with a prime example of how a materialism is, under examination, a disguised idealism.

It might be objected that Althusser was simply arguing against his own particular reconstruction of dialectical materialism here. And he certainly is making an argument against the Theory of theoretical practice. But his target is much wider, and reasonably so. For it is undoubtedly common to hear of dialectical *laws* in Marxist discourse. The explicit targets are the inevitability theses of the Second International and the Diamat of Stalinism that, with dialectical materialism, justified their respective political passivity and murderous oppression. Dialectical materialism, as much as any of the philosophies it sought to attack, underpinned justificatory ideologies for the actions of social democracy and Stalinism. What Althusser is not saying is that all Marxist philosophy, either that of Marx and Engels or after, is simply wrong or irretrievably corrupted and without value, only that it had failed to adequately get to grips with what it meant to be materialist and had maintained unanalysed assumptions as a result. What he is saying is that if Marxist philosophy were to be of further use in developing an emancipatory politics, this needed to be corrected.

If Althusser’s challenge to dialectical materialism might look controversial to Marxists, it is worth considering that he is only really using a metric proposed by Engels. The original claim for the specific novelty of dialectical materialism was that it superseded not only idealism but also mechanical materialisms. So-called because Newtonian mechanics was taken as a universal model for the sciences. The consequence of this was a static and unhistorical viewpoint: ‘nature, so much was known, was in eternal motion. But according to the ideas of that time, this motion turned just as eternally in a circle and therefore never moved from the spot; it produced the same results over and over again’. In the field of history it would take dialectical materialism, which cast ‘the world as a process, as matter undergoing uninterrupted historical development’, to produce the comprehension that mechanical materialism could not.⁸² If I may take the liberty of placing Engels’ argument in an Althusserian register, Engels’ claim seems to be that idealism and mechanical materialism shared a problematic—namely, one defined by the static nature of things. Dialectical materialism situated itself outside of this problematic by rejecting the fixity of the subject/object distinction in favour of the category of process. Althusser’s critique of origins has a more general purchase than Engels’ argument and is, in my view, a more powerful way of posing the problem, but

⁸⁰ Althusser, *Marxist in Philosophy*, 116.

⁸¹ Althusser, *Non-Philosophers*, 188.

⁸² Engels, ‘End of Classical German Philosophy’, *MECW: 1882–1889*, xxvi, 370–71.

what Engels' is doing here is no different: he is staking the superiority of dialectical materialism on its lack of origin. Consequently, we can deduce that Althusser and Engels agree on what Marxist philosophy needs to be. What they differ on is this: whereas Engels thought that he and Marx had succeeded in constructing a philosophical system that met this criterion, Althusser thought that at least the *explicit* philosophy handed down from Engels failed to do so. The reason being that dialectical materialism was built around an origin—its laws.

The argument that Engels constructed a mechanistic materialism, consequently contaminating the socialism movement (however accidentally), is a familiar one. It is a common Western Marxist position that Engels was in error and there is an alternative that can be located in Marx, prior to the philosophical texts Engels wrote after Marx's death.⁸³ The Western Marxist claim is that Engels reduced the human subject to matter and its laws, making the subject a mere automaton and consequently abolishing the possibility of an emancipatory political practice. Shlomo Avineri provides a classic example of this view: 'whereas Marx tries to find the human meaning of natural sciences, Engels looked for a natural science methodology to fit the human world'.⁸⁴ If for Engels humanity must be *naturalised*, for Hegelian Marxism nature must be *humanised*. The emancipatory project is to reconcile the external, alienated, natural world with the human subject, in order that the subject need no longer experience it as such. Althusser obviously had sympathy for the first part of this position. As I have argued, he rejected Engels' laws of matter for the same reason a Hegelian Marxist is inclined to. But Althusser also rejected the Hegelian Marxist resolution on the basis of a subject, and thus represents a third position in the debate. What posing the problem as one of origins reveals is that Engels' *Dialectics of Nature* and Hegelian Marxism form two sides of the same coin. Avineri provides us with a clear case of what Althusser was trying to demonstrate: reversing the terms is no solution at all. Both take something that is contingent as something that is given.⁸⁵

What Althusser came to argue is that it is impossible to avoid the idealist implications of dialectical materialism.⁸⁶ The idea of a 'dialectic' as *the* pattern of change could only involve fitting the facts to the theory. It presented a philosophical restriction on scientific investigation. And if the dialectic is not *the* logic of change, then dialectical

⁸³ An approximation of this view is also found in Analytical Marxism, see Elster, *Making Sense of Marx*, 40–43.

⁸⁴ Shlomo Avineri, *The Social and Political Thought of Karl Marx* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968), 72.

⁸⁵ It may be of interest that this argument was, in essence, also given by the biologist Jacques Monod, probably under Althusser's influence. Monod argued that the inversion of Hegelian dialectics preserved an 'animism' in dialectical materialism, by which he means the transposition of intuitions about living beings (particularly their apparently teleological behaviour) to physical laws. This inversion produced a pseudo-scientific doctrine; Jacques Monod, *Chance and Necessity*, trans. by Austryn Wainhouse (New York: Vintage Books, 1972), 33–40. On the relationship between Althusser and Monod see Maria Turchetto, 'Althusser and Monod: A "New Alliance"?', trans. by Peter Thomas, *Historical Materialism*, 17:3 (2009), 61–79.

⁸⁶ That the idealist dialectic of Hegel and the materialist dialectic of Engels are, at bottom, one and the same is also the position Colletti arrived at. See Lucio Colletti, *Marxism and Hegel*, trans. by Lawrence Garner (London: New Left Books, 1973), 27.

materialism becomes a red herring. The obsession with the dialectic had, on Althusser's account, caused Marxist materialism to ossify into a closed system. Rather than being a scientific concept that provided a method of knowledge production, when the dialectic was elevated to the central role that it was in dialectical materialism it acted as an ideological concept in which the supposed logic of history overrode the study of real history. The dialectic ceases to have, in Althusser's work, the status of an origin and an ontology. What is retained—its positive content, as Althusser argued in 'Marx's Relation to Hegel' (1968)—is the idea that everything is constantly in flux, subject to change, and is only temporarily fixed through structures of domination, such is the concept of a '*process without a subject*'.⁸⁷

It is for this reason that Althusser ceased referring positively to dialectical materialism in his work, and stopped trying to repair it as a viable Marxist philosophy. In the mid-1980s Althusser called dialectical materialism 'absolutely indefensible', a 'dreadful term', and a "yellow logarithm".⁸⁸ Wood is right to argue that the 'the kernel of historical materialism was an insistence on the historicity and specificity of capitalism, and a denial that its laws were the universal laws of history'.⁸⁹ Althusser's extensive attempts to reconstruct dialectical materialism result in failure. He came to the conclusion that it restricted rather than advanced historical materialism: in place of the subject-as-capitalist it merely asserted a different universal law.

3.2 Towards a New Materialism

3.2.1 Process Without a Subject or Goal

Althusser argued that for a philosophy to be properly materialist, it must abandon the problematic of origins:

[Materialism] can play its role only by drawing a demarcation line between itself and every philosophy of the Origin, whether of Being, of the Subject or of Meaning ... when you reject the radical origin of things, whatever the figure used, you need to create quite different categories from the classical ones in order to get a grasp on those notions—essence, cause or liberty—whose authority is drawn from this origin, When you reject the category of origin as a philosophical issuing bank, you have to refuse its currency too, and put other categories into circulation.⁹⁰

The entire trajectory of Althusser's corpus can be seen from this vantage point, as the successive elaboration of the insight that a materialist philosophy must eschew any point of origin and, in its place, as Althusser was fond of saying, 'catch a moving train ... without knowing where he comes from (origin) or where he is going (goal)'.⁹¹ If the

⁸⁷ Althusser, 'Marx's Relation to Hegel', *Politics and History*, 185.

⁸⁸ Louis Althusser, 'The Future Lasts a Long Time', in *Future Lasts a Long Time*, 12–286 (223); Althusser, 'Philosophy and Marxism', *Philosophy of the Encounter*, 254; Althusser, *Thèses de juin*, IMEC, ALT2. A29-06.04, 4.

⁸⁹ Wood, *Democracy Against Capitalism*, 5.

⁹⁰ Althusser, 'Is it Simple', *Spontaneous Philosophy*, 217.

⁹¹ Althusser, 'Underground Current', *Philosophy of the Encounter*, 189; Althusser, 'Philosophy and Marxism', *Philosophy of the Encounter*, 277–78; Althusser, 'Portrait of the Materialist

origin was the giveaway component of idealism, the category that had a similarly central role in materialism was that of *process* or, more precisely, what Althusser called ‘process without Subject or Goal(s)’.⁹²

Process had long been central to dialectical materialism. It is what supposedly set it apart from the mechanical materialisms that had preceded it. As Engels described:

The world is not to be comprehended as a complex of ready-made *things*, but as a complex of *processes*, in which the apparently stable things, no less than their mental images in our heads, the concepts, go through uninterrupted change of coming into being and passing away.⁹³

The point is that, as Resnick and Wolff explain,

all entities in society change as the direct consequence of the complex contradictions that constitute their existence. To exist at all, for Marxian theory, is to be overdetermined, contradictory, changing, and hence in a state of process. Entities, for Marxian theory, become processes.⁹⁴

It is only from the standpoint of examining entities as processes rather than things (or subjects or objects), Althusser argued, that it is possible to avoid all idealist philosophies of order and their ontologies of origin. When we ‘*suppress every origin and every subject*’, he said, what remains is to treat entities as a ‘*process without a subject*’.⁹⁵

It is the concept of process without a subject that Althusser saw as the ‘rational kernel’ of the Hegelian dialectic. If we reject the formulation of the dialectic as a system of laws, what remains—and what we should retain—is this concept of process, the idea that everything is in a state of flux and has no permanently fixed condition. This was, Althusser claimed, ‘Marx’s principal *positive* debt to Hegel’.⁹⁶ Hegel arrived at this position precisely because he rejected, unlike many philosophers before, after, and contemporaneous to him, the view that the nature of things was fixed. Hegel rejected ‘every Origin, which is what is said at the beginning of the *Logic*, where Being is immediately identified with Nothingness’.⁹⁷ Because, for Hegel, any entity immediately brought into being its counterpart—position and negation—there is no single origin point, for movement is immanent to the process from the outset. And in making this argument, Althusser thought Hegel had made a real advance. But what ended up as the origin of the Hegelian dialectic was the *laws of the dialectic themselves*:

Philosopher’, *Philosophy of the Encounter*, 290; Althusser, *Marxist in Philosophy*, 18; Louis Althusser, ‘1972 Letter to René Diatkine’, quoted in François Matheron, ‘Introduction’, in Althusser, *Spectre of Hegel*, ix–xxii (xxi); Althusser, ‘Only Materialist Tradition: Spinoza’, *New Spinoza*, 13; Althusser, ‘Les 2 grands courants’, IMEC, ALT2. A29-04.09, 2; Althusser, ‘Matérialisme aléatoire’, *Multitudes*, 186.

⁹² Althusser, ‘Reply to John Lewis’, *Self-Criticism*, 94.

⁹³ Engels, ‘End of Classical German Philosophy’, *MECW: 1882–1889*, xxvi, 384.

⁹⁴ Resnick and Wolff, *Knowledge and Class*, 7.

⁹⁵ Louis Althusser, ‘Lenin Before Hegel’, in *Lenin and Philosophy*, 71–83 (81).

⁹⁶ Althusser, ‘Marx’s Relation to Hegel’, *Politics and History*, 185.

⁹⁷ Althusser, ‘Is it Simple’, *Spontaneous Philosophy*, 218.

The whole process, which is fulfilled in the final totality, is indefinitely, in all the moments which anticipate its end, its own Origin. There is no Subject in Hegel, but that is because the becoming-Subject of substance, as an accomplished process of the negation of the negation, is the Subject of the process itself.⁹⁸

For Hegel, the origin and end was the substance of Spirit, the fabric of reality in which the laws were inscribed. The process was guaranteed to develop in a certain way because it was the nature of history that it would develop in that way. And this is why inversion could not solve the issue for Marxists: exchanging the category of Spirit for matter preserved what was idealist in the Hegelian dialectic by simply swapping an idealist category for a materialist one.

Read in this way, Hegel had developed a materialist category within a predominantly idealist philosophy.⁹⁹ Marxists were consequently right to think of this philosophy as an important predecessor to their own, but Althusser alleged that they had failed to separate idealism adequately from materialism. Marxists had tended to misunderstand what it was about Hegel's dialectic that was materialist and what was idealist.

In 'The Humanist Controversy' (1967) Althusser argued that the late Engels initiated a 'justified "revival"' of the dialectic of nature. What was justified here, however, was not the extension of dialectics to cover the natural as well as the social world, but rather the naturalism—the claim that the social world was like the natural in that it was made up of intransitive processes. Materialism is necessarily, in Althusser's view, a naturalism (that materialism is a naturalism is what is being asserted by anti-humanism—the denial that the subject is undetermined when everything else is determined), but the basis of that naturalism is not a natural dialectic. It is 'the category of the *process without a subject*'.¹⁰⁰

Although the concept of process without a subject is present in *Reading Capital* (1965), it began to feature prominently from 'On the Humanist Controversy' (1967) onwards. It is fleshed out in 'Marx's Relation to Hegel' (1968) and in an addendum to the 'Reply to John Lewis' (1972).¹⁰¹ In the period 1967–72 process without a subject and dialectical materialism co-exist in Althusser's work. Once dialectical materialism loses its laws, process is what remains: that movement, not stasis, was the normal order of things.

Althusser has been read as trying to leave the field of ontology entirely, in the same way as he had sought to abandon epistemology.¹⁰² There is no guarantee of truth; thus we can only conclude that we cannot really know if we have the truth. Equally, there can be

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ Althusser, 'Is it Simple', *Spontaneous Philosophy*, 216–18; Althusser, 'Humanist Controversy', *Humanist Controversy*, 237–43.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid, 282.

¹⁰¹ Balibar, 'Basic Concepts', *Reading Capital*, 439; Althusser, 'Humanist Controversy', *Humanist Controversy*, 275, 282; Althusser, 'Marx's Relation to Hegel', *Politics and History*, 182–86; Althusser, 'Reply to John Lewis', *Self-Criticism*, 94–99.

¹⁰² See, for examples: Sotiris, 'Laboratory of Philosophy', *Décalages*, 27; Wal Suchting, 'Althusser's Late Thinking About Materialism', *Historical Materialism*, 12:1 (2004), 3–70 (55 fn. 119).

no guarantee that the form of entities is as they always will be and have been, thus we can only conclude that they are processes, always liable to further transformation. Nevertheless, the idea that entities are processes is clearly an ontological claim. It avoids imposing any form on entities, of reducing them to variations of *a priori* types (e.g. Being, Subject, Object), but the claim that entities are really processes is still a claim about being. If we are to take Althusser seriously when he argued that it is not possible to leave philosophy, then I think it is a corollary that it is not possible for him—or anyone else—to leave ontology.

Where philosophies of origin imposed a false order on all the beings in the world materialism, by contrast, should not impose essences which persist through change, but be capable of treating beings as irreducibly different. This is to say that Althusser thought that materialism should not be committed to monism, as I have said so far, but rather *nominalism*.¹⁰³ Althusser was hesitant to draw this conclusion about materialism and about his own work, and it is a conclusion that speaks strongly against the interpretation of Althusser as a structuralist for whom social structures were populated by homogenous interpellated subjects that could not deviate, let alone rebel. Nevertheless, this is the view Althusser eventually reached. What is going on with aleatory materialism will not be understood unless certain likely preconceptions about Althusser on this topic are set aside. An open declaration for nominalism does not occur in his work until the mid-1980s. For example, in ‘Elements of Self-Criticism’ (1972) he wrote that ‘nominalism, as Marx recognized, could then be the antechamber of materialism’.¹⁰⁴ It is here only the *antechamber* and not materialism itself. In ‘Is it Simple to be a Marxist in Philosophy?’ (1975) Althusser still seemed to think of nominalism as sub-materialist. He argued there that if the distinction between the real-object and thought-object is not maintained then ‘it may lead to nominalism, even to idealism’.¹⁰⁵ It is not until 1985 that we find explicit endorsements: ‘I really believe’, he wrote, ‘that nominalism is not the royal road to materialism but *the only conceivable materialism in the world*’.¹⁰⁶

3.2.2 A New Practice of Philosophy

The idea of a new practice of philosophy was first introduced by Althusser in the late-1960s, in ‘Marx’s Relation to Hegel’ (1968), in order to denote the specificity of the philosophical break that Marxism had made with the philosophies that preceded it.

¹⁰³ See: Warren Montag, ‘Althusser’s Nominalism: Structure and Singularity (1962–6)’, *Rethinking Marxism*, 10:3 (1998), 64–73; Lucien Sève, ‘Althusser et la dialectique’, in *Althusser philosophe*, ed. by Pierre Raymond (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1997), 105–36 (133).

¹⁰⁴ Althusser, ‘Elements of Self-Criticism’, *Self-Criticism*, 137. Marx and Engels call nominalism ‘the first form of materialism’; Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, ‘The Holy Family’, in *Marx-Engels Collected Works: Marx and Engels, 1844–1845* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1975), IV, 5–211 (127).

¹⁰⁵ Althusser, ‘Is it Simple’, *Spontaneous Philosophy*, 228.

¹⁰⁶ Althusser, ‘Only Materialist Tradition: Spinoza’, *New Spinoza*, 11. It is possible that comments to the same end made in ‘Philosophy and Marxism’ (1984–87) were slightly earlier, but they are roughly contemporaneous. See Althusser, ‘Philosophy and Marxism’, *Philosophy of the Encounter*, 265.

Marxist philosophy was not simply an inversion of idealism, but also a rupture with all preceding materialisms. In rejecting the problematic of origins there emerges

not only a new conception—but a new modality of existence, I shall say a new *practice* of philosophy: a philosophical discourse that speaks *from somewhere else* than classical philosophical discourse did. To make this comprehensible, let me invoke the analogy of psychoanalysis.

1. The point is to carry out a *displacement* = to make something *move over* in the internal disposition of the philosophical categories.
2. Such that philosophical discourse changes its *modality*—speaks *otherwise* which creates the difference between interpreting the world and changing it.
3. Without philosophy disappearing nonetheless.¹⁰⁷

The significance this category was later to take on is easy miss at this stage of Althusser's work, and it appears that this was the case even to Althusser himself who continued to refer to Marxist philosophy as dialectical materialism. It seems that at this point he understood dialectical materialism to be a new practice of philosophy.¹⁰⁸

What the definition of philosophy as class struggle in theory that we examined in 2.2 amounts to is a view of philosophy as 'no more than a certain investment of politics, a certain continuation of politics'.¹⁰⁹ Philosophy should no longer be understood as the science of the whole (such as Althusser had attempted with the Theory of theoretical practice) but as influenced by factors external to it—as part of the whole, not above it, and as partisan discourse rather than as indifferent assessment. What philosophy is not, on Althusser's account, is a means by which we can know the world. Philosophy is not itself knowledge (although it may lead to it), but a form of class struggle; and the point of a new practice of philosophy is to act as such. It is, as Montag describes, to do 'philosophy as if it were an extension of the class struggle, intervening to shift the balance of forces so as to weaken the power of the dominant ideas and thus create the space for ideas (or philosophical theses) adequate to the practice of revolt'.¹¹⁰ Emancipatory politics demanded a different way of thinking about philosophy.

This impulse had, Althusser thought, initially manifested itself in Marx's work as his attempt to leave philosophy. The advent of historical materialism revealed philosophy's role in reproducing domination.¹¹¹ In attempting to suppress philosophy in its traditional form, Marx and Engels' initial response was to declare an exit from philosophy. The consequence was underdevelopment of Marxist philosophy. When explicit philosophical thinking re-emerged with Engels' *Anti-Dühring* (1878), it was in the form of dialectical materialism which only repeated, in a new guise, philosophy as it was practised in its classical form. What was not followed through in the philosophical

¹⁰⁷ Althusser, 'Marx's Relation to Hegel', *Politics and History*, 174.

¹⁰⁸ Althusser, 'Lenin and Philosophy', *Lenin and Philosophy*, 17.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid*, 18.

¹¹⁰ Warren Montag, 'Introduction: Philosophy for Non-Philosophers or Non-Philosophy for Philosophers?', in Althusser, *Non-Philosophers*, 1–14 (4).

¹¹¹ Althusser, 'Revolutionary Weapon', *Lenin and Philosophy*, 6

work of the late Engels is the idea of philosophy as a new practice of philosophy.¹¹²

Althusser further developed these arguments in the mid-1970s, particularly in a 1976 lecture ‘The Transformation of Philosophy’.¹¹³ What is especially notable about this piece is that it eschews mention of the idealism/materialism pair that governed Althusser’s division of philosophy up to this point, and uses a division between philosophy/non-philosophy instead. When Marx subjected philosophy to the science of historical materialism, Althusser argued, he ceased to produce philosophy ‘as the science of the Whole’.¹¹⁴ Marx did not ‘establish a new philosophy’ or ‘inaugurate a new philosophical discourse. Instead, he establishes a reality that possesses the particularity of being at one and the same time presupposed by all traditional philosophical discourses, yet naturally excluded from such discourses’.¹¹⁵ Marx ‘did not found a new philosophy. He simply practised existing philosophy in a revolutionary way’.¹¹⁶ Althusser’s point here seems to be that Marx resisted doing philosophy as philosophy and instead does philosophy as class struggle.

With this Althusser argued that there was a profound break with philosophy in its traditional guise. ‘Practice’, he said, ‘is not a substitute for Truth ... on the contrary, it is what knocks philosophy off balance’.¹¹⁷ Rather than imposing its own order on the structure, philosophy is subject to the order of the structure—a part of it, not a neutral observer of it. This is where Althusser now located the dividing line in philosophy. Traditional philosophy, be it materialist or idealist, was marked out by imposing an order on the world, ‘a system or “meaning” that encompasses all beings, assigning them their place, meaning and end’.¹¹⁸ Traditional philosophy sought to convey the truth of origins and ends in order to justify and naturalise class rule. How then, Althusser asked, ‘is a Marxist philosophy conceivable?’¹¹⁹ Can there be a philosophy that is not an organiser of hegemony, but emancipatory?

Althusser chose the enigmatic term “non-philosophy” to designate what he had in mind. This is a misnomer, for non-philosophy is still philosophy and Althusser did not suppose otherwise. Non-philosophy is philosophy ‘which ceases to be produced in the form of a philosophy, whose function of theoretical hegemony will disappear in order to make way for new forms of philosophical existence’.¹²⁰ With non-philosophy, we seek a ‘different relationship between philosophy and the ideologies and practices: a relationship that is one not of servitude and exploitation, but of emancipation and freedom’.¹²¹ Philosophy in this form accepts its submission to the world which it inhabits; it does not seek to impose itself over it. Consequently, it cannot be in the form

¹¹² See Althusser, *Marxist in Philosophy*, 138–39.

¹¹³ See: Althusser, ‘Transformation of Philosophy’, *Spontaneous Philosophy*; Althusser, *Marxist in Philosophy*, 134–43; Althusser, *Non-Philosophers*, 186–87.

¹¹⁴ Althusser, ‘Transformation of Philosophy’, *Spontaneous Philosophy*, 245.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid*, 248.

¹¹⁶ Althusser, *Marxist in Philosophy*, 138.

¹¹⁷ Althusser, ‘Transformation of Philosophy’, *Spontaneous Philosophy*, 249.

¹¹⁸ Althusser, *Non-Philosophers*, 186.

¹¹⁹ Althusser, ‘Transformation of Philosophy’, *Spontaneous Philosophy*, 260.

¹²⁰ *Ibid*, 264.

¹²¹ Althusser, *Non-Philosophers*, 185.

of a closed system for it has an outside; the other practices intrude on any attempt to render philosophy complete. New products of science or politics, for example, demand fresh philosophical thought. There can be no finality to philosophy for it is, like any other practice, a process without a subject. It is a process of transformation of its raw material (itself) without end—a ‘perpetual war’.¹²²

The role of philosophy in a social formation was, Althusser argued, to organise the domination of the dominant class in a way analogous to the state.¹²³ Non-philosophy equated to the proposed form of revolutionary state—the dictatorship of the proletariat—that put into effect its own dissolution, ‘a state that is a “non-State”’.¹²⁴ Because the proletariat was not a class based on exploiting other classes, it had to construct a different kind of state to those which reproduced conditions of exploitation. Equally, it had to make use of a different kind of philosophy, one which did not exploit the sciences to the ends of class hegemony.

This comparison between philosophy and the state is instructive insofar as it allows us to see how non-philosophy is still philosophy, but philosophy with a different form and function. Althusser does not, however, seem to realise that if the comparison holds it would indicate that the state must be considered a permanent feature of social life in the same way he considers philosophy (and ideology) to be inescapable. Furthermore, Althusser is left vulnerable to the charge that Lenin makes, that no form of state is compatible with freedom, rather that there is only a form of state that trends towards its own dissolution. Only with that dissolution can freedom pertain. In Lenin’s view, wherever a state exists relations of domination also exist.¹²⁵ Therefore we could be led to the conclusion that wherever philosophy persists, so does domination, and thus a condition of freedom does not pertain, only a possible path to it. If philosophy does not wither away, then the proposed condition of freedom that is communism is only ever in the process of becoming and can never be fully realised.

Althusser argued, in *On The Reproduction* (1970), that philosophy will be present when two conditions obtain:

- 1) There are class divisions.
- 2) There are one or more sciences.¹²⁶

This would seem to indicate that philosophy, like the state, can ‘wither away’ in Althusser’s view since Althusser must have thought it at least possible, given his communist commitments, for condition 1) to cease. This is implied by the definition of philosophy as ‘class struggle in theory’. This would, however, conflict with Althusser’s view of philosophy as an underlabourer to science, a view which seems to suggest only

¹²² Althusser, ‘Transformation of Philosophy’, *Spontaneous Philosophy*, 261.

¹²³ *Ibid*, 263–65.

¹²⁴ *Ibid*, 264; Althusser, ‘Philosophy and Marxism’, *Philosophy of the Encounter*, 259.

¹²⁵ Vladimir I. Lenin, ‘The State and Revolution’, in *Lenin Collected Works: June–September 1917*, ed. by Stepan Apresyan and Jim Riordan (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1964), XXV, 381–492 (397–98).

¹²⁶ Althusser, *On the Reproduction*, 13–14.

condition 2) must hold, and since it cannot be the case that science can wither away, it must also be the case that philosophy cannot wither away. Later, in ‘Philosophy and Marxism’ (1984–87) only condition 2) is given as necessary for the existence of philosophy.¹²⁷ With this in mind, I suggest that Althusser’s argument in *On The Reproduction* be interpreted as referring solely to traditional philosophy, which only has a conceivable function in class societies, and not to non-philosophy, a category he had yet to formulate at that time. The available move would be to abandon the theme of the withering away of the state and accept that the state can fundamentally change in form (from ‘the government of persons’ to the ‘administration of things’) without becoming something other than a state (an argument Althusser does not make).¹²⁸ This would enable us to more reasonably sustain the comparison with philosophy, which need not always function as a form of domination (an argument Althusser does make). This would, however, put into question whether philosophy as ‘class struggle in theory’ can stand as an adequate definition in the face of the ‘new forms of philosophical existence’ that Althusser is reaching for.¹²⁹

The ‘non-state’ concept in classical Marxism was meant to denote something more than a simple change in the type of state, a distinction between, for example, absolute monarchy and liberal democracy. The term ‘non-state’ designated a change in the function of the state, from the state as the reproduction of domination to the state as the production of freedom. In the same way, non-philosophy would be a type of philosophy that broke out of the idealist problematic, and this could only be achieved by rejecting the very terms in which it conducted itself. ‘If a strategy for communism requires a new practice of politics’, Sotiris writes, ‘it also requires a new practice of philosophy’.¹³⁰ Just as Marxism sought ‘to replace the State’ with a form of state that played ‘a totally different role ... not one of violence and repression’ so it was necessary to think philosophically in ways that ‘will cease to have as their essential function the constitution of the dominant ideology’ and instead ‘promote the liberation and free exercise of social practices and human ideas’.¹³¹ The (non-)philosophy Althusser had in mind had to move beyond a dominant/dominated dynamic. Its task was to underpin the free exercise of the social practices. Free in the sense that they were no longer subject to the subjection present in systems based on class exploitation.

The specific novelty of a new practice of philosophy lies in it being a philosophy which does not seek a new form of domination, but its escape altogether—it is a philosophy that must break from the couplet domination/dominated and its philosophical representation of idealism/materialism. Traditional philosophy, in either its materialist or idealist guises,

responds to a fundamental political necessity. The task which it is assigned and

¹²⁷ Althusser, ‘Philosophy and Marxism’, *Philosophy of the Encounter*, 266–67.

¹²⁸ Friedrich Engels, ‘Anti-Dühring’, in *MECW: Anti-Dühring, Dialectics of Nature*, xxv, 5–309 (268). Althusser famously made this move when it came to ideology; see Althusser, ‘Marxism and Humanism’, *For Marx*, 232.

¹²⁹ Althusser, ‘Transformation of Philosophy’, *Spontaneous Philosophy*, 264.

¹³⁰ Sotiris, ‘Laboratory of Philosophy’, *Décalages*, 21.

¹³¹ Althusser, ‘Transformation of Philosophy’, *Spontaneous Philosophy*, 264–65.

delegated by the class struggle in general, and more directly by the ideological class struggle, is that of contributing to the unification of the ideologies within a dominant ideology and of guaranteeing this dominant ideology as Truth.¹³²

A new materialism must avoid imposing a new origin category, in doing so changing its character from sustaining exploitation to facilitating freedom.¹³³ As Althusser explained in *Philosophy for Non-Philosophers*:

While every science is indeed inaugurated by a 'break', since it must 'change terrain', abandoning the old terrain of pre-scientific notions, most of which are ideological, in order to develop on new theoretical bases, a new philosophy does not proceed that way. It is not marked by the same discontinuity, since it simply takes its place in the continuity of a millennial struggle which opposes adversaries whose arguments vary, but whose objectives remain more or less the same through the variations in the conjuncture. If a new philosophy wishes to represent a revolutionary class's conception of the world in philosophy, the conception of a class which, since it exploits no other class, seeks to abolish all classes, it has to do battle on the existing philosophical battlefield, and it has to accept the rules of the battle; or, rather, it has to impose its own rules, but on the same battlefield, *without mistaking its adversary*. Imposing its own rules of battle, it can disconcert its adversary by rejecting most of the standing rules, since they only serve the domination of the class in power: for example, the rule of the 'system', and a considerable number of others, those of the Truth of Meaning, End, Guarantee and so on. In short, it must, seizing the initiative, impose a new practice of philosophy on its adversary.¹³⁴

A new materialism, or non-philosophy, must 'wage battle, not only against its adversary on the philosophical field of battle, but also against that *Kampfplatz* itself' as Goshgarian puts it.¹³⁵

It is this task of getting out of the idealism/materialism duality that dialectical materialism had failed to achieve. Althusser formerly argued that dialectical materialism initiated a break with all preceding materialisms and in doing so permitted, for the first time, materialism to dominate idealism in the philosophical struggle. Consequently, dialectical materialism 'represented the proletarian class struggle in theory' insofar as it held the promise of aiding the struggle of that class in abolishing capitalism and moving towards a social system that was no longer characterised by relations of domination.¹³⁶ By the time of 'Transformation of Philosophy' (1976), Althusser rejected both parts of this argument. Dialectical materialism did not sufficiently surpass pre-existing (mechanical) materialisms, for whatever its formal adherence to materialism and its extension into the domain of history dialectical materialism retained the function of domination located in the problematic of origins. Dialectical materialism could not then be an adequate representative of the proletarian

¹³² Ibid, 259.

¹³³ Althusser, *Non-Philosophers*, 185.

¹³⁴ Ibid, 187.

¹³⁵ G. M. Goshgarian, 'Introduction', in Althusser, *Marxist in Philosophy*, xi–xxix (xxv).

¹³⁶ Althusser, 'Revolutionary Weapon', *Lenin and Philosophy*, 7.

class struggle in theory.

While yet to put in place the terminology, the path to aleatory materialism is opened here. On the one hand, Althusser's contended that "a new practice of philosophy" captured something that is implicit in Marx's work but, on the other, he thought Marx and Engels continued to make use of a philosophy—dialectical materialism—that did not fulfil the promise of this move.¹³⁷ While dialectical materialism may have been a dead end it coexisted alongside another problematic in Marx's work, a problematic separated from idealism by an 'epistemological break'.

3.3 The Epistemological Break

Between the idealist dialectic of Hegel and the materialist dialectic of Marx lay what Althusser called, in 'On the Materialist Dialectic' (1963), an "epistemological break".¹³⁸ This concept was invoked to denote the shift Marx made from one problematic to another in his foundation of the science of history. From ideological schemas of history—of which Hegel's serves as the most relevant example—Marx split away a science of history. Ideological theories tended to take the preferences of the agents as causative, preferences which were roughly the same for all individuals in both space and time. Marx's scientific theory, in contrast, saw social structures as the cause of those preferences. Social structures explain those preferences rather than being explained by them. This transformation followed the same pattern taken by all sciences, which were preceded in their respective domains by an ideological (mis)understanding of their objects. This epistemological break between an ideology and a science was facilitated by, Althusser argued, a corresponding break between materialism and idealism: a 'double foundation in a single break'.¹³⁹

In *For Marx* (1965) Althusser located the break in 1845, at the point of the *Theses on Feuerbach* and *The German Ideology*, followed by a transitional phase between 1845–1857, and finally the mature works after 1857 in which the scientific problematic of historical materialism, based on the philosophy of dialectical materialism, fully emerged and the idealist problematic of Hegel's idealist dialectic had disappeared.¹⁴⁰ It is this epistemological break that defined, for Althusser, Marxism's specificity. It was a watershed in Marx's thinking that placed him on qualitatively different ground to his predecessors.

What Althusser had claimed in this first attempt at tracking the epistemological break was that two problematics were simultaneously present in Marx from 1845 onwards and that the first, idealism, gradually gave way to the second, materialism and, with it, the science of historical materialism. Althusser argued that Marx was unable to formulate the nature of this break and make its presence clear. Marx was constrained in his self-understanding by 'objective theoretical conditions' that prevented the

¹³⁷ Althusser, *Non-Philosophers*, 188–89.

¹³⁸ Althusser, 'Materialist Dialectic', *For Marx*, 169

¹³⁹ Althusser, 'Introduction', *For Marx*, 33.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid*, 33–39.

adequate articulation of the problems he took up: 'indispensable theoretical concepts do not magically construct themselves on command when they are needed'.¹⁴¹ Marx was forced to think 'in borrowed concepts, particularly Hegelian ones', and thus the means to express the real significance of his work evaded him.¹⁴² Consequently, Althusser argued, while Marx may have believed himself to be following Hegel in actual fact he had been doing nothing of the sort.

Althusser's concept of the epistemological break has been widely criticised. His theory has been reproached for lacking fidelity to the textual evidence. Elliott, for example, argues that the presence of Hegelian categories in the *Grundrisse* (1857-8) upset Althusser's periodisation of Marx's works as 'it displays a Marx in transit to something rather different from the Althusserian vision of *Capital*'.¹⁴³ Colletti disputed that themes Althusser rejected as idealist, such as alienation, never receded and were present all the way through Marx's late works.¹⁴⁴ Insofar as the break licenced Althusser's reading of Marx he was accused, by Raymond Aron, of having produced an 'imaginary Marxism', and so on.¹⁴⁵

Althusser had claimed, in *For Marx*, that Hegel was absent in *Capital* save two places.¹⁴⁶ His critics were right to argue that this was incorrect. Althusser subsequently clarified that the break was not a clean one, something he had, at any rate, never argued.¹⁴⁷ He has been read as having said that the break was a sudden event in Marx's work rather than a protracted shift.¹⁴⁸ Yet in 'The Humanist Controversy' (1967) Althusser wrote that

¹⁴¹ Althusser, 'Marx's Philosophy', *Reading Capital*, 52.

¹⁴² Althusser, 'Object of *Capital*', *Reading Capital*, 270.

¹⁴³ Elliott, *Detour of Theory*, 115. See also John Lewis, 'Althusser Case (Part 2)', *Marxism Today*, 44. Cf. Elliott with John Mepham, 'From the *Grundrisse* to *Capital*: The Making of Marx's Method', in *Issues in Marxist Philosophy: Dialectics and Method*, ed. by John Mepham and David-Hillel Ruben (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1979), 1, 145-73 who argues that there is not necessarily a linear trajectory between the methodology deployed in the *Grundrisse* and that in *Capital*, and that *Capital* need not be viewed as a methodologically unified text without internal fissures. On Marx's relation to Hegel in the *Grundrisse* see Martin Nicolaus, 'Foreword', in *Grundrisse*, by Karl Marx, trans. by Martin Nicolaus (Penguin Books, 1973), 7-63 (24-44).

¹⁴⁴ Colletti, 'Interview', *New Left Review*, 16-17.

¹⁴⁵ Raymond Aron, *D'une sainte famille à l'autre : essais sur les Marxismes imaginaires* (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1969). See also: William Lewis, *Louis Althusser and the Traditions of French Marxism* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2005), 189-90; Levine, *Future for Marxism*, 91-92; Hobsbawm, 'Structure of *Capital*', *Althusser: A Critical Reader*, 9; Norman Geras, *Marx and Human Nature: Refutation of a Legend* (London: Verso, 1983), in particular 78-79; Creaven, "'Two Marxisms'", *Journal of Critical Realism*, 27-30.

¹⁴⁶ Althusser, 'Materialist Dialectic', *For Marx*, 200. See also Althusser, 'Humanist Controversy', *Humanist Controversy*, 263.

¹⁴⁷ 'It is impossible to break with a theoretical past at one blow'; Althusser, 'Introduction', *For Marx*, 36.

¹⁴⁸ For examples of this confusion see: Kolakowski, 'Althusser's Marx', *Socialist Register*, 123; Ernest Mandel, *Formation of the Economic Thought of Karl Marx: 1843 to Capital*, trans. by Brian Pearce (London: New Left Books, 1971), 158-59 fn. 15; Colletti, 'Marxism and the Dialectic', *New Left Review*, 23; John Lewis, 'The Althusser Case (Part 1)', *Marxism Today*, January 1972, 23-28 (23-24); Levine, 'Althusser's Marxism', *Economy and Society*, 258; Arditi, 'Louis Althusser', *Continental Political Thought*, 191; Norman Levine, *Marx's Discourse with Hegel* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 180; Luke Ferretter, *Louis Althusser* (London: Routledge, 2006), 23.

‘the break is never anything more than the beginning of an event of a very long duration which, in a sense, never ends’.¹⁴⁹ And in ‘Lenin and Philosophy’ (1968):

Obviously this epistemological break is not an instantaneous event. It is even possible that one might, by recurrence and where some of its *details* are concerned, assign it a sort of premonition of a past. At any rate, this break becomes *visible* in its first signs, but these signs only inaugurate the beginning of an endless history. Like every break, this break is actually a sustained one within which complex reorganizations can be observed.¹⁵⁰

Put this way, the epistemological break is a much more defensible view about the development of Marx’s work.

The German Ideology (1845) did not, according to Althusser, announce an immediate discontinuity with Marx’s past Hegelian idealism but was merely the ‘point of *no return*’.¹⁵¹ What began to congeal around this time was the conceptual apparatus of a new science. Idealism was not absent from *Capital*, Althusser admitted in his ‘Preface to *Capital* Volume One’ (1969), but occurred in the formulations of value-theory, in the persistent presence of the negation of the negation, and in the theory of fetishism. Thus Marx’s transitional period was more protracted than he had originally thought. Althusser now resolved that it was only in some of Marx’s final works, the *Critique of the Gotha Programme* (1875) and *Marginal Notes on Adolph Wagner’s Lehrbuch der Politischen Oekonomi* (1882) that the idealist problematic from which Marx began had decisively disappeared.¹⁵² We see here the first signs of Althusser’s project shifting from a *reconstruction* of historical materialism to pointing towards a need for the *construction* of historical materialism; that Marx’s work was not simply unfinished but, even in his *magnum opus* of *Capital*, mistaken. ‘We ought’, Althusser said, ‘to draw the conclusions from this, which means ultimately that we ought to *rewrite Part I of Capital*’.¹⁵³

In *For Marx* Althusser gave the impression that the break took place in theory alone. Marx and Engels struggled to extricate themselves from Hegel and develop their own conceptual arsenal with which to articulate their new science. Starting with ‘The Historical Task of Marxist Philosophy’ (1967) Althusser shifted to arguing that historical materialism was induced by a *conjunction*, a meeting between intellectuals and the worker’s movement.¹⁵⁴ Marxism could not be *only* the confluence of three theoretical components—French Socialism, German Philosophy, and British Political Economy—combined in a novel way.¹⁵⁵ It took an additional condition to detach the scientific

¹⁴⁹ Althusser, ‘Humanist Controversy’, *Humanist Controversy*, 269.

¹⁵⁰ Althusser, ‘Lenin and Philosophy’, *Lenin and Philosophy*, 22.

¹⁵¹ Althusser, ‘Reply to John Lewis’, *Self-Criticism*, 66.

¹⁵² Karl Marx, ‘Critique of the Gotha Programme’, in *MECW: 1874–1883*, xxiv, 75–99; Marx, ‘Marginal Notes on Adolph Wagner’, *MECW: 1874–1883*, xxiv, 531–59.

¹⁵³ Althusser, ‘Preface to *Capital*’, *Lenin and Philosophy*, 62.

¹⁵⁴ Althusser, ‘Historical Task’, *Humanist Controversy*, 160.

¹⁵⁵ Louis Althusser, ‘On the Evolution of the Young Marx’, in *Self-Criticism*, 151–61 (156–57); Althusser, ‘Marx in His Limits’, *Philosophy of the Encounter*, 33–36; Althusser, ‘Marxism Today’, *Spontaneous Philosophy*, 270–71; Vladimir I. Lenin, ‘The Three Sources and Three

elements in each of the sources from the ideological systems in which they were articulated, namely the direct acquaintance of radical intellectuals with the social struggles of the day. This interaction with the workers' movement permitted Marx (in Paris) and Engels (in Manchester) to adopt 'proletarian class positions' in theory (materialism) and thereby to create a new science.¹⁵⁶

In a reversal of the position he held in *For Marx*, Althusser consequently came to differentiate himself from the Lenin of *What is To Be Done?* on this point.¹⁵⁷ Marxist theory was neither the spontaneous product of the workers' movement, its inevitable representation in theory, nor the work of two geniuses operating at a distance from the class struggle that they theorised. Rather, the break is induced in this meeting of social and theoretical factors, and it was this that produced something new; an effect produced by a multiplicity of causes none of which contained within them the result.¹⁵⁸ These were 'absolutely new, unheard-of concepts, not to be found in the old conceptions ... there was no continuity between the system of Marxist concepts and the system of pre-Marxist notions'.¹⁵⁹ We witness here the replacement of what Althusser came to regard as an idealist view of the emergence of Marx's thought—of Marxist philosophy as class-neutral, a new, higher, truth—with a materialist explanation that did not rely on the problematic of origins but, instead, serves as an example of the kind of causal relations we have seen Althusser trying to expound.¹⁶⁰

Althusser also began, in 'Reply to John Lewis' (1972), to dispense with the idea of the break as a progressive rupture in Marxist thought. Rather than advancing in a simple chronological fashion, a successive growth of Marxist science and corresponding retreat of humanist ideology, the presence of ideological concepts in Marx's works, Althusser now argued, waxed and waned. Historical materialism did not advance linearly but encountered difficulties and problems along the way that forced continual resort to ideology. Working out the conceptual apparatus of a new science from the raw material of his ideological sources was a difficult task, and involved *both* lapses and breakthroughs. Althusser attributed his earlier error on this count, as assuming the progressive advance of Marx's science, to having collapsed Marx's philosophical *revolution* (from traditional philosophy to a new practice of philosophy) into his scientific epistemological *break* (from ideology to science). The emergence of a science represented a real rupture with its past, but philosophy was a perpetual war between tendencies and thus always subject to reversals. This, in turn, affected and warped the

Component Parts of Marxism', in *Lenin Collected Works: March–December 1913*, trans. by George Hanna and Robert Daglish (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1963), XIX, 23–28.

¹⁵⁶ Althusser, 'Evolution of the Young Marx', *Self-Criticism*, 157.

¹⁵⁷ See: Vladimir I. Lenin, 'What Is To Be Done?', in *Lenin Collected Works: May 1901–February 1902*, ed. by Victor Jerome, trans. by Joe Fineberg and George Hanna (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1960), V, 347–529 (422); Althusser, 'Evolution of the Young Marx', *Self-Criticism*, 156–61; Althusser, *On The Reproduction*, 229; Althusser, 'Tbilisi Affair', *Writings on Psychoanalysis*, 112–13. Cf. Althusser, 'Materialist Dialectic', *For Marx*, 171 fn. 7; Althusser, 'Theoretical Practice', *Spontaneous Philosophy*, 16.

¹⁵⁸ Althusser's account of the emergence of Marxist theory is thus rendered consistent with the theory itself. James' criticism that Althusser 'has difficulty in applying his theory to his own exposition of Marx's work' is made obsolete; James, *Content of Social Explanation*, 110.

¹⁵⁹ Althusser, 'Evolution of the Young Marx', *Self-Criticism*, 153–54.

¹⁶⁰ On this, see in particular Althusser, 'Marxism Today', *Spontaneous Philosophy*, 270–71.

development of the corresponding science, stifling its advance.¹⁶¹

Reading, for example, ‘Reply to John Lewis’ (1972) it remains possible to retain the view of Marx as solitarily dealing with the problems of his theories detached from events in the wider world. The case for the advance and retreat of Marxist science as accompanying political events is made more strongly in ‘Marx in His Limits’ (1978). In this text, Althusser argued that breakthroughs in Marxist theory tended to accompany heightened periods of working class struggle. This relationship, between the class struggles of the nineteenth century and the work of Marx and Engels, was not merely advantageous but the condition of possibility for their discoveries.¹⁶² Marx’s 1859 *Contribution to a Critique of Political Economy*, published during the lull between the 1848 revolutions and the rise of the First International, is described by Althusser as ‘a laborious text’ with its famous Preface being ‘mediocre’.¹⁶³ On the other hand, the 1871 Paris Commune inspired the ‘brilliant’ *Civil War in France*.¹⁶⁴ *The Poverty of Philosophy*, in which the crucial concept of relations of production takes shape, and *The Communist Manifesto*, for their part, both immediately preceded the 1848 revolutions.¹⁶⁵ It was Marx’s political experiences that enabled his theoretical shifts. According to Althusser, it is the oscillations of class struggle that roughly explain the corresponding oscillations in theory, namely the shifts between the dominance of the new practice of philosophy and traditional philosophy in Marx and Engels’ work.

It is on this basis that we can take seriously the idea that the epistemological break was permanently incomplete, thus rendering it consistent with the way in which we have seen Althusser understand science and philosophy. In ‘Marx in His Limits’ (1978) Althusser finally dispenses with the idea that any of Marx’s texts represent the culmination of the break. Rather, a form of idealism is preserved right the way through Marx’s corpus from which he is never able to extricate himself fully. The break was not a line running *across* Marx’s work, dividing it chronologically, but *through* his oeuvre. If Marx’s epistemological break was incomplete, this was because Marx’s philosophical revolution was not an irreversible moment after which it was plain sailing but ‘only tendential’.¹⁶⁶ Marx’s philosophy was an incoherent mix of a dialectical materialism, still within the idealist problematic, and a new materialist practice of philosophy. Instead of the former gradually ceding to the latter both continued to exist, each sporadically attaining prominence.

The classical Althusserian project of the early– and mid–1960s—*For Marx*, *Reading Capital* and other contemporaneous texts—had attempted to specify Marx’s materialist philosophy which was absent an explicit codification in Marx’s work, but existed in a practical state, and on that basis demonstrate the scientific status of historical

¹⁶¹ Althusser, ‘Reply to John Lewis’, *Self-Criticism*, 71–72.

¹⁶² Cf. The periodisation provided in *For Marx*, which contains no such attempt to link the development of Marx’s theory to the class struggle and his engagement with it. Althusser, ‘Introduction’, *For Marx*, 34–38.

¹⁶³ Althusser, ‘Marx in His Limits’, *Philosophy of the Encounter*, 30.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 32.

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 29–30.

¹⁶⁶ Althusser, ‘Philosophy and Marxism’, *Philosophy of the Encounter*, 258.

materialism. Marx's philosophy, as the Theory of theoretical practice, was the guarantee of the production of knowledge and thus the metric with which we could sift the scientific components of Marx's thought from the ideological components. Consequently, Althusser was led to counterpose, Kolakowski alleged, 'the young Marx to *the Marx*'.¹⁶⁷ The mature Marx of *Capital*, within which a fully realised dialectical materialism in turn produced the science of historical materialism, was the gold standard by which to assess Marx's thought and the measure of all Marxism.

Althusser had undertaken this task on the basis that Marx was being misinterpreted and that this was the means by which these misinterpretations could be rectified. This project was conducted against those who had erred by supposedly adopting and developing Marx's idealist facets, viz. humanist and evolutionist interpretations. This was not principally an academic dispute over textual interpretation, but a political argument conducted by theoretical means—a detour of theory for which the destination was political rectification. The political result of privileging Marx's idealism was the incapacity of the descendants of the Second International and the horrors of Stalinism. The two main political currents that had emerged from idealist readings of Marx and ascended to state power had both proved unable to construct anything resembling a socialist society. It was only by specifying Marx's philosophical revolution that we could properly understand his science, and only by doing that we might launch, so Althusser believed, a socialist politics that would avoid these pitfalls.

The consequence of Althusser's view that the break was a permanent fracture in Marx's work is that there was no mature Marx which one could locate in order to dismiss the rest as youthful error: it is not possible to state that the materialist Marx was the *actual* Marx any more than the idealist Marx. Both are present in the texts and are valid readings. We could no longer charge many of Marx's interpreters with, as Althusser had in *Reading Capital*, inaccuracy despite them being 'true to the letter of what he wrote'.¹⁶⁸ Althusser's former 'tactic of denying that those positions were, all along, Marxist positions' was now abandoned:¹⁶⁹

We cannot consider our historical, political and even theoretical tradition as a *pure* heritage, which was distorted by an individual called Stalin, or by the historical period which he dominated. There is no original 'purity' of Marxism that only has to be rediscovered. During the whole testing period of the 1960s when we, in our different ways, went 'back to the classics', when we read or re-read Marx, Lenin and Gramsci, trying to find in them a living Marxism, something which was being snuffed out by Stalin-type formulae and practices, we were all forced, each in our own way, even within our differences, to admit the obvious—namely, that our theoretical tradition is not 'pure'; that, contrary to Lenin's over-hasty phrase, Marxism is not a 'block of steel', but contains difficulties, contradictions and gaps, which have also played, at their own level, their role in the crisis, as they already did at the time of the Second International, and even at the beginning of the Third

¹⁶⁷ Kolakowski, 'Althusser's Marx', *Socialist Register*, 112.

¹⁶⁸ Althusser, 'Object of *Capital*', *Reading Capital*, 270.

¹⁶⁹ Benton, *Structural Marxism*, 15.

(Communist) International, while Lenin was still alive.¹⁷⁰

Resultantly, we are forced to concede that the politics of Althusser's targets—Stalinism, the Second International, Hegelian Western Marxists—were not altogether *wrong* if the relevant metric is what it is possible to justify by recourse to the works of Marx.¹⁷¹ Marxism's failures did not originate from an intrusion into its theoretical corpus. They had been there from the outset.

Thus the integrity of Marxist philosophy was compromised from the beginning *and stayed that way*. If classical Althusserianism had sought to uncover and reconstruct the materialist philosophy that was contained in Marx's work, but never made clear, then the late Althusser admits the failure of that endeavour. Althusser came to agree with Aron and others that he had 'fabricated' a solution:¹⁷²

The biggest gap in Marxism, the work of Marx and even Lenin included, was philosophy ... we latched on to Lenin: 'Marx's logic is to be found in *Capital*', but in a latent state; we tried to bring it out of this latent state. We did so not on a whim, but out of a profound necessity: to make it possible to read and to think Marx's thought, we had to bring out the philosophy implicit in it, the only philosophy capable of clarifying the difficulties in his great work, *Capital*—capable, in a word, of rendering it thinkable, that is, *rational and coherent*. Turning every possible clue to advantage, then, we set out to acquire—to discover and elaborate—what was massively absent from it: Marx's philosophy. And we fabricated for Marx, really and truly *fabricated*, the philosophy that he lacked: this rational, coherent philosophy.¹⁷³

Althusser had tried to extract Marx's materialist philosophy, but in its absence had been left to import a philosophy from outside. Thus whatever the merits or otherwise of this exercise, Althusser concluded that it was 'a philosophy that did not exist in his [Marx's] work—if one adheres scrupulously to the letter of his texts'.¹⁷⁴

A similar line of thought has been articulated by Allen Wood, who argues that since Marx raised philosophical questions and yet left few explicitly philosophical texts one is compelled to reconstruct his answers from texts 'written in the course of other investigations'. The inherent danger is that 'interpretation may turn into a fantasy, supplying tacit philosophical "foundations" for Marx's theories'.¹⁷⁵ Althusser came to the view that no coherent philosophical approach can be extracted from Marx's texts

¹⁷⁰ Louis Althusser, 'The Crisis of Marxism', in *Power and Opposition in Post-Revolutionary Societies*, by Rossana Rossanda and others, trans. by Grahame Lock (London: Ink Links, 1979), 225–37 (231).

¹⁷¹ Cf. Connolly, *Appearance and Reality*, 43; Connolly argues that Althusser treated 'Stalinism as a particular effect of the Soviet system, rather than in any way expressive of theoretical ambiguities within Marxism itself'. Althusser, in fact, argued that Stalinism was, at least in part, rooted in theoretical ambiguities within Marxism.

¹⁷² Althusser, 'Philosophy and Marxism', *Philosophy of the Encounter*, 258.

¹⁷³ Althusser, 'Correspondence', *Philosophy of the Encounter*, 210.

¹⁷⁴ Althusser 'Philosophy and Marxism', *Philosophy of the Encounter*, 258.

¹⁷⁵ Wood, *Karl Marx*, xxxix.

alone.

The problem centred on Marx's failure to codify his own philosophy. Althusser had argued in *For Marx* and *Reading Capital*, following Lenin, that Marx never found the time to write his equivalent to Hegel's *Logic* because he already found himself able to apply his philosophy in practice in *Capital*, thereby making it a task of minimal importance.¹⁷⁶ Althusser later shifted to arguing that Marx was simply unable to make explicit the philosophical theses on which his scientific discovery was dependent.¹⁷⁷ Marx's promised '2 or 3 sheets' expounding his philosophy failed to emerge not 'because he couldn't find a week's time to do it, but because he didn't know, in the state his work was in, just what he could find to say on the subject'.¹⁷⁸ Marx never made his philosophy explicit out 'of profound attachment to Hegel. Marx never could detach himself from Hegel despite his conceptual and terminological efforts'.¹⁷⁹ Hegelian philosophy constituted a *limit* on Marx's thought that he never decisively surpassed.

In place of a philosophy which he had been unable to codify Marx resorted to an inverted Hegelianism, but, as we have seen, Althusser argued that this did not live up to its materialist promise. And in place of Marx's philosophy, Althusser had created a philosophy driven by, what he had then regarded as, new resources that allowed him to break the silence in Marxist philosophical work, as I discussed in the previous chapter.¹⁸⁰ At that time, he had not yet arrived at an understanding of dialectical materialism as unrecoverable. Once Althusser had resolved to abandon dialectical materialism he argued, instead, that he was after 'the type of philosophy which best corresponds to what Marx wrote in *Capital* ... it will not be a Marxist philosophy: it will be a philosophy *for Marxism*'.¹⁸¹

This was not to concede that was *no* metric by which to divide and assess Marx's work. If Marx was not misunderstood by later Marxists, they were at least guilty of failing to interrogate adequately the weaknesses of his work and of neglecting to develop his thought suitably. If certain mistakes were permissible, even unavoidable, in certain circumstances, then greater culpability was born by those who persisted with those mistakes once circumstances changed. Althusser argued that Marx was limited in what he could think by the conditions in which he thought: 'due allowance made' it 'would be like criticizing Newton for not being Einstein'.¹⁸² For many of Marx's successors, however, dogmatism had supplanted theoretical advance.¹⁸³

¹⁷⁶ Althusser, 'Marx's Philosophy', *Reading Capital*, 29–30; Althusser, 'Materialist Dialectic', *For Marx*, 174–75.

¹⁷⁷ Althusser, 'Lenin and Philosophy', *Lenin and Philosophy*, 25; Althusser, 'Is it Simple', *Spontaneous Philosophy*, 218.

¹⁷⁸ Karl Marx, 'Marx to Engels, 16 January 1858', in *MECW: Letters, 1856–1859*, XL, 248–50 (249); Althusser, 'Correspondence', *Philosophy of the Encounter*, 210.

¹⁷⁹ Althusser, 'Matérialisme aléatoire', *Multitudes*, 185; my translation.

¹⁸⁰ See Althusser, 'Historical Task', *Humanist Controversy*, 181.

¹⁸¹ Althusser, 'Philosophy and Marxism', *Philosophy of the Encounter*, 258.

¹⁸² Althusser, 'Marx in His Limits', *Philosophy of the Encounter*, 49.

¹⁸³ In making this argument, Althusser is only applying a metric of judgement that Marx himself used. Leopold shows how Marx held a positive view of the first generation of utopian

What was necessary, then, was not arguing over one's faithfulness to the foundational texts of Marxism, but of developing it from the perspective of Marxism's emancipatory political goals. Thus the argument becomes less about what Marx *did* do and more about what he *should* have done: to 'understand better what Marx was trying, and, at least partially, failed, to say'.¹⁸⁴ Althusser's case is, then, that if we are to be true to Marx's thought it is not a matter of just reconstructing what he wrote, but of realising what he sought, but failed, to achieve. We might say there is no 'Marx's true philosophy' but there can be a philosophy true to Marxism.¹⁸⁵

3.4 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have uncovered three shifts in Althusser's work that are critical for appreciating how and why he moves towards aleatory materialism. Firstly, the critique of the problematic of origins. I have argued that this is a strong continuity in Althusser's work, but I have sought to highlight how Althusser developed this line of criticism through the 1970s to encompass dialectical materialism itself. Secondly, the emergence of the category of 'process without a subject or goal(s)' which initially exists alongside dialectical materialism but eventually comes to replace it, and the idea of a new practice of philosophy that is meant to designate the form of the new philosophical problematic that Marxist philosophy should situate itself within. Thirdly, Althusser's changing view of the epistemological break from something that was completed within Marx's work to something that traversed it and, by extension, all of Marxism.

Althusser's claim, developed over this chapter and the previous one, is that a materialist philosophy must adopt a different attitude to the ontological—what is being?—and epistemological—how do we know we know?—problems that preoccupy what he called, variously, traditional philosophy or idealist philosophy. Where in his early work it was epistemological origin, the subject as knower, that concerned Althusser he shifted his attention, during the 1970s, to how origins functioned in ontology: by privileging Being over beings one form of existence was elevated to the only form of existence. In the terms of political philosophy, the privileging of one form of political order over others. The idealist problematic, including its materialist inversion, made use of such techniques to provide rational grounds for the dominant ideology, thereby assisting social structures to reproduce themselves.

Althusser's view seems to be that there can be no *solutions* to these problems. There can be many *answers*, but those answers cannot be understood as progressive advances towards truth. All the responses philosophy gives to its questions are ultimately partisan

socialists as having made theoretical advances and as being important precursors to his own work. Simultaneously, Marx held an unfavourable view of his contemporaries who continued to adhere to utopian socialist positions. A theory can only be judged by what was possible under the conditions in which it was proposed. If those conditions changed such that errors could now be shown to be errors, then those that continued to propagate those errors were culpable; David Leopold, 'The Structure of Marx and Engels' Considered Account of Utopian Socialism', *History of Political Thought*, 26:3 (2005), 443–66 (452–53, 459–61).

¹⁸⁴ Althusser, 'Underground Current', *Philosophy of the Encounter*, 166.

¹⁸⁵ Althusser, 'Correspondence', *Philosophy of the Encounter*, 213.

answers—they reflect certain socio-political concerns, either in aid of an established order (idealism) or against it (materialism). For philosophy to claim to settle these questions beyond all further discussion—in the sense that an answer is given as the true answer—is for philosophy to portray its work as like that of science. When philosophy depicts itself in this way it contributes to a form of socio-political domination (either established or aspirant). It is on this point that Althusser's materialism is fundamentally distinguished from what André Tosel labels the 'rationalist' philosophical tradition, in which it is supposed that there can be reasoned answers to metaphysical questions.¹⁸⁶

Althusser is thereby in some agreement with Rudolf Carnap—whom I use only as an example, for this is a position common to the Logical Positivist school—who argued that materialist and idealist positions in philosophy 'have no meaning at all so that the question of their truth and falsity cannot even be posed'.¹⁸⁷ In response to the question of how it is possible to know Althusser said that 'materialism does not grant, or should not grant, that this is a philosophically valid theoretical *question*'.¹⁸⁸ Carnap pointed out that, with respect to empirically observable phenomenon, materialists and idealists have no disagreement. Their different positions cannot be decided by empirical evidence and are therefore scientifically meaningless. The question to which materialism and idealism pose their respective answers is a pseudo-problem.¹⁸⁹ But Althusser is not saying, as Carnap is, that the questions of traditional philosophy are completely without meaning, for the given answers (materialist or idealist) reflect certain approaches to the sciences which in turn reflect certain political ends. The positions of materialism and idealism are thus, as Stolze puts it, 'hardly "meaningless" in a practical sense' because they reflect different class positions in philosophy.¹⁹⁰ Carnap understates the extent to which 'idealism invariably tends to distort, to manipulate, in short, to *exploit* scientific knowledge for its own purposes'.¹⁹¹ That is, he does not appreciate the link between science and ideology, a link which is political.

There are appropriate responses a materialist philosophy might make to these questions, not because they are true, and certainly not because they are empirically verifiable, but because by thinking in this way rather than that way emancipatory politics might be advanced. A properly materialist philosophy must avoid, as far as possible, the idealist strategy of origins, for such philosophies invariably acted as justifications for domination. It was in the interests of emancipatory politics to expose prevailing social orders as contingent rather than necessary. Thus the idea of a 'process without a subject or goal(s)' is offered in order to *displace* alternative origin-based ontologies by supplying an ontology without origin, thereby allowing social science to

¹⁸⁶ André Tosel, 'The Hazards of Aleatory Materialism in the Late Philosophy of Louis Althusser', in *Encountering Althusser*, 3–26; André Tosel, 'De la théorie structurale à la conjoncture aléatoire', *La Pensée*, 382 (2015), 31–45.

¹⁸⁷ On Logical Positivism see Kolakowski, *Positivist Philosophy*, 217–18. I owe this comparison with Carnap to Stolze; see Stolze, 'What is a Philosophical Tendency?', *Historical Materialism*, 24–26.

¹⁸⁸ Althusser, *Marxist in Philosophy*, 60.

¹⁸⁹ Rudolf Carnap, *The Logical Structure of the World*, trans. by Rolf A. George (Chicago: Open Court, 2003), 332–34.

¹⁹⁰ Stolze, 'What is a Philosophical Tendency?', *Historical Materialism*, 26.

¹⁹¹ *Ibid*, 25.

advance by demonstrating the contingency of events otherwise presumed to be inevitable. Dialectical materialism had failed to do this and remained within the idealist problematic of origins. What was required, Althusser supposed, was an *aleatory* materialism.

4. Aleatory Materialism

In this chapter, I expound and defend Althusser's aleatory materialism as a philosophy for Marxism. With aleatory materialism Althusser proposed to break a methodological impasse that he thought dialectical materialism had been unable to, namely conceptualising transitions between modes of production without pre-supposing the existence of what the theory needed to explain. In Althusser's view aleatory materialism is a materialist philosophy in the sense outlined in the previous two chapters, most importantly as a philosophy without origins. A concept of contingency is not just compatible with a realist science of history but required by it. By offering a way of thinking about how entities come into being that does not rely on origins, aleatory materialism can assist historical materialism in providing accounts of how social structures change.

In 4.1, I begin by clarifying some issues of method, terminology, and translation in Althusser's aleatory writings. We are then in a position to examine Althusser's argument that aleatory materialism constituted a distinct current in the history of philosophy. My main objective here is to illuminate what is meant by aleatory materialism by connecting it with ideas with which readers may be familiar. I do not attempt to demonstrate that Althusser's readings of other philosophers are correct, only that they are minimally plausible.

In 4.2, I explain the main categories of aleatory materialism: swerve, void, encounter, atom, and take. I argue that the swerve is best understood as referring to the potentiality of the actions of agents. The void is a thought-device by which we may think the contingency of the swerve and what may result from it. It consequently yields a theory of structure and conjuncture. By situating ourselves within the void, we can think the absence of an overarching order and thus of structures without origins. A structure comes into being when the swerve causes an encounter between atoms, and that encounter endures ('takes'). A science of history based on aleatory materialism must consider structures to be contingent and dysfunctional wholes, the continued existence of which always being in doubt.

In 4.3, I discuss Althusser's ideas about necessity and contingency. With reference to Leibniz, I outline the difference between necessity and contingency, viz. the former must pertain in all possible worlds and the latter in only some possible worlds. Althusser does not deviate from that view, but he claims the only necessary entity is contingency. The only necessary fact about worlds is that all other facts about them are contingent. Only then are we able to offer viable explanations for historical events. I develop an account of how (what are really) contingencies become transformed into necessities by the work of Ideological State Apparatuses.

In 4.4, I differentiate two different ways of examining history. Althusser called these static history and living history, but they may also be called, in the language of

structuralism, synchrony and diachrony. The first involves examining history as a static object, in which everything required to obtain knowledge of it is simultaneously present. It is this method Althusser has frequently been seen as using. The second involves examining history as a historical object, in that one needed to look at the past in order to understand the present. The second is the method endorsed by the aleatory Althusser.

In 4.5, I reach the main part of the argument that aleatory materialism sustains realist science. First I examine how we can meaningfully continue to talk about causal laws even if we accept that there is contingency. Accepting contingency does not entail abandoning science, on the contrary it is central to how we can render the world intelligible. I then query whether a theory of this sort can still be construed as a Marxist theory, understood as a science of history that prioritises class as the principal causal mechanism. My view is that this is indeed the case, and Althusser continued to see relations of production as the object of the theory, and class struggle as the main mechanism by which those relations become transformed.

In the final section, 4.6, I provide a historical materialist theory of transitions that accords with aleatory materialism. In the first part, I outline the Brenner Thesis of the emergence of capitalism in England. In the second part, I argue that although there are some differences between Althusser and Brenner, their methodological stance is in the main the same. My view is that the Brenner Thesis makes use of an aleatory materialist framework without identifying it as such or developing it in a philosophical register. Just as the Brenner Thesis furnishes aleatory materialism with an example of its method at work in an empirical case study, so aleatory materialism provides philosophical arguments and concepts that permit the generalisation and defence of the method consistent with the Brenner Thesis.

4.1 Aleatory Materialism in the History of Philosophy

4.1.1 Some Methodological Considerations

As we saw in chapter 3, Althusser's case was that most materialisms remained within an idealist problematic. Materialism, in the form in which it had generally been recognised, had been orientated on questions given by idealism. Althusser claimed, however, that the existence of materialist philosophy indicated a recognition that 'idealism has to be rejected'. But materialism, conceived as such, was 'at the same time, a trap, because one does not break free of idealism by simply negating it'.¹ Materialism had generally failed to make the moves that Althusser thought were required in order to reject the problematic of origins and ends.

But, Althusser contended, some philosophers had actually taken steps towards escaping the idealism/materialism binary. There was 'a profound tradition that sought its

¹ Althusser, 'Philosophy and Marxism', *Philosophy of the Encounter*, 272.

materialist anchorage *in a philosophy of the encounter*'.² These philosophers belonged to an 'underground current of the materialism of the encounter'.³

In 'The Underground Current of the Materialism of the Encounter' (1982), the first properly aleatory text, Althusser referred to the philosophical current in question as the 'materialism of the encounter', and it is this term that was used as its title when it was edited for publication after Althusser's death.⁴ The term 'aleatory' appears several times. The eponymous 'encounter', for example, is said have an aleatory nature.⁵ Althusser's final works in the 1986–87 period use the term 'aleatory materialism' in place of 'materialism of the encounter'.⁶ I have thus far adopted this term and I will now say why.

Firstly, the term materialism of the encounter was straightforwardly replaced with the term aleatory materialism by Althusser. The two terms designate the same idea. We can infer that the latter term was Althusser's preferred one as it came later than, and supplanted, the former term. Secondly, aleatory materialism better conveys what is on offer. One could plausibly deploy the image of the encounter to capture non-aleatory processes. What was significant about encounters, for Althusser, was that they took place in aleatory ways. Thirdly, aleatory materialism draws a more straightforward contrast with dialectical materialism. This both makes it easier to convey to a Marxist audience and better highlights its function within the philosophical *kampfplatz* as an anti-dialectical materialism.

Then there is the issue of translation. The term 'aleatory' might not be immediately recognised, but it is a perfectly respectable English word even if it is not in everyday circulation. Its meaning is given, in the Oxford English Dictionary, as 'dependent on the throw of a die' or 'dependent on uncertain events or occurrences'.⁷ 'Encounter' is a much more pedestrian term that, whatever specificities might surround its philosophical usage, will at least connect with some background knowledge of the average English speaker. Given this difficulty, it might be tempting to resort to the earlier 'materialism of the encounter'. This would be, I think, a mistake. 'Aléatoire', the French word rendered into English as aleatory, is a common word in that language meaning 'random', 'uncertain', 'risk', or 'unpredictable'. The Latin root shared by both the English and French words, 'alea', means much the same as it does in both modern languages, as 'chance' or 'risk', and 'die' or 'games of chance involving dice'. The idea of action as a game of dice, a gamble dogged by uncertainty, was an image Althusser would

² Althusser, 'Underground Current', *Philosophy of the Encounter*, 188.

³ *Ibid.*, 196.

⁴ See the editorial note in Althusser, 'Underground Current', *Philosophy of the Encounter*, 163–64.

⁵ See, for example, Althusser, 'Underground Current', *Philosophy of the Encounter*, 198–99.

⁶ See, for examples: Althusser, 'Portrait of the Materialist Philosopher', *Philosophy of the Encounter*, 291; Althusser, 'Matérialisme aléatoire', *Multitudes*.

⁷ 'Aleatory, Adj.', in *OED Online* (Oxford University Press, 2018)

<www.oed.com/view/Entry/4795> [accessed 20 September 2018]. An 'aleatory contract', for example, refers to any legal contract 'in which at least one party's performance depends on some uncertain event that is beyond the control of the parties involved'; 'Aleatory Contract', in *Black's Law Dictionary*, ed. by Bryan A. Garner (St. Paul, MN: West, 2009), 366.

frequently invoke to convey the idea of aleatory materialism.⁸

The reason Althusser identified aleatory materialism as a distinct philosophical current was to get away from the idea that there is a *sui generis* Marxist philosophy of the sort dialectical materialism was claimed to be. Althusser maintained that Marx achieved something important philosophically, but that achievement was principally in subjecting philosophy to scientific comprehension: of envisaging philosophy as a *practice* rather than a commentary or reflection of the world from which it was itself free. The methods Althusser thought that we needed to put to work in the study of history were found in non-Marxist sources. On this matter, Althusser clearly had something in common with Analytical Marxism as I established in chapter 1. What separates Marxism from (at least some) other social theories are its substantive considerations—the questions it asks, the empirical data relevant to it—rather than a distinctive methodology. Althusser did think that Marxism’s substantive considerations do raise methodological issues insofar as the appropriate methods for the kind of investigation Marxists are interested in may not be appropriate for other kinds of investigation, he just supposed that the appropriate methods for Marxists are not uniquely Marxist.

Such a philosophy, Althusser said, ‘will be capable of accounting for the conceptual discoveries that Marx puts to work in *Capital*, but it will not be a Marxist philosophy: it will be a philosophy *for Marxism*’.⁹ The category of aleatory materialism seems to be a broadening of an idea Althusser advanced in *Reading Capital* (1965). There he detected a ‘repressed Spinozism’ that ‘unfolded as a subterranean history’ in philosophy and ‘in political and religious ideology ... but not on the illuminated stage of visible philosophy’.¹⁰ Aleatory materialism is the name now given to this repressed philosophy, and since Althusser now thought he had identified antecedents to Spinoza going back to classical Greek philosophy, Spinoza is displaced from centre stage.

Examples of this perspective could be, according to Althusser, found both before and after Marx. While these philosophers could be grouped as materialists or idealists in the classical sense (more the former than the latter), Althusser argued that it was possible to locate in their work aspects of a philosophy that could not be accounted for within these categories. Aleatory materialism was ‘*an almost completely unknown materialist tradition in the history of philosophy*’. It had not been recognised, Althusser argued, as a distinct philosophical current because it had been ‘interpreted, repressed and perverted into an *idealism of freedom*’. On account of the fact that this philosophy was

⁸ Interestingly there is another French word, ‘hasard’, which has passed into common usage in English (hazard), that both means much the same thing (risk, chance) as aléatoire and also takes its etymology from dice. Hasard is a corruption of the Arabic word ‘az zahr’ (dice); Rémy Lestienne, *The Creative Power of Chance*, trans. by E. C. Neher (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1998), 8–9.

⁹ Althusser, ‘Philosophy and Marxism’, *Philosophy of the Encounter*, 258.

¹⁰ Althusser, ‘Object of *Capital*’, *Reading Capital*, 250. See Jonathan I. Israel, *Radical Enlightenment: Philosophy and the Making of Modernity, 1650–1750* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001); Israel details the attempts to suppress Spinozism in the seventeenth century (see, in particular, 274–94). Israel argues that Spinoza has been far more influential than is generally recognised.

‘dangerous’ it had been ‘repressed’, by which Althusser seems to mean that it was hidden from view, but also neutered.¹¹

There are two interpretations of Althusser’s general claim about the existence of an aleatory materialist current in the history of philosophy that I want to consider. First, Althusser might be arguing that aleatory materialism is a form of esotericism. Because the philosophers of this tradition arrived at and offered views that could be seen as a threat to existing political and/or religious authorities, or because the conclusions reached might lead to events the author thought would be undesirable, these philosophers placed their views in a particular terminology or structure of argument that hid what they sought to convey. For the most part, they would be taken as relatively innocuous (offering an ‘*idealism of freedom*’) whereas for those who could learn to decode these texts their real, ‘dangerous’, meaning would be revealed.¹²

The second interpretation is that Althusser could be arguing that something occurred ‘behind the backs of the producers’.¹³ The philosophers of aleatory materialism were contributing to something they did not fully understand and/or did not possess the conceptual apparatus to express adequately. The label of aleatory materialism is applied *post facto* to those between whom we can, from our current perspective, detect certain affinities. They contributed to an identifiable strand unintentionally. On this reading, aleatory materialism was not purposefully suppressed, by the intentional action of either author or authority. Rather the more shocking implications of some of their ideas were neutered in favour of more pedestrian interpretations, perhaps because they lacked the capacity to see them any other way, perhaps because they were just not understood.

Consequently, the safer, idealist, elements of their thought were prioritised over the ‘dangerous’, aleatory, ones.¹⁴ The references to aleatory materialism being repressed should be understood as its exclusion from view by the idealist problematic. A cogent explanation of this idea is provided in *Reading Capital*:

It is the field of the problematic that defines and structures the invisible as the defined excluded, *excluded* from the field of visibility ... new objects and problems are necessarily *invisible* in the field of the existing theory, because they are not objects of this theory, because they are *forbidden* by it ... they are invisible because they are rejected in principle, repressed from the field of the visible.¹⁵

And Althusser did seem to think that our fascination with canonical philosophers can be accounted for as the result of noticing in them something that we have been unable to render explicit.¹⁶ In this way, aleatory materialism might not just have been operating

¹¹ Althusser, ‘Underground Current’, *Philosophy of the Encounter*, 167–68.

¹² For a defence of esotericism in the Western philosophical canon see Arthur M. Melzer, *Philosophy Between the Lines* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014).

¹³ Marx, ‘Capital, Vol. I’, *MECW: Capital, Volume 1*, xxxv, 54.

¹⁴ Althusser, ‘Underground Current’, *Philosophy of the Encounter*, 168.

¹⁵ Althusser, ‘Marx’s Philosophy’, *Reading Capital*, 24.

¹⁶ Althusser, ‘Underground Current’, *Philosophy of the Encounter*, 175.

'behind the backs of the producers', but the consumers also. We are struck by what we read but are unable to conceive or articulate exactly why that is. We read these philosophers through the lens of the dominant ideology which inhibits our capacity to appreciate certain aspects of them. As Althusser said of the continual interest and perplexity that greets Machiavelli's works, 'they are gripping, but elusive and thus strange'.¹⁷

In my view, Althusser's meaning is in line with the second interpretation, which better accords with his overall perspective than the first. It is true, however, that at least some of these philosophers recognised affinities with each other long before Althusser did. It is also the case that a number of those Althusser called aleatory materialists held unorthodox views that were conceived of as dangerous in their own lifetimes—Machiavelli, Hobbes, Spinoza, and Marx all serve as examples (in which case if they were esotericists, they were bad ones). Evidently, their contemporaries did recognise something shocking about these thinkers, usually because they proposed ideas that questioned the legitimacy of prevailing institutions, and these thinkers often did take actions to hide their views. *The Prince* was not published until after Machiavelli's death, as was *Ethics* for Spinoza, which he was notoriously reluctant to show to others. In *Reading Capital* Althusser referred to Spinozism as having been repressed purposively, which it indeed was.¹⁸

Aside from my view that esotericism is methodologically suspect, as it always runs the risk of reading into the past the concerns of the present, what is decisive in leading me to adopt the second interpretation is that Althusser explicitly rejected the first in *Philosophy for Non-Philosophers* (1976–78).¹⁹ To call a philosopher an 'idealist' or 'materialist' is not dependent on their own self-understanding. Nor can any philosophy be exhaustively categorised as one or the other (because philosophy is a struggle between different positions, and thus something of the other position must be taken up by the opposing philosophy). Aleatory materialism is a third position in the schema, a tentative and incomplete attempt to move away from the kinds of questions and categories emblematic of the idealist problematic. But it can only be such a thing if it engages with, and therefore makes use of, those questions and categories.²⁰ Those under consideration wrote 'as the convinced idealists they were', but also demonstrated that they were not purely reducible to expressions of that problematic.²¹ Althusser's argument, then, is not one about the intentions of these philosophers—which is the

¹⁷ Althusser, *Machiavelli and Us*, p. 6. See also Louis Althusser, 'Machiavelli's Solitude', in *Machiavelli and Us*, 115–30 (116–17).

¹⁸ Althusser, 'Object of *Capital*', *Reading Capital*, 250. See also *ibid.*, 343.

¹⁹ Althusser, *Non-Philosophers*, 31.

²⁰ Consequently, I reject Pippa's argument that there is a conflict between aleatory materialism as a scientific underlabourer and aleatory materialism as a position in the *kampfplatz* of philosophy (Pippa, 'Althusser and Contingency', 231). Althusser does not construe aleatory materialism as true or complete; rather it fulfils a task posed by science by displacing other, inadequate, philosophical theses. When Althusser referred to aleatory materialism as a "true" materialism' (see, for examples: Althusser, 'Marxism and Philosophy', *Philosophy of the Encounter*, 256; Althusser, 'Thèses de juin', IMEC, ALT2. A29-06.04, 4) he follows up to specify that is not a totalising system, but is a position in philosophical conflict.

²¹ Althusser, *Non-Philosophers*, 31.

claim implicit in esotericist readings—but about their contribution to a current they did not necessarily appreciate.

This seems to be what Althusser was pointing to in the emphasis he placed on Machiavelli's '*dispositif*', the arrangement of the theses presented, in *Machiavelli and Us* (1986) which is the key, he argued, to unlocking the real novelty of Machiavelli's work. Theses which, taken at face value, appear to endorse ideas that are widespread and unoriginal have a different impact when viewed in their relations to one another. Althusser's claim, then, was that Machiavelli made use of existing conceptual tools to say something new by putting them into a particular arrangement, thereby modifying their meaning. What we witness here is an aleatory philosophical strategy, but without a recognition of the implications of the strategy itself.

Althusser's claims are as follows: 1) That (at least some) aleatory materialists identified a commonality with other aleatory materialists. 2) That some aleatory materialists recognised the profundity of their conclusions, in that they differed in severe ways from contemporaries or antecedents, and posed some threat to prevailing forms of social power. 3) That aleatory materialists often expressed those conclusions in unclear ways. But Althusser was also of the view that all aleatory materialists were only *partly* aleatory materialists. Present are elements of what can be called aleatory materialism, but those elements were articulated, usually as a minority current, alongside more mainstream idealist or materialist ideas.

These are, then, avowedly selective readings. For Althusser aleatory materialism is a tendency in philosophy, but one realised to varying degrees amidst other tendencies. It is in the aforementioned examples that Althusser thought aleatory materialism was most active or evident. But it might be possible, Althusser believed, to find something resembling aleatory materialism in every philosopher.²² The claim that aleatory materialism can ultimately be found in all philosophy need not destroy it as a useful category. It is enough to say that some philosophers are *more* aleatory materialist than others, and those that make up the aleatory materialist tradition proper are those that cross some qualifying threshold.

I will only partially substantiate these points here, for the reason that they are not especially consequential for Althusser's overall case. None of the fundamental arguments made under the heading of aleatory materialism hinges on Althusser's reading of the history of philosophy being correct, although Althusser did think that his interpretation of the history of philosophy was correct. Notwithstanding the infamous comments Althusser made in *The Future Lasts a Long Time* (1985) that his 'philosophical knowledge of texts was rather limited', his published correspondence contains a series of (often self-deprecating) comments about his reading of these theorists, and his published lecture notes testify to an extensive engagement with the

²² Althusser, 'Matérialisme aléatoire', *Multitudes*, 180.

subject matter.²³

While it is interesting to posit the possibility that Althusser is correct about the existence of this current he might also be read as saying that if we want to do some given thing in the present, there are some resources found in the past that can assist us. These resources might only be useful as selective misreadings. We can be creatively wrong. If that is judged to be so, then it would be of no real consequence for the substantive issues at stake in aleatory materialism. My purposes here are confined to: First, establishing that Althusser's own reading of aleatory materialism as a philosophical current is at least minimally based in things those he claims for it actually said. Second, and more importantly, to illuminate what Althusser meant by aleatory materialism by linking it to ideas likely to be already familiar to readers.

In claiming that there is an aleatory materialist tradition in the history of philosophy, Althusser was rejecting his formerly held view, put in *Reading Capital*, that 'we can regard Spinoza as Marx's only direct ancestor from the philosophical standpoint'.²⁴ In fact, Althusser now argued, Marx had many predecessors. We can identify the relevant philosophers by 'the fact that they escape, or attempt to escape, questions of origin and end, that is, in the final analysis, the question of the End or Ends of the world and human history'.²⁵ Such philosophies do 'not claim to be autonomous' from the rest of society. They renounce the idea of having provided a finalised truth, or to have located the grounds of all knowledge.²⁶

4.1.2 The Underground Current of Aleatory Materialism

Althusser traced the aleatory tradition back to a division in Greek philosophy. The classical idealist problematic, he thought, stemmed from Plato's 'friends of the Forms' and Aristotle's 'first mover'. Aristotle's claim that 'there exists a kind of eternal, unmoved substance' bears on the problem of how change is possible at all.²⁷ Either change comes from nothing, held to be an incoherent notion, or it comes from something that exists. The solution of first cause is to say that everything that will exist already exists, and change is just rearrangements of those things. Whatever happens, something persists throughout that generates change—an unmoved mover.²⁸ This, however, only follows if one presumes that the default state of a body is rest and that it is change, rather than stasis, that requires explanation. For these philosophers, something about the world was fixed, and this is what made the world possible. The task of the philosopher was to uncover the truth, viz. the unchanging reality behind the variations of the world. From here the principal line of Western philosophy is derived in both its materialist and idealist guises. This is, in essence, a perspective shared by

²³ Althusser, 'Future Lasts a Long Time', *Future Lasts a Long Time*, 165. See also: Althusser, 'Correspondance', *Philosophy of the Encounter*; Althusser, *Politique et histoire de Machiavel à Marx*; Althusser, *Cours sur Rousseau*.

²⁴ Althusser, 'Object of Capital', *Reading Capital*, 250.

²⁵ Althusser, 'Philosophy and Marxism', *Philosophy of the Encounter*, 273.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 274.

²⁷ Aristotle, *The Metaphysics*, trans. by Hugh Lawson-Tancred (Penguin Books, 1998), 375.

²⁸ Hugh Lawson-Tancred, 'Introduction', in Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, xi–lviii (xxvi–xxvii).

structuralism, as outlined in chapter 1, as well as that of dialectical materialism.

There was, Althusser contended, another way of thinking about these problems that also originated in Greek philosophy. Epicurus was Althusser's most important reference here. Very few of Epicurus' writings survive directly, but his ideas have been passed down via the Roman poet Lucretius' *On the Nature of Things (De Rerum Natura)*.²⁹ What was original in Lucretius' work and what was a restatement of Epicurus' views remains a matter of debate. Althusser referred to both in his account without clearly distinguishing between them, and it will suffice for our purposes to treat them as one.

What Epicurus denied, in Althusser's reading, is that there was any transcendental realm behind our experience of reality that underpinned it and made it intelligible and meaningful. Change does indeed emerge from, in some sense, nothing, and Althusser defended this perspective as the only way of accounting for true novelty in the world. In making these claims, Epicurus was responding to a debate about whether our actions could actually influence the future.³⁰ For Epicurean atomism, everything—philosophy, meaning, law—is *internal* to the world. It has no deeper foundation.³¹ The implication is that everything about the world is a contingent result and consequently perishable. The world is not eternal, and nothing in it persists by necessity. Thus what seemed to draw Althusser to Epicurus was his rejection of any divine will or natural law, and the corresponding assertion that all human communities and their ethical principles are contingent human creations.³²

Where Aristotle looked for the cause of all movement, Epicurus simply supposed it exists.³³ The foundational assumption of the Epicurean system is that movement is the original state of a body. Everything is, from the start, changing. The atoms that make up the world fall in the void. The swerve, or *clinamen*, is a deviation from the existing determined path of the atom, that then alters the path of others by hitting them and changing their direction.

Atomism might seem a strange place for a Marxist to draw support. Marxists have generally—Althusser included—sought to differentiate themselves from atomism in its meaning of 'a methodological stance which denies that relations—whether between individuals or between social entities—are ever genuinely explanatory'. For atomists, in this use of the term, entities are 'fully constituted non-relationally' and causation is 'strictly internal to individuals in the society in question'.³⁴ But this is one reason why Epicurus interested Althusser, for Epicurus denies that atomism in the sense just given is true. Epicurus argued that 'atoms are not only constituents but also the generative

²⁹ Lucretius, *On the Nature of Things*, trans. by Martin Ferguson Smith (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2001).

³⁰ Tim O'Keefe, *Epicurus on Freedom* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 123–52.

³¹ Althusser, 'Underground Current', *Philosophy of the Encounter*, 168–69.

³² Melissa Lane, *Greek and Roman Political Ideas* (London: Penguin, 2014), 227–32.

³³ Epicurus, *Epicurus: The Extant Remains*, trans. by Cyril Bailey (London: Oxford University Press, 1926), 25.

³⁴ Wright, Levine, and Sober, *Reconstructing Marxism*, 109–10.

principles of the world, that is not in virtue of their *individual* properties attributable to each in isolation; rather it is in virtue of the indefinite sum of atoms in motions'.³⁵ Atomism, for Althusser, provided a model of a relational ontology. Care should be taken not to confuse these two different uses of the term atomism.

Althusser's interest in Epicurus had much in common with Marx's own interest in this subject. Marx wrote his doctoral dissertation on the 'Difference Between the Democritean and Epicurean Philosophy of Nature'.³⁶ This link has hardly been remarked upon in the secondary literature. There is, as far as I am aware, no direct evidence that Althusser was inspired to turn to Greek atomism by this source, although it is plausible and he was certainly aware of this text.³⁷ Marx's thesis compared the atomist theory of Epicurus with his predecessor Democritus. In it, Marx criticised the deterministic causality of Democritus and sides with Epicurus' attempt to defend a notion of free will in atomic motion.³⁸ Cyril Bailey claims that Marx was 'probably the first' to appreciate a distinction between Democritus who, in seeing appearance as the only possible knowledge, 'regarded the true realities as remote and unknowable', and Epicurus who 'regarded the world not as a subjective appearance, but as an objective revelation'.³⁹ The parallel here with the Post-Kantian philosophy of Marx's own time is clear, and it is possible that Marx is doing no more in his dissertation than taking Epicurus' criticism of Democritus as a proxy for a Hegelian attack on mechanical materialism.⁴⁰ John Bellamy Foster, however, compellingly argues that more is going on than this and that, rather than seeing Epicurus as having introduced an idealist element, Marx was preoccupied with Epicurus' anti-teleological and non-deterministic materialism that defended the idea of contingency and, with it, freedom.⁴¹ In this case, Marx's dissertation is better understood as a materialist rebuke to Hegelianism, rather than a Hegelian critique of materialism.⁴² Foster sees Marx as having 'internalized Epicurean materialism ... within his own thinking, while *explicitly* referring back to it only on occasion'.⁴³ Thus, for Foster, Marx's encounter with Epicurus is a crucial, and underemphasised, element of Marx's intellectual development that significantly informed his philosophy.⁴⁴ Irrespective of whether Marx's dissertation pushed Althusser in this direction, in turning to Epicurus Althusser was resuming a line of thought that Marx had initiated during his early intellectual formation.

³⁵ Pierre-Marie Morel, 'Epicurean Atomism', in *The Cambridge Companion to Epicureanism*, ed. by James Warren (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 65–83 (82).

³⁶ Karl Marx, 'Difference Between the Democritean and Epicurean Philosophy of Nature', in Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Marx-Engels Collected Works: Marx, 1835–43* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1975), 1, 25–106.

³⁷ See Althusser, 'Introduction', *For Marx*, 35.

³⁸ David McLellan, *The Thought of Karl Marx* (London: Papermac, 1980), 7.

³⁹ Cyril Bailey, 'Karl Marx on Greek Atomism', *The Classical Quarterly*, 22:3/4 (1928), 205–6 (205).

⁴⁰ Tony Burns, 'Materialism in Ancient Greek Philosophy and in the Writings of the Young Marx', *Historical Materialism*, 7:1 (2000), 3–39.

⁴¹ Marx, 'Democritean and Epicurean Philosophy of Nature', *MECW: 1835–43*, 1, 46–53.

⁴² John Stanley, 'The Marxism of Marx's Doctoral Dissertation', *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, 33:1 (1995), 133–58.

⁴³ Foster, *Marx's Ecology*, 61.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 51–65.

Epicurus provided Althusser with the central metaphor he used to expound aleatory materialism: the ‘rain of atoms’. In Althusser’s reading of Epicurus ‘before the formation of the world, an infinity of atoms were falling parallel to each other in the void’.⁴⁵ They had no original cause. Any inquiry into this is scientifically meaningless. No true or false answer can be given. It must simply be supposed that movement had always existed. It is a swerve in the path of one of the atoms that produces change. A swerve may produce an *encounter* between atoms that had previously been falling together in parallel. It is in this encounter that a world is born.

Aside from the Greek atomists—Democritus, Epicurus, and Lucretius—Althusser argued the same line of thought can be detected in (at least) the pre-Socratics, the Sophists, Socrates, Machiavelli, Hobbes, Pascal, Spinoza, Rousseau, Kant, Clausewitz, Stirner, Kierkegaard, Marx, Nietzsche, Freud, Wittgenstein, Heidegger, Deleuze, and Derrida.⁴⁶ Althusser made little attempt to justify most of these cases. I will confine myself here to examining a few of those that he did write about.

Machiavelli is the only thinker Althusser named as an aleatory materialist that he examined as such at length, in *Machiavelli and Us* (1986).⁴⁷ Others have further tried to substantiate Althusser’s interpretation.⁴⁸ Machiavelli is important for Althusser because *The Prince* is, in Althusser’s reading, a political manifesto that acts within a particular conjuncture in order to effect an *encounter*. The various components amenable to forming a nation-state supposedly existed in Italy but, like Epicurus’ atoms falling within the void, they existed ‘*without connections* between them’.⁴⁹ The various elements for a new form of polity on the Apennine Peninsula were present, but they were not in contact with one another. In order to bring them together—to produce an encounter between them—there had to be political action. Between the elements lay an empty space: ‘empty so as to have inserted in it the action of the individual or group who will come and take a stand there’.⁵⁰ This was, for Althusser, a brilliant example of aleatory reason. Machiavelli forewent claims about necessity, inevitability, and cyclical returns to the past in favour of an agency that might produce, given what existed, a result without precedent in Italy.⁵¹ Prevailing norms and values—they might be constraints on or enablers of certain actions—were treated only instrumentally. Machiavelli ‘does not confront religion with the question of its origin and religious credentials. He considers it from an exclusively political, factual point of view’.⁵² Thus he treats the dominant ideology not as an ultimate truth to be adhered to, but as a

⁴⁵ Althusser, ‘Underground Current’, *Philosophy of the Encounter*, 168.

⁴⁶ Ibid, 167–68, 189; Althusser, ‘Philosophy and Marxism’, *Philosophy of the Encounter*, 261, 273; Althusser, ‘Only Materialist Tradition: Spinoza’, *New Spinoza*, 3; Althusser, ‘Machiavel’, *L’Avenir dure longtemps*, 491; Althusser, ‘Matérialisme aléatoire’, *Multitudes*, 180; Althusser, ‘Sur l’histoire’, *Écrits sur l’histoire*, 279.

⁴⁷ Althusser, *Machiavelli and Us*.

⁴⁸ I provided a comprehensive list of the existing literature on Althusser’s Machiavelli on page 14 footnote 55 above. See, in particular, Lahtinen, *Politics and Philosophy*.

⁴⁹ Althusser, ‘Underground Current’, *Philosophy of the Encounter*, 171.

⁵⁰ Althusser, *Machiavelli and Us*, 20.

⁵¹ Machiavelli did, of course, seem to subscribe to a cyclical view of history, but Althusser maintained that when this is looked at in the context of other remarks, the result is not cyclical, but aleatory; *ibid*, 37–44.

⁵² *Ibid*, 90.

justification for the present order that hindered change.

Althusser ascribed to Machiavelli an appreciation that his text was at once analytical and normative. It sought to bring about a result which did not yet exist by commencing with what was available and then pointing to what would need to be introduced (*The Prince*). Machiavelli wrote about *The Prince* in general terms, Althusser argued, because it references a placeholder, not a specific prince. The Prince goes unnamed because they do not exist yet: *The Prince* seeks to bring *The Prince* into being. Machiavelli rejected all the existing political forms and agents and thinks with ‘nothing’, as in no thing that currently exists. Machiavelli was not looking to existing princes, but to the margins, at the edge of the existing system. The Prince could be anyone, from anywhere.⁵³ Where Epicurus, for Althusser, set the philosophical scene, Machiavelli is credited as being the first to draw out the political implications. What Machiavelli does is renounce the quest for transcendental foundations for political settlements. He emphasises instead the contingent construction of every order: a political counterpart to an aleatory conception of social structures.

It is from this empty space between the atoms—what Althusser called the void (again following Epicurus)—that Machiavelli sought the political action that would constitute the swerve. Machiavelli’s Prince is nameless: ‘the great adventure begins apart from everything that actually exists, hence in an unknown [sic] place with an unknown man’.⁵⁴ But it is not only that the encounter may not happen if the agent does not materialise, it is also that the encounter may not last. It is only via a state and its transformation of force into law that the encounter can endure over time. Machiavelli has long been read as placing power above morality, and this is exactly what Althusser credited him with comprehending: that ethics are internal to the world, and thus to reason in their terms is to reason in ideology. Machiavelli ‘makes religion an instrument of politics, subordinates morality to political practice’.⁵⁵ These may be required for the stability of the world, but precisely because of that in order to create a new world it is necessary to think outside of them—in the void.⁵⁶

Althusser had long had an affinity for Spinoza and his novel theories of knowledge, subject, and structure based on a rejection of the Cartesian problematic. Spinoza was undoubtedly one of Althusser’s main sources for the eventual formulation of aleatory materialism. Spinoza himself displayed a preference for the Greek atomists over Plato and Aristotle, indicating that he saw a similar commonality to the one Althusser later

⁵³ Ibid, 76–78.

⁵⁴ Ibid, 80.

⁵⁵ Ibid, 29.

⁵⁶ Althusser, ‘Underground Current’, *Philosophy of the Encounter*, 173.

detected.⁵⁷ Spinoza was also, as Althusser knew, an admirer of Machiavelli.⁵⁸

In making God coextensive with nature, Spinoza attacked the transcendental viewpoint of idealism. Spinoza responded to the Cartesian view that there were two types of substance in the world—mind and matter—by arguing that there could only be one. God, for Descartes, provided the guarantee that mind and matter could be reliably connected with one another (mind could know matter). Descartes took mind and matter to be separate substances because the existence of one did not require the existence of the other. What had gone unrecognised, in Spinoza's view, is that this implied that any substance must be the cause of itself. One substance cannot be the cause of another substance by definition, therefore a substance must be *causa sui*.⁵⁹ Consequently, according to Spinoza, a substance must be without limits—it *is necessarily infinite*.⁶⁰ It is everything that is and will be—as Althusser put it, 'without exterior'.⁶¹ To believe otherwise would mean that an external cause influenced the substance and must be referenced in a definition of it, thereby disqualifying such a thing from being a substance. Further, to say a substance is without external cause is the same as saying that it existed *necessarily*.⁶² Everything in the world is an aspect of this substance, and it is this substance that Spinoza calls God, synonymous with nature. The hallmark of Spinozism was, as Israel describes, the claim that 'Nature is self-moving, and creates itself', a view that was widely recognised as a profound rupture with an understanding of the world as subject to divine guide, and consequently 'regarded with horror'.⁶³

Althusser argued that the difference in philosophical strategy between Descartes and Spinoza is as follows. Descartes commenced with the subject, and through the method of radical doubt ended up with God as the guarantee of the connection between ideas and reality. This was illustrative of ends as a reflection of origins: a form of circular reasoning. Just as Althusser had argued that 'there can only be such a multitude of possible religious subjects on the absolute condition that there is a Unique, Absolute, *Other Subject*, i.e. God' so it is because God can know that the subject can know.⁶⁴ The subject is only possible as an instance of the Subject. The origin is a reflection of the

⁵⁷ Benedictus de Spinoza, 'Letter 56', in *The Collected Works of Spinoza*, ed. & trans. by Edwin Curley (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), II, 420–24 (423); I owe the point to Caroline Williams. See Williams, 'Althusser and Spinoza', *Encountering Althusser*, 161.

Epicurus was, via Lucretius, also an important influence on Machiavelli (see: Alison Brown, *The Return of Lucretius to Renaissance Florence* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), 68–87; Alison Brown, 'Lucretian Naturalism and the Evolution of Machiavelli's Ethics', in *Radical Machiavelli*, 105–27; Jain, 'The Atomic Prince') and Marx (see Marx, 'Democritean and Epicurean Philosophy of Nature', *MECW: 1835–43*, 25–105).

⁵⁸ Althusser, 'Underground Current', *Philosophy of the Encounter*, 176; Althusser, *Machiavelli and Us*, 6; Althusser, 'Machiavel', *L'Avenir dure longtemps*, 490; Benedictus de Spinoza, 'Political Treatise', in *Collected Works*, II, 503–604 (531).

⁵⁹ Benedictus de Spinoza, 'Ethics', in *The Collected Works of Spinoza*, ed. & trans. by Edwin Curley (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), I, 408–617 (411–12).

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 412–13.

⁶¹ Althusser, 'Only Materialist Tradition: Spinoza', *New Spinoza*, 11.

⁶² Spinoza, 'Ethics', *Collected Works*, I, 412; Valtteri Viljanen, 'Spinoza's Ontology', in *The Cambridge Companion to Spinoza's Ethics*, ed. by Olli Koistinen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 56–78 (72–74).

⁶³ Israel, *Radical Enlightenment*, 160.

⁶⁴ Althusser, 'Ideology', *Lenin and Philosophy*, 121.

ends and vice versa. Spinoza tried to escape this circle by taking ‘up his position *in God*’ as opposed to a path that leads *to God*.⁶⁵ By doing so Spinoza took over ‘the chief stronghold of his adversary ... and redispersed the theoretical fortress in such a way as to turn it’ against his adversary, which is to say that Spinoza performed the kind of manoeuvre that Althusser had argued for as constituent of the practice of philosophy—a kind of theoretical combat in which one must occupy the positions of the opponent (see 3.1.1).⁶⁶ Spinoza’s strategy was to take Cartesian axioms and use them to demonstrate the failure of Cartesian conclusions.

God for Spinoza is not a transcendental realm which serves as the ultimate guarantee of epistemology, ontology, and ethics but ‘an absolute, unique, infinite substance, endowed with an infinite number of infinite attributes’.⁶⁷ This is, for Althusser, another instance of reasoning in the void. To say Spinoza begins from within God is to say that he begins from within the whole, philosophy as a part of society rather than above it. In Althusser’s interpretation, Spinoza’s philosophy does not survey the whole from a birds-eye view. It takes up a vantage point necessarily limited by its position within what it attempts to appraise. Spinoza thus renounced the possibility of providing a *totalising* discourse that can exhaustively account for all the possibilities of the world.

Althusser made the seemingly paradoxical claim that ‘saying that one “begins with God”, or the Whole, or the unique substance, and making it understood that one “begins with nothing”, is, basically, the same thing’.⁶⁸ While there is a difference, that I think Althusser justified effectively, between reasoning *on the whole* and reasoning *in the whole*, and this is a viable methodological difference between idealist and aleatory philosophy, it is not immediately clear how the latter would amount to ‘beginning with nothing’. This equivalence between reasoning from within the whole and beginning with nothing can, however, help us better establish what Althusser meant by this.

The idea of beginning with nothing is opaque because if an idea is to be communicated intelligibly one cannot say everything at once. It is necessary to begin somewhere. As Marx remarked in the *Grundrisse*: ‘all the *solid* assumptions themselves become fluid in the course of the analysis. But it is only by fixing them at the outset that one can undertake the analysis without confounding everything’.⁶⁹ However suspect beginnings might be the claim that we can avoid one entirely is not an especially cogent one. My interpretation is that what Althusser meant with this phrase was just another way of saying that the aleatory materialist must avoid taking up a transcendental standpoint that purports to capture the whole exhaustively. Spinoza “begins with nothing” because, for him, there is no outside to the Whole—before it ‘there is nothing’.⁷⁰ Evidently, there is always *something*. Althusser surely thought this since he rejected the problem of beginnings—of first cause—as meaningless and invoked, instead, the rain of

⁶⁵ Althusser, ‘Underground Current’, *Philosophy of the Encounter*, 176.

⁶⁶ Althusser, ‘Only Materialist Tradition: Spinoza’, *New Spinoza*, 11.

⁶⁷ Althusser, ‘Underground Current’, *Philosophy of the Encounter*, 177.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 176.

⁶⁹ Karl Marx, ‘Outlines of the Critique of Political Economy (Rough Draft of 1857–58) [Second Instalment]’, in *MECW: 1857–1861*, xxix, 5–255 (196–97).

⁷⁰ Althusser, ‘Underground Current’, *Philosophy of the Encounter*, 176, 179.

atoms as always-already present. It might be better to state the view as: before it there is nothing *of it*. To reason in the void is then to do two things: First to reason in the ‘absence of cause, principle, essence, origin, etc., absence of ontological and ethical principles’—without transcendental laws that provide ultimate constraints on possibilities. Second, to reflect ‘on the real void, factual and conjunctural’—comprehension of the immediate circumstances that do provide constraints on possibilities.⁷¹

Spinoza’s parallelism also served Althusser with an example of the concept of the aleatory encounter in epistemology. Descartes offered a ‘divine guarantee’ that knowledge was secure—we know that mind could connect with matter because of God.⁷² Spinoza, on the other hand, thought that mind and matter are simply different ways of looking at the same thing. Subjects and objects are not to be understood as different types of entity. They have a homologous structure. Therefore, Spinoza says, ‘*the order and connection of ideas is the same as the order and connection of things*’.⁷³ There are two thoughts contained in this statement: first that causation and logic have the same structure, second that ideas and the objects they are ideas of have no causal interaction with each other.⁷⁴ They are different *attributes* of a single reality. The two do not come into contact, but neither is one more *real* than the other—hence, parallel.⁷⁵

Althusser called this ‘a *parallelism without encounter*, yet a parallelism that is already, in itself, *encounter* thanks to the very structure of the relationship between different elements of each attribute’.⁷⁶ The novelty here is that Spinoza set up a theory of knowledge that renounced the idea of a theory of knowledge which guaranteed its own success. For Spinoza, knowledge could never be completely secure—and even if it were, we could not know that it was. Insofar as there is an encounter between the attributes of thought and extension it is always at risk of coming apart again: knowledge is always subject to being overturned, not just at the minor level of qualification but by a ‘paradigm shift’ in problematic. Just as Machiavelli gave an exposition of this idea in political philosophy, so Spinoza did in epistemology. By doing so, Althusser claimed, Spinoza dissolved ‘*the problem of knowledge*’ of Western idealist philosophy.⁷⁷

Nietzsche has been grouped alongside Marx and Freud, two of Althusser’s most important influences, as a ‘master of suspicion’ for sharing the view, common to all three, that the subject was not transparent to itself, that there was no reliable way of knowing consciousness was in touch with reality. As Paul Ricoeur put it ‘the philosopher trained in the school of Descartes knows that things are doubtful, that they are not such as they appear; but he does not doubt that consciousness is such as it appears to itself;

⁷¹ Althusser, ‘Machiavel’, *L’Avenir dure longtemps*, 490; my translation.

⁷² Althusser, ‘Only Materialist Tradition: Spinoza’, *New Spinoza*, 5.

⁷³ Spinoza, ‘Ethics’, *Collected Works*, I, 451.

⁷⁴ Sharp, ‘Force of Ideas in Spinoza’, *Political Theory*, 737.

⁷⁵ Althusser, ‘Is it Simple’, *Spontaneous Philosophy*, 227–28; Althusser, *Marxist in Philosophy*, 65–66.

⁷⁶ Althusser, ‘Underground Current’, *Philosophy of the Encounter*, 177.

⁷⁷ *Ibid*, 177.

in consciousness, meaning and consciousness of meaning coincide'.⁷⁸ Nietzsche, as with Marx and Freud, rejected the Cartesian problematic. Nietzsche's view of morality as grounded in power rather than the structure of reality, and his attack on classical philosophical concepts, makes him an obvious candidate for admission to the pantheon of aleatory materialists.⁷⁹ Nietzsche, like Althusser, thought 'that life is best conceived of as a chaotic dynamic process without any stability and direction'.⁸⁰ If there is something to explain here it is why Althusser gave Nietzsche comparatively little attention, particularly in light of that bestowed on him by Althusser's contemporaries in the French philosophical scene.⁸¹

There are, however, some rather more surprising candidates for the current of aleatory materialism. Thomas Hobbes, for example, features prominently in Althusser's account. Althusser had formerly attacked Hobbes along with Rousseau and Locke, as one would expect a Marxist to do, for pre-supposing a certain kind of subject in order to provide the evidence for the legitimacy of the kind of society that produced those subjects. This social contractualist tradition serves as an example of the link between origin and ends.⁸² In 'Underground Current' Althusser highlighted, however, something akin to Epicurean atomism in the work of both Hobbes and Rousseau.

For Hobbes, Althusser argued, the state of nature is composed of atomic individuals moving in the void. The state of nature is also their state of freedom—the absence of impediments to their movement. The problem—the war 'of every man, against every man'—enters when the path of the individual, her descent through the void, is blocked by another: there is an encounter. 'Men have no pleasure', Hobbes wrote, '(but on the contrary a greate deale of grieffe) in keeping company'.⁸³ Absent a framework of law encounters between individuals resulted in violence, as each individual pursued her own ends at the expense of all others. The only means by which one of the encountering atoms can continue its journey is by removing the obstacle the other presents. Natural right, for Hobbes, is a right to *everything*, that is it is merely licence to do as one chooses without concern for any other—a right of self-preservation by any means necessary.⁸⁴

Society is the result of the recognition that it is better, in a crowded world, to regulate these encounters and render them durable. The Leviathan state takes over as the supreme authority. It creates law so as to organise the interactions of the atoms. Right, Hobbes argued, is the freedom to do as one sees fit in order to secure self-preservation.

⁷⁸ Paul Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation*, trans. by Denis Savage (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970), 33.

⁷⁹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, ed. by Carol Diethe, trans. by Keith Ansell-Pearson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994); Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, ed. by Rolf-Peter Horstmann and Judith Norman, trans. by Judith Norman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

⁸⁰ Rolf-Peter Horstmann, 'Introduction', in Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, vii–xxviii (xvi).

⁸¹ See, for example, Gilles Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, trans. by Hugh Tomlinson (London: Athlone Press, 1983).

⁸² Althusser, 'Marx in His Limits', *Philosophy of the Encounter*, 61–63; Althusser, *Non-Philosophers*, 72–77.

⁸³ Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. by Richard Tuck (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 88.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 91.

Law, on the other hand, is the obligation not to transgress the rights of others. By transforming right into law, the encounters ‘take’ into a stable configuration in which the atoms fall through the void together. In making this bargain, the individuals cede everything to the state: no appeal can be made to a principle of right beyond the existing society in order to exit it. Judgements of good or bad, virtue and vice, only having meaning with that common authority that is created with society. Morality is *internal* to the society that has been created. The power of the Leviathan is absolute—it is not limited by any principle that precedes or exceeds it. Because we are only compelled to act on our promises when we are within a society, and society itself is a form of promise, a contract between individuals, breaching the social contract is unjust and thus the Leviathan can levy punishment accordingly. Hobbes endorsed, Althusser argued, ‘*the aleatory constitution of a world*’, grounded as it is not in transcendental principles but in an attempt to make encounters lasting and productive rather than short and destructive.⁸⁵

Althusser found a similar conception in the state of nature of Rousseau’s *Discourse on the Origin and Basis of Inequality Among Men*. Rousseau contested Hobbes’ account of the state of nature and claimed, instead, that it was not full of encounters, but a largely solitary existence. Hobbes was right, Rousseau argued, to suppose that morality is a convention of society but wrong to conclude ‘that man is naturally evil just because he has no idea of goodness’.⁸⁶ Althusser contended that where the other major social contractualists of the period reflected onto the state of nature something about the societies they lived in—for Hobbes, writing during the Thirty Years and English Civil Wars, the state of nature is a state of war, and for Locke, writing slightly later at the height of the mercantilist era, it is an arena of trade—only Rousseau offers up a state of nature genuinely free of social relations, ‘whether positive or negative’.⁸⁷ The atoms fell in the void alone, where the void is ‘the absence of all relation’.⁸⁸ The occasional encounters between them are neither destructive nor constructive; they simply meet and go their separate ways. It is in what Althusser called Rousseau’s “‘*state of pure nature*” that peace prevails for the atoms continue on their path without obstruction. This is contrasted with Rousseau’s “‘*state of nature*” which occurs after enough private property has been claimed to cause a war of all against all but before the solidification of regulatory institutions.⁸⁹ In the pure state, people act purely out of instinct. Advances in knowledge are fleeting and quickly forgotten. For knowledge to progress cumulatively there must be encounters and they must endure: ‘in instinct alone man had all he needed for living in a state of nature; in cultivated reason he has what is

⁸⁵ Althusser, ‘Underground Current’, *Philosophy of the Encounter*, 183.

⁸⁶ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *A Discourse on Inequality*, trans. by Maurice Cranston (London: Penguin, 1984), 98.

⁸⁷ Althusser, ‘Underground Current’, *Philosophy of the Encounter*, 184. See Rousseau, *Discourse on Inequality*, 125.

⁸⁸ Althusser, ‘Underground Current’, *Philosophy of the Encounter*, 176.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 184. Cf. ‘the idea of property, depending on many prior ideas which could only have arisen in successive stages, was not formed all at once in the human mind. It was necessary for men to make much progress, to acquire much industry and knowledge, to transmit and increase it from age to age, before arriving at this final stage of the state of nature’; Rousseau, *Discourse on Inequality*, 109.

necessary only for living in society'.⁹⁰ In the pure state, where encounters are brief, nothing lasts; 'there was neither education or progress, the generations multiplied uselessly, and as each began afresh from the same starting-point, centuries rolled on as underdeveloped as the first ages; the species was already old, and man remained eternally a child'.⁹¹

To move from, what Althusser called, this 'radical absence of society' to society 'the *state of encounter has to be imposed* on people'.⁹² The transition from the pure state of nature to society is not inevitable, but the consequence of increasing encounters. The pure state—the void—is, however, the condition of possibility for all other possibilities. Althusser read Rousseau as saying that it is when men are spatially constrained that the encounters increase and social institutions begin to emerge. Natural disasters forced men together, and those on islands developed language sooner than their continental counterparts, who had lots of room with which to avoid each other.⁹³ It is because of Rousseau's use of natural disasters as a device to show why people began to co-operate that Althusser attributed to him use of the concept of the swerve.⁹⁴ This seems to me less critical to Rousseau's account than Althusser made it. It is sufficient to invoke the idea that encounters lead to other encounters—a pile-up of the atoms. Each encounter held the possibility of producing another move in that direction even if most tended not to. Assuming society is one possible outcome, if enough encounters happen then society might be the eventual result.

This is how, Rousseau said, 'everything begins to change its aspect. Men who had previously been wandering around in the woods ... come gradually to unite together'.⁹⁵ The encounters eventually produced agriculture and a chain-reaction which led to property: 'from the cultivation of land, its division eventually followed, and from property once recognized arose the first rules of justice'.⁹⁶ This pattern became generalised across the world as the pooling of resources in one society forced others to do the same in response.⁹⁷ Thus Rousseau moves from what he calls 'natural liberty', the atoms falling freely through the void, to a social structure, an encounter that has taken hold and lasted.⁹⁸ People are solitary to begin with, and happy to be. It is, Althusser argued, this 'process of accumulation and change that literally *creates socialized human nature*' for Rousseau.⁹⁹ Rousseau complained that 'many authors have hastened to conclude that man is naturally cruel and needs civil institutions to make him peaceable' as a result of observing 'savage' societies. But this is not so, for 'in truth nothing is more peaceable than man in his primitive state'.¹⁰⁰ What was being

⁹⁰ Ibid, 97.

⁹¹ Ibid, 105.

⁹² Althusser, 'Underground Current', *Philosophy of the Encounter*, 184–85.

⁹³ Rousseau, *Discourse on Inequality*, 113.

⁹⁴ Althusser, 'Underground Current', *Philosophy of the Encounter*, 185. See also Althusser, *Marxist in Philosophy*, 84–85.

⁹⁵ Rousseau, *Discourse on Inequality*, 113.

⁹⁶ Ibid, 117.

⁹⁷ Ibid, 122.

⁹⁸ Ibid, 122.

⁹⁹ Althusser, 'Underground Current', *Philosophy of the Encounter*, 185.

¹⁰⁰ Rousseau, *Discourse on Inequality*, 114–15.

observed in these societies was not beings outside of social structures, the pure state of nature, but already socialised beings, encumbered with concepts of property and morality. The disposition towards violence found with Hobbes that necessitated the formation of a state was, according to Rousseau, the consequence of an already established form of social structure.

This is where, Althusser argued, *The Social Contract* fitted into the picture.¹⁰¹ *The Social Contract* did not derive its theory from an original state of being (the pure state of nature). It reasons within the conjuncture: given some given fact(s) about the world—in this case, the solidification of a property-based social structure—it poses the best possible world. Rousseau's *Social Contract* is not then an example of utopian thought but of a pragmatic embrace of existing conditions and taking their 'inner law' to its conclusion.¹⁰² And as Leopold notes 'whereas the young Marx thinks of the good society as the cumulative result of historical development, Rousseau thinks of its arrival as a wholly exceptional hiatus in the course of history'.¹⁰³ The society of the General Will is not inevitable culmination, but the product of a swerve and a new encounter.

Objections to Althusser's readings may be raised in all instances. Hobbes, for example, evoked a 'generall rule of Reason, *That every man, ought to endeavour Peace*' in order to provide an explanation for why people would want to exit the state of nature in the first place.¹⁰⁴ Reason shows us that our natural right to self-preservation can only be fulfilled in society, and thus we are compelled to leave the state of nature. Rebellion would be wrong not merely because the absolutist state decrees it, but because it 'is a rule of reason, by which we are forbidden to do any thing destructive to our life'. By returning us to a state of war, rebellion is in contradiction with reason.¹⁰⁵ Hobbes' view was not just that given some existing conditions this is the right course of action. The claim is stronger than this. Hobbes appeals to something outside of society, viz. a transhistorical conception of reason, and he does so in order to justify the unlimited power of the state. All roads lead to the Leviathan state, and things could not be otherwise. Hobbes can be seen as an aleatory materialist, and simultaneously as an idealist (at least in the Althusserian sense for Hobbes endorses materialism in its conventional meaning) who structured his conception such that the absolutist state was a necessary entity.

Spinoza, for his part, left no room for contingency, and thus no other possible worlds—thereby working against precisely the point Althusser was trying to make.¹⁰⁶ Spinoza presents us with a strong determinism. It might seem strange, then, to think Spinoza would have something significant to add to Marxism and, in particular, to a Marxist such as Althusser who was trying to escape mechanistic formulations of historical

¹⁰¹ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, trans. by Maurice Cranston (London: Penguin, 2004).

¹⁰² Althusser, 'Underground Current', *Philosophy of the Encounter*, 186–87.

¹⁰³ David Leopold, *The Young Karl Marx: German Philosophy, Modern Politics, and Human Flourishing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 266.

¹⁰⁴ Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 92.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 91.

¹⁰⁶ Spinoza, 'Ethics', *Collected Works*, I, 433–34.

materialism. Althusser is, however, no more a social contractualist or an authoritarian for having drawn on Hobbes. He need not endorse Spinozist determinism in order to find Spinoza's philosophical strategy ingenious.

The big, and somewhat inexplicable, omission here is Hegel. There is a passage in 'The Only Materialist Tradition' (1985) where Althusser drew a parallel between Spinoza's relation to Descartes and Hegel's relation to Kant, arguing that both Spinoza and Hegel try to escape the '*transcendental subjectivist*' epistemological position of their counterpart.¹⁰⁷ Althusser invoked, again, the process without a subject or goal. As we saw in the last chapter, Althusser argued that this concept was central to the Hegelian system, that, for Hegel, movement was intrinsic and not derivative, like Epicurus and unlike Aristotle. But he never explicitly labelled Hegel an aleatory materialist despite ample opportunity to do so. As I demonstrated in 3.2.1 Althusser, in his pre-aleatory writings, argued for the presence of the type of materialism that he would come to call aleatory in Hegel's work. Indeed, as Pippa has shown, the motivating concerns that would lead Althusser towards aleatory materialism are first found in his doctoral dissertation 'On Content in the Thought of G. W. F. Hegel' (1949), where he saw Hegel 'as the philosopher who ... posed the need to think of the subject and the object without opposing them'.¹⁰⁸ This remains an unresolved puzzle.

4.2 Concepts of Aleatory Materialism

In place of the conceptual framework of dialectical materialism—contradiction, synthesis, negation—Althusser proposed a new set of categories: swerve, void, encounter, atom, and take. In this section I will explicate these.

The idea of the swerve is to defend agency against determinism. The atoms are falling in the void according to some causal law. A swerve is a deviation from an atom's path. By making this swerve the atom initiates a pile-up, a further set of collisions between the falling atoms. In the absence of the swerve the atoms fall straight down—they rain—which is to say that they follow pre-determined, predictable paths.¹⁰⁹ The swerve breaks the chain of deterministic causality. Thus what the swerve tells us is that contingency is a property of the atoms themselves that cannot be totally suppressed by the structural configurations in which they exist. The novel idea that Althusser attributed to Epicurus was 'that the origin of every world, and therefore of all reality and all meaning, is due to a swerve, and that Swerve, not Reason or Cause, is the origin of the world'.¹¹⁰ As I will argue, this statement does not amount to a rejection of realism. The claim being made is that agency is a genuine source of change and that change is not a contribution to an *a priori* schema. The act that constitutes the swerve is not epiphenomenal of something underlying it.

¹⁰⁷ Althusser, 'Only Materialist Tradition: Spinoza', *New Spinoza*, 5.

¹⁰⁸ Pippa, 'Althusser and Contingency', p. 26. See also *ibid*, 17–40. For Althusser's doctoral dissertation see Louis Althusser, 'On Content in the Thought of G. W. F. Hegel', in *Spectre of Hegel*, 17–172.

¹⁰⁹ Althusser, 'Underground Current', *Philosophy of the Encounter*, 168.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid*, 169. Cf. Lucretius, *Nature of Things*, 41.

The shift in how Althusser discussed this idea between Epicurus and Machiavelli shows that this is the correct interpretation. When Althusser examines Epicurus he says that the swerve simply occurs: “no one knows where, or when, or how”.¹¹¹ On this reading, it is pure randomness, and also unintelligible. Machiavelli, on the other hand, understood that ‘it was necessary *to create the conditions for a swerve*, and thus an encounter’.¹¹² The swerve in the Machiavellian sense is not just something that happens, it is something that is made. And it is something that is brought about in contravention of *laws*. Thus for the swerve to be possible laws (in the political sense) and regularities (in the economic and social senses) cannot exhaustively determine the potential actions that can be taken. There must be some kind of excess that is not controlled by them.

The function of the swerve for Epicurus is contested in the literature.¹¹³ The dominant interpretation until relatively recently was that its role was to defend a view of individuals as moral agents, responsible for their own actions, against psychological determinism. Read in this way it is something that takes place *within* the individual: ‘the atoms in the soul are capable of swerving, and it is somehow through or via these swerves that the soul becomes capable of volition’.¹¹⁴ This is beside the point for Althusser. The idea of the swerve for Althusser (as O’Keefe argues it was for Epicurus) is to protect the contingency of the future: the idea that actions can have an effect that would not have otherwise have occurred if those actions had not been taken. The swerve is better understood, for Althusser, not as a response to a psychological problem but to a structure/agency problem. As I explained above, ‘atomism’ here is not concordant with its common usage as methodological individualism and it is not the individual with which Althusser is principally concerned.¹¹⁵ An ‘agent’, in this sense, might be an individual (Machiavelli’s Prince) but it might be a collective (Gramsci’s Modern Prince).

The swerve’s role, in aleatory materialism, is to provide the means by which to show that the trajectory of history could have (in the past) been otherwise and can (in the future) go in different directions. The fact that a swerve *may* occur constitutes a denial that the law-governed nature of the world is exhaustive: we cannot know with complete certainty that an atom will continue to fall as it presently is, for a swerve could occur and alter its position. As Derrida put it, the swerve ‘introduces the play of necessity and chance into what could be called, by anachronism, the determinism of the universe’.¹¹⁶ Without the swerve the world would be merely mechanical repetition—the predictable and stable course of the atoms through the void. What swerves can induce is the birth

¹¹¹ Althusser, ‘Underground Current’, *Philosophy of the Encounter*, 169.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 171.

¹¹³ See: Walter G. Englert, *Epicurus on the Swerve and Voluntary Action* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1987), 1–7; O’Keefe, *Epicurus and Freedom*, 14–17.

¹¹⁴ Daniel C. Russell, ‘Epicurus and Lucretius on Saving Agency’, *Phoenix*, 54:3/4 (2000), 226–43 (226).

¹¹⁵ On methodological individualism see Elster, *Making Sense of Marx*, 5–8; in Elster’s definition it is ‘the doctrine that all social phenomena—their structure and their change—are in principle explicable in ways that only involve individuals—their properties, their goals, their beliefs and their actions’.

¹¹⁶ Jacques Derrida, ‘My Chances/Mes Chances: A Rendezvous with Some Epicurean Stereophonies’, in *Taking Chances: Derrida, Psychoanalysis, and Literature*, ed. by Joseph H. Smith and William Kerrigan (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1984), 1–32 (8).

of new worlds—new configurations of the atoms following a new course through the void. Althusser presented a model with which to envisage becoming that replaces the dialectical schema.

I will now further unpack what Althusser means by the void—the ‘absence of cause, principle, essence, origin, etc., absence of ontological and ethical principles’.¹¹⁷ The void has three roles for Althusser. First, it is a philosophical strategy, a response to the supposition of an origin. Second, it is an ontological claim, that aleatory materialism thinks in the void by eschewing any claim to an origin, the view that before and outside of the world there is ‘nothing’. Third, it yields a theory of structure and conjuncture.

The atoms fall within this void, and it is also the location of their encounters. To say that the encounters take place within this void is to say that the results of those encounters are not guaranteed with any certainty. The void in this way functions as a philosophical concept to displace the notions of origin, essence, and teleology that Althusser thought had structured Marxist discourse. Morfino is right to understand the void as a thought device: ‘it is the concept necessary for thinking fluctuation; it is the absence of any plan before the encounter among elements. The void has no meaning in itself’.¹¹⁸ The void, for Althusser, is a philosophical abstraction, something that does not exist introduced by philosophy in order for it to be able to think about what does exist. The purpose is not to present a philosophical abstraction that is itself purported to be true, as it is for idealism, but to present a philosophical abstraction that will clear the way for knowledge by dislodging idealist alternatives. The difference is that where idealist philosophy posits the presence of meaning aleatory materialism assumes its absence.

The events of history, Althusser said, are moments when ‘the dice are tossed on the gaming table’.¹¹⁹ The gambling metaphor is instructive: there is a stake—something to win or lose. The agent might succeed, they might not. The possibilities of the dice are not infinite. They are constrained by the number of faces on each die and the number of die in play. There are strategies to gambling. It helps to know how to play the game, and deploying specific techniques can influence outcomes. But the structure of the game is such that there remains some element outside of our control. Therefore, we cannot know the outcome in advance of casting the dice. We may be able to know the range of possible outcomes. We can modify our actions based on that knowledge. Outside of cheating, however, no action can *guarantee* that the gambler will win—the dice are cast in the void, where ‘nothing determines, no principle of decision determines this alternative in advance’.¹²⁰ Nevertheless, we should be wary about pushing the metaphor too far. Given precise knowledge about the dice (their shape and weight) and how it is cast (the flick of the wrist), the consequences are entirely predictable ones.

The concept of the void thus emphasises that the prevailing laws ‘represent only one possible configuration of the effects of an encounter that remains without cause or

¹¹⁷ Althusser, ‘Machiavel’, *L’Avenir dure longtemps*, 490; my translation.

¹¹⁸ Morfino, *Plural Temporality*, 99.

¹¹⁹ Althusser, ‘Underground Current’, *Philosophy of the Encounter*, 172.

¹²⁰ *Ibid*, 174.

reason', as Bourdin has put it.¹²¹ They could have been and can be otherwise. The current configuration is secured by nothing deeper than its own institutions, which protect it as best they can against mutation. But "a throw of the dice will never abolish chance". As Althusser said, 'nothing guarantees that *the reality of the accomplished fact is the guarantee of its durability ... every encounter is provisional even when it lasts, there is no eternity in the "laws" of any world or any state*'.¹²² No configuration can entirely overcome the conditions of its foundation: its creation by a *swerve* within the *void*. Contingency remains even as it is constrained. The state, ideology, and philosophy act to secure a given world as best they can—their role is to resist the aleatory nature of reality, to mitigate risk—in order to make that world endure over time. Some configurations of elements are evidently more successful than others.

Althusser took the phrase "a throw of the dice will never abolish chance" from the poem of the same name by Stéphane Mallarmé.¹²³ According to Quentin Meillassoux, Mallarmé

transformed a banal idea—'all is chance'—by giving it the aspect of a sort of inversion of Hegelian infinity: no longer the process of Spirit containing all in itself, including that which appears to deny it, but the process of Nothingness (understood as the absence of Sense) including that which seems to be an exception of it.¹²⁴

The void or Nothingness is taken here as the equivalent of 'process without a subject or goal' as the backdrop to all events.

The idea is that where the idealist philosopher proceeds from outside the whole the aleatory materialist commences from *within*. As we have seen, Althusser thought the former strategy was a deception. Philosophy is necessarily limited by the conditions in which it operates. The aleatory materialist recognises this and takes an immanent approach. She tries to take over the positions of her adversaries from the inside and push at those limits.¹²⁵ 'The legitimate form [of society] does not exist' for the aleatory materialist. There is no timeless justification for a particular social arrangement or any social arrangement whatsoever. 'But', Althusser said, '*one has to postulate it* in order to think the existing concrete forms'.¹²⁶ In order to comprehend existing social structures what needs to be understood is their imperfect realisation of their own internal principles.

It is interesting that here that Althusser seems to accept something about Aristotle's point about a first mover. In order to comprehend change something must persist. 'One has to postulate it [the legitimate form of society] as the transcendental condition for

¹²¹ Bourdin, 'Uncertain Materialism', *Graduate Faculty Philosophy Journal*, 278.

¹²² Althusser, 'Underground Current', *Philosophy of the Encounter*, 174.

¹²³ See Stéphane Mallarmé, 'A Dice Throw At Any Time Never Will Abolish Chance', in *Collected Poems and Other Verse*, trans. by E. H. Blackmore and A. M. Blackmore (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 161–81; Althusser signals Mallarmé's influence in Althusser, 'Matérialisme aléatoire', *Multitudes*, 182.

¹²⁴ Quentin Meillassoux, *The Number and the Siren: A Decipherment of Mallarmé's Coup De Dés*, trans. by Robin Mackay (Falmouth: Urbanomic, 2012), 31.

¹²⁵ Althusser, 'Only Materialist Tradition: Spinoza', *New Spinoza*, 10–11.

¹²⁶ Althusser, 'Underground Current', *Philosophy of the Encounter*, 187.

any condition, that is, any *history*'. It is only possible to make judgements about a particular arrangement against the metric of this 'legitimate form'.¹²⁷

This captures the kind of ethical critique that Marx made in *On The Jewish Question* (1844). In this text what Marx takes issue with is neither rights in general nor with (most of) the particular rights proposed in liberal political thought, but with their partial and unequal implementation in capitalist societies. Because capitalist societies were predicated on a separation of politics and economics, equality before the state did not translate into equality before the market and thus the distribution of rights tended to track economic inequalities. Human emancipation is cast here as the substantive realisation of rights that are already asserted, rather than an entirely new moral theory.¹²⁸ The *Communist Manifesto* echoes the same idea. The right to private property under capitalism is a conceit, Marx and Engels argue, for 'its existence for the few is solely due to its non-existence in the hands of those nine-tenths'. It is communists, not capitalists, that want everyone to be able to access a share of the products of society.¹²⁹ Marxism's normative theory is formed as a radicalisation of liberalism, of showing that it is necessary to move beyond it in order to realise it.

To think in the void, 'to say that in the beginning was nothingness', is tantamount to 'rejecting the Whole and every Order ... *in favour of dispersion ... and disorder*'. The initial state of every world is not order, but chaos. This is, in a sense, Althusser's own 'state of nature' for it functions not as a true history (we are always-already subjects) but as a thought device. This chaos is not a real point in time, a succession of structures stretches back into the past and, presumably, into the future. But this initial disorder is the condition of possibility of every form of temporary order. Every structure is an order *imposed* on this chaos—it gives order where otherwise there would be none. Every structure is also then, in tension with what made it possible in the first place—the contingent nature of reality. This conception militates against an end of history, conceived as a form of social structure that accords with some fixed ontological feature (be that human nature or something else). Additionally, it also implies that social structures are, for the aleatory materialist, what I called latent disorders in 2.3.3. Dispersion and disorder are endemic to every structure, albeit to varying degrees, because the various forms of imposition, attempts to control aleatoriness, can only do so imperfectly. Every structure that is the result of an encounter that lasts 'is, even at its most stable, haunted by a *radical instability*'.¹³⁰

This is a reiteration of an idea that had long been present in Althusser's work. In 'Elements of Self-Criticism' (1972) Althusser argued that the difference between Marxism and structuralism was that the former asserted '*the primacy of the process*

¹²⁷ Ibid.

¹²⁸ Karl Marx, 'On the Jewish Question', in Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Marx-Engels Collected Works: Marx and Engels, 1843–1844* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1975), III, 146–74.

¹²⁹ Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, 'Manifesto of the Communist Party', in *MECW: 1845–1848*, VI, 477–519 (500).

¹³⁰ Althusser, 'Underground Current', *Philosophy of the Encounter*, 195.

over the structure' and, by implication, that structuralism held the reverse.¹³¹ History in general could not be repressed by any particular structure that existed within it. The same idea is translated into the new terminology: 'the primacy of "nothing" over all "form"'.¹³²

A swerve is a deviation of an atom from its otherwise determined path. It is a *breach* with the existing laws governing a structure: 'it is *deviance* or deviation that is at the beginning of the world: deviation, not the norm'.¹³³ Encounters between the swerving atom and others might be missed or brief, in which case no new world is born. But sometimes a 'pile-up' happens. When it does a new '*form of order and the form of beings*' is born. The important thing here is that the new configuration is given, according to Althusser, 'by the *structure* of the encounter'. That is, Althusser held 'the primacy of structure over its elements'. This has been a persistent theme in Althusser's work. He had formerly expressed it as, variously, the '*primacy of class struggle over classes*' and 'the primacy of contradiction over the opposed terms'.¹³⁴

On becoming part of a structure, the atoms are assigned a place within it. The structure is not born of an addition of the atoms but in their arrangement, or *relation*, to one another. The encounter

confers their reality upon the atoms themselves, which, without swerve or encounter, would be nothing but *abstract* elements, lacking all consistency and existence. So much so that we can say that the *atoms' very existence is due to nothing but the swerve and the encounter* prior to which they led only a phantom existence.¹³⁵

Being is conferred by relation. The properties of the atom are not inherent (contingency excepted) but acquired relationally. The relations between the atoms are not, therefore, exterior to pre-existing entities, but interior to and constructive of the entities. The claim here is that the properties of entities are derived from their relational context, in the same way as the property 'tribesman' implies the structure of a 'tribe'.¹³⁶ Thus the chain is the reverse of that which atomism is generally taken to imply in its methodological individualist sense. The macro-level system is not constructed from the intrinsic properties of the individual atoms; rather the atoms are formed by the relations in which they are embedded.

This is how Althusser came to think about the relationship between structure and conjuncture. The structure is not a separate object imposed on a set of pre-existing elements. As Balibar put it

it is no longer a question of viewing the conjuncture as a short moment in the life

¹³¹ Althusser, 'Elements of Self-Criticism', *Self-Criticism*, 130.

¹³² Althusser, 'Underground Current', *Philosophy of the Encounter*, 192; Althusser, 'Philosophy and Marxism', *Philosophy of the Encounter*, 263.

¹³³ Althusser, *Marxist in Philosophy*, 100–1.

¹³⁴ Althusser, 'Marx in His Limits', *Philosophy of the Encounter*, 20.

¹³⁵ Althusser, 'Underground Current', *Philosophy of the Encounter*, 169.

¹³⁶ Bhaskar, 'Social Scientific Knowledge', *Issues in Marxist Philosophy*, III, 112.

of a structure or a transition between successive stages of the structure, because the reality of the structure is nothing but the unpredictable succession of conjunctures; conversely, the conjuncture is merely determined as a certain disposition of the structure.¹³⁷

And Montag:

Conjuncture as structure, that is, the necessity that governs any conjuncture whatsoever in its very complexity but without the complexity made the 'emissary' of an intention. It is this notion that allows the conjuncture to be thought of not as the negativity of indeterminacy, as the random encounter of primary elements that themselves require no further explanation than the positing of their irreducibility, but rather as determinate singularities both composed of and composing other singularities.¹³⁸

The idea is, for Althusser, to undercut any rigid distinction between structure and conjuncture as opposites. The structure is an abstraction that designates the regularities that traverse every conjuncture. Many misinterpretations of Althusser are largely attributable to a failure to grasp this point which, as I signalled in chapter 2, is present in Althusser's earlier works in a more rudimentary form.

Is the aleatory Althusser an Althusserian of the structure or of the conjuncture? The answer is surely both, for the conception is designed to overcome the opposition between them and say that the structure is not the more fundamental designation, the hidden reality behind the passing conjunctures, but is nothing but the procession of overdetermined aleatory conjunctures. Thus if it was possible but not always easy to read structure for the Althusser of *Reading Capital* as being neither 'ontologically prioritised nor ... beneath the surface' it becomes much plainer that structure for the aleatory Althusser is just a kind of abstraction, part of the way that thought came to terms with the conjuncture, but not something endowed with independent existence in its own right.¹³⁹

Contra dialectical materialism an aleatory materialist structure does not contain within itself its future replacement. The birth of a new world is subject to the precise conditions of the swerve and consequent encounter. Classic accounts of dialectical materialism have it that world-historical changes occur at the points where the relevant contradiction is most acute. In historical materialist terms, we would expect (as Marx often did) socialism to emerge at the point(s) where capitalism was most advanced. Arguments about whether 'actually existing socialism' constituted genuine socialism aside, the general pattern has been the opposite of what dialectical materialism predicts. This has long been a conundrum Althusser had sought to answer (see 3.1.3). In contrast, Althusser asserted that this kind of change could 'begin anywhere'.¹⁴⁰ Prior superiority

¹³⁷ Étienne Balibar, 'Structural Causality, Overdetermination, and Antagonism', in *Postmodern Materialism*, 109–19 (115).

¹³⁸ Montag, *Althusser and His Contemporaries*, 93.

¹³⁹ Sotiris, 'Rethinking Structure and Conjuncture', *Historical Materialism*, 14.

¹⁴⁰ Althusser, 'Machiavelli's Solitude', *Machiavelli and Us*, 126.

did not correlate with first adoption of new modes of production.

A structure's gravediggers come from its 'margins', Althusser argued, not its centre: 'it is in the margin that the new throws or games of being are produced'.¹⁴¹ Seemingly with the topographic base/superstructure metaphor in mind, in which the former transforms the latter, Althusser suggested an alternative dichotomy between the 'circle' and the 'margins'. The circle represents the boundaries of what is realisable within the existing order, 'the *absolute limit* reached by self-consciousness'.¹⁴² The margins, or interstices, represent possibilities beyond what is considered possible in the eyes of the dominant ideology. The swerve that occurs in these margins is '*that which nothing in the world can designate*, although it is the origin of every world'.¹⁴³ Thus the opportunities for the dissolution of the structure appear less as something produced by its laws than the cracks that open in their imperfect attempts to suppress aleatoriness. For Althusser, the resources for macro-level change exist not at the centre of the system but in what is excluded by it. The movement of the margins to the centre is how Althusser conceptualises successful social revolutions.¹⁴⁴ Rather than being an essential development of the structure, its transformation is the interruption of that development and its diversion onto a new path.

Aleatory materialism purports to provide a conceptual terminology and reasoned defence of historical materialism along the following lines, which I will elaborate in what follows:

- 1) All worlds are contingent. They may or may not have occurred. They may or may not persist.
- 2) These worlds are dysfunctional wholes. They are wholes because they are all-encompassing, they have no outside. They are dysfunctional because the parts do not exist *for* the whole.
- 3) Alternative worlds generally do not emerge at the points where existing laws are most established but in their interstices, where the laws are failing to reproduce themselves successfully.

4.3 Necessity and Contingency

We will now further explore Althusser's ideas about necessity and contingency. There are two concerns social theorists have tended to have here. If there is only necessity, and all actions are fully explicable in terms of predictable, law-governed, behaviour, then the course of history must be pre-determined, even if we cannot obtain clarity about that path. This is the position I have called determinism. If there is, on the other hand, only contingency, and no law-like regularities pertain, we would expect far-reaching change to be far more frequent than it actually is. Aside from being at odds

¹⁴¹ Althusser, 'Matérialisme aléatoire', *Multitudes*, 191; my translation. See also Althusser, *Marxist in Philosophy*, 87–89.

¹⁴² Althusser, 'Matérialisme aléatoire', *Multitudes*, 190; my translation.

¹⁴³ Althusser, 'Underground Current', *Philosophy of the Encounter*, 191.

¹⁴⁴ Althusser, 'Matérialisme aléatoire', *Multitudes*, 191.

with our experience of the world, in which from one day to the next we generally seem to experience the same results as products of the same actions, it puts into doubt the possibility of knowledge itself.¹⁴⁵

Leibniz provides a helpful way of understanding this distinction between necessity and contingency. For Leibniz, necessities must be true in all possible worlds (the law of non-contradiction). Contingencies are true only in some possible worlds (that I wrote this thesis).¹⁴⁶ A necessary truth cannot also be contingent. Leibniz thinks that ‘contingence is *opposed* to metaphysical necessity’.¹⁴⁷ It is also the case for Leibniz that a complete understanding of an entity contains everything that it has done and will do, and this is true for both necessary and contingent truths.¹⁴⁸ It is because Leibniz thinks that the future of an entity is contained within it from the start, its path thus fully determined from the outset, that he has been seen as being unable to integrate a concept of freedom into his system.¹⁴⁹ Necessary truths can be known to us, but only God (an entity in possession of Absolute Knowledge) can fully know a contingent truth. This is not to say we can know *nothing* about a contingent truth, but that because analysis of a contingent truth ‘proceeds to infinity’ we cannot know it completely.¹⁵⁰ Nevertheless, nothing is, for Leibniz, without a reason or cause (the principle of sufficient reason).¹⁵¹ One consequence of the principle of sufficient reason is that there must be ‘a reason in Nature why something should exist rather than nothing’.¹⁵² That reason, for Leibniz, is God, who exists by necessity (God is a perfect entity, perfection entails existence; therefore God must exist). Another consequence of the principle of sufficient reason is that it erodes contingency and confines it to the outset of the world by making everything subject to determinism once something is established. As Meillassoux puts it ‘the thesis that *at least one* entity is absolutely necessary ... culminates in the thesis according to which *every* entity is absolutely necessary’.¹⁵³ Origin connects with ends.

Some of Althusser’s central propositions about aleatory materialism could be taken as straightforwardly anti-Leibnizian claims, but I think that they can be better understood as a secularisation of the Leibnizian system—Leibniz without God. Althusser labelled the principle of sufficient reason an ‘idealist criterion’.¹⁵⁴ The question Leibniz poses—“‘why is there something rather than nothing?’”—is presented as a classic example of a question that forces one to pose an origin as an answer.¹⁵⁵ The only possible response, according to Althusser, that would refuse a resort to origins is to invoke *contingency* as

¹⁴⁵ See Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, 228–36.

¹⁴⁶ Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, ‘Necessary and Contingent Truths’, in *Philosophical Writings*, ed. by G. H. R. Parkinson, trans. by Mary Morris and G. H. R. Parkinson (London: Rowman and Littlefield, 1973), 96–105; Robert Merrihew Adams, *Leibniz: Determinist, Theist, Idealist* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 9.

¹⁴⁷ Leibniz, ‘Necessary and Contingent Truths’, *Philosophical Writings*, 101; my emphasis.

¹⁴⁸ Leibniz, ‘On Freedom’, in *Philosophical Writings*, 106–11 (107).

¹⁴⁹ Roger Woolhouse, *Starting with Leibniz* (London: Continuum, 2010), 124–25.

¹⁵⁰ Leibniz, ‘On Freedom’, *Philosophical Writings*, 109.

¹⁵¹ Leibniz, ‘A Letter on Freedom’ in *Philosophical Writings*, 112–14 (112).

¹⁵² Leibniz, ‘A Résumé of Metaphysics’, *Philosophical Writings*, 145–47 (145).

¹⁵³ Meillassoux, *After Finitude*, 33.

¹⁵⁴ Althusser, ‘Correspondence’, *Philosophy of the Encounter*, 217.

¹⁵⁵ Althusser, ‘Underground Current’, *Philosophy of the Encounter*, 170; Althusser, *Non-Philosophers*, 28.

necessary:

The accomplishment of the fact is just a pure effect of contingency, since it depends on the aleatory encounter of the atoms due to the swerve of the clinamen. Before the accomplishment of the fact, before the world, there is only *the non-accomplishment of the fact*, the non-world that is merely the *unreal* existence of the atoms.¹⁵⁶

Althusser's worry was that by posing these questions, an answer of origins is always demanded. The aleatory materialist thus takes these question to be illegitimate ones for philosophy. In refusing the idealist strategy of an *a priori* origin and instead setting out on a moving train the result is to say that all truths are contingent ones, bar the necessary truth of contingency. This, in my view, was Althusser's case, and it is as a consequence that, as for Leibnizian contingent truths, complete knowledge about the cause of an entity is *in principle* impossible (apart from for God)—impossible because of the fact of contingency, and not just a lack of epistemic clarity. There is no origin of the process, only some possible beginnings or entry points from which we can trace its becoming.¹⁵⁷ As Robert Nozick points out, 'if something cannot be created out of nothing, then, since there is something, it didn't come from nothing'. The possible move, then, is to say there was always-already something—'nothingness is not the natural state; if there is a natural state, it is somethingness'.¹⁵⁸ Thus what is rejected in doing so is Leibniz's determinism—the claim that an entity's predicates are present within it from its beginning—and the claim that any entity exists out of necessity alone. If there is no God or first mover—no necessary entities—contingency is the only remaining explanation for the emergence of phenomena.

It might be objected that obviously aleatory events have causes, and if they have causes they have sufficient reason. They are not uncaused. The swerve is the cause of all transformations. Indeed, everything has one or some causes. It would be a mistake to take Althusser as saying that there are things without causes. Althusser's point was that once we take away the origin, the sufficient reason for an event will perpetually remain unknown. Sufficiency can only be exhausted by reintroducing an origin. By assuming that there is an end to science in which every event that has been or will be is exhaustively known an origin will always be reintroduced—a necessary transhistorical entity that provides the Archimedean point from which science surveys the world. To fulfil the principle of sufficient reason an event must be *fully* explained by its cause (or causes), such that it would be possible to deduce the initial conditions from it—it must exhibit constant conjunction, and we must take that constant conjunction to be evidence that that constant conjunction is necessarily so.¹⁵⁹ But for aleatory events, this is not the case. If an event is contingent, the implication is that the same initial conditions can yield different results. Moreover, the complexity of the events involved will, generally speaking, rule out even identifying what information would be required, and at what accuracy, to provide a complete causal explanation of the event. The

¹⁵⁶ Althusser, 'Underground Current', *Philosophy of the Encounter*, 169–70.

¹⁵⁷ Cf. Wood, *Origin of Capitalism*, 98.

¹⁵⁸ Robert Nozick, *Philosophical Explanations* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press, 1981), 125.

¹⁵⁹ Popper, *Open Universe*, 8–12.

explanation of why a given entity exists will always encompass an infinite series of statements, and thus a complete formulation of an answer (rather than a merely adequate one) is not possible. Thus it is only by introducing contingency that knowledge is protected from superstitious resolutions to epistemological problems, by which philosophy short-circuits the scientific problem of tracing beginnings by introducing a necessary entity itself beyond explanation.

Let us further examine this with reference to the problem of induction identified by David Hume. Hume argued that inferring from the fact that an event happens frequently that it will continue to happen is not a well-founded belief. Constant conjunction is insufficient to establish a necessary connection between cause and effect:¹⁶⁰

When I see, for instance, a Billiard-ball moving in a straight line towards another; even suppose motion in the second ball should by accident be suggested to me, as the result of their contact or impulse; may I not conceive, that a hundred different events might as well follow from that cause? May not both these balls remain at absolute rest? May not the first ball return in a straight line, or leap off from the second in any line or direction? All these suppositions are consistent and conceivable. Why then should we give the preference to one, which is no more consistent or conceivable than the rest? All our reasonings a priori will never be able to shew us any foundation for this preference.¹⁶¹

‘The idea of chance logically precedes that of determinism’, the burden of proof is on the latter.¹⁶² Why then do we tend to believe that the same effect necessarily follows from the same causes?

This principle is CUSTOM or HABIT. For wherever the repetition of any particular act or operation produces a propensity to renew the same act or operation, without being impelled by any reasoning or process of the understanding; we always say, that this propensity is the effect of *Custom* ... Custom, then, is the great guide of human life. It is that principle alone, which renders our experience useful to us, and makes us expect, for the future, a similar train of events with those which have appeared in the past.¹⁶³

What Meillassoux notes about this move is that Hume does not answer the original question of whether there are really necessities, but a different question: why we *believe* there are necessities. Hume takes for granted that necessities exist, denying only that experience can establish that they truly exist. Hence Hume provides a sceptical resolution to the original question: necessity exists, it just cannot be proven to exist. Hume does not actually deny the existence of necessary laws. And the reason for believing that seems obvious enough—our experience of the world is such that not just

¹⁶⁰ David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. by Peter Millican (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 21–22.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 22.

¹⁶² Jean-René Vernes, *Critique de la raison aléatoire* (Paris: Aubier-Montaigne, 1982), 107; my translation.

¹⁶³ Hume, *Enquiry*, 32.

anything happens. Indeed, if that were the case it would be impossible to make any sense of experience at all. But the problem, Meillassoux argues, should really be put the other way around: if we accept we cannot prove the necessity of the laws should our starting point not be their contingency? And thus what we need to explain is the apparent stability of the laws in a contingent world.¹⁶⁴

Meillassoux denies aleatory materialism is valid for this reason. He distinguishes chance (calculable probability) from contingency (anything can happen) on the grounds that chance requires the presupposition of some degree of stability in the world, namely ‘*that there is a totality of conceivable possibilities*’.¹⁶⁵ If the object of discussion is physical laws, then this does indeed raise a particular difficulty about the (non-)persistence of the conditions which make probability calculations possible. But this is precisely what we are entitled to assume in our case. Action takes place in determinate contexts. For aleatory reason to hold some background conditions must be stable (it is possible to roll the dice on the table, they do not fly off into the air). That they are is essential to Althusser’s point, for his claim is not that *anything can happen*—pure contingency—it is that every social order is necessarily subject to contingent occurrences against the persistent background of a structure of relations, and that one or some of those contingent occurrences may go on to produce a transformation in that structure. Contingency, for Althusser, is always structured contingency. Thus the case is doubly that what possibly may happen is constrained, and further what may ‘take’ is constrained also. ‘Not just anything can produce just anything’, Althusser argued, ‘but only elements’ with sufficient ‘affinity, to “take hold” one upon the other ... the atoms are ... “hooked”, that is, susceptible of interlocking’.¹⁶⁶ Not all combinations of the atoms will ‘gel’ into structures capable of enduring.

Hume’s ‘custom or habit’ resembles Althusser’s theory of ideology as a mental reflection of an imaginary relationship between individuals and their conditions of existence.¹⁶⁷ Necessity is not an innate property of the object under consideration, but a kind of inter-subjective convention. For Hume, ‘cause and necessity are categories of analysis, not of nature’. They are not ‘innate qualities’ of things but given ‘through the association we make between them’. To cause something is to express power, and power is only given by an entity’s relation with other entities.¹⁶⁸ For Althusser, ideology provides to individuals the ‘absolute guarantee that everything really is so’, and the individual is interpellated as subject ‘*in order that he shall (freely) accept his subjection*’.¹⁶⁹ Ideology renders the contingent world as sure and predictable, and our place within it as subject to laws beyond our control and ourselves as subject to them, by making convention appear (via the mechanism of origin and ends) as a real property of the object. This is what Hume refused to do by rejecting the possibility of justification for necessity beyond ‘custom or habit’. The difference is, however, that for Althusser ideology is not the

¹⁶⁴ Meillassoux, *After Finitude*, 92.

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 102.

¹⁶⁶ Althusser, ‘Underground Current’, *Philosophy of the Encounter*, 192.

¹⁶⁷ Althusser, ‘Lenin and Philosophy’, *Lenin and Philosophy*, 111.

¹⁶⁸ Joel Reed, ‘Althusser and Hume: A Materialist Encounter’, in *Current Continental Theory and Modern Philosophy*, 210–22 (217–19).

¹⁶⁹ Althusser, ‘Lenin and Philosophy’, *Lenin and Philosophy*, 123.

passive reception of ideas but the learned behaviour of practices—ideology is comprised of actions we take within the context of the institutions in which ideology is embedded and disseminated. We kneel, and we believe. It is this internalisation of the laws, their apparent source being within, and our reproduction of them by our continued participation, thus reinforcing our subjection to them, that blurs the distinction between the fact of necessity and a simple belief in necessity.¹⁷⁰

Through the need to orientate ourselves in a world in which, most of the time, the same events do follow the same causes we adopt ideology as a social map. But by its representation of what is contingent as necessary ideology shows that world to us as final and unchangeable. Ideology is, for Althusser, closely connected to the state (as ‘Ideological State Apparatuses’) such that the state is the principal mechanism by which the reproduction of the relations that make up the social formation is achieved. If the ideological inculcation of moral duties and legal obligations fails to reproduce those relations successfully, they are backed by the coercive force of the repressive state apparatuses. Ideology and force serve to reproduce prevailing systems of domination, attempting to secure their continued necessity against the threat of contingent emergencies turning into ruptural breaks with the existing constant conjunction of events. They impose a structural regularity on the otherwise heterogeneous elements. Consequently, ‘on Althusserian premises revolution is the exception that proves the rule, because the exception is the rule’.¹⁷¹

How is it possible that agents might act contrary to the functional requirements of a social structure which interpellates its subjects according to its own needs of reproduction? This question has vexed Althusser’s interpreters since *For Marx* and *Reading Capital*. In chapter 2 I denied this was as much of a problem as it has often been thought to be. If readers were not entirely convinced at that stage, the transposition of Althusser’s earlier views into the terminology of aleatory materialism might assist in defending this claim. Structures, for Althusser, are not to be treated as expressive totalities, but temporary forms of order imposed on sets of diverse atoms with separate prior histories that makes divergence possible. Thus it is arguably not Althusser who has to face up to this issue, but adherents of dialectical materialism who have not appreciated its necessitarian implications.

The interpellation of the individual as subject, which makes him an ideological subject, is realized not on the basis of a *single* ideology, but of *several ideologies* at once, under which the individual *lives* and *acts* his practice. These ideologies may be very ‘local’ such as the subject in his *family* and at *work*, in his immediate relations with his family and friends or his peers; or they may be broader, ‘local’ in the broad sense, either ‘regional’ or ‘national’. Such ideologies are, for the most part, always initially inherited from the past, the tradition. What results is a *play and a space* of multiple interpellations in which the subject is caught up, but which (as contradictory play and as space) constitutes the ‘freedom’ of the individual subject, who is *simultaneously* interpellated by several ideologies that are neither of the

¹⁷⁰ See Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), 114–15.

¹⁷¹ Elliott, ‘Necessity of Contingency’, *Rethinking Marxism*, 77.

same kind nor at the same level; this multiplicity explains the *'free' development of the positions adopted by the subject-individual*. Thus the individual has at his disposal a 'play of manoeuvre' between several positions, between which he can 'develop', or even, if you insist, 'choose', determine his course although this determination is itself determined, but in the play of the plurality of interpellations.¹⁷²

Choice, in this sense, occurs within imposed limits: it cannot be simply anything. But multiple possibilities are available. Ideologies subject individuals to competing demands. The subject is exposed to multiple interpellations simultaneously, thereby producing specific individuals exposed to specific combinations of subjection. The subject-individual is overdetermined by the complex articulation of the overlapping ideologies. As Bhaskar argues, 'the theory of complex determination, in situating persons as comprehensive entities, whose behaviour is subject to the control of several different principles at once, allows the possibility of genuine self-determination (subject to constraints)'.¹⁷³ It is open to debate whether Althusser's view can meaningfully constitute free-will, but it does make the case that subjects are not merely functional automatons. They can act in ways that do not merely reflect but affect the course and composition of the structure. Contrary to the structuralist reading of Althusser, in which it is inferred that subjects cannot act contrary to the demands placed upon them to reproduce whatever is in existence, Althusser builds a case in which the multiple interpellations of the subject produce aleatory effects.

Althusser argued that 'instead of thinking contingency as a modality of necessity, or as an exception to it, we must think necessity as the becoming-necessary of the encounter of contingencies'. More succinctly, what we are directed to here is the 'necessity of contingency'.¹⁷⁴ Althusser's claim is that it is a necessary fact about all worlds that there is contingency. Leibniz, for his part, has been read as implying that 'there is no real objective distinction between necessity and contingency, and that the distinction is simply an appearance relative to the limited human mind'.¹⁷⁵ We can, in fact, read Althusser in the same way but in reverse. Leibniz struggles to account for contingency. But the explanatory burden on the aleatory materialist is showing they can adequately account for the apparent stability of the world. Althusser did not deny that there were necessities, but he claimed they were internal to a given world (capitalism has some necessary features, an entity without these features is not capitalism, capitalism is not a necessary entity). What makes them appear to us as necessities *in general*, that is transhistorical laws applicable across worlds, is ideology, which serves to transform what are really contingent outcomes into metaphysical necessities. Thus necessities are only, at bottom, themselves contingent results—the consequences of prior contingent events—and their appearance as other than this is the result of a mystification. Contingency is not an exception, but the norm. In making the case for the necessity of contingency what Althusser uncovered was *'an absolute necessity that does not reinstate any form of absolutely necessary entity'*, and with it he tries to avoid the

¹⁷² Althusser, 'Correspondence', *Philosophy of the Encounter*, 241.

¹⁷³ Bhaskar, *Realist Theory*, 101.

¹⁷⁴ Althusser, 'Underground Current', *Philosophy of the Encounter*, 187.

¹⁷⁵ Woolhouse, *Starting with Leibniz*, 129.

implications of idealism.¹⁷⁶ Contingency is thus universal and eternal, an *a priori* absolute but one which defends the materialist supposition that there is a real that we can know without imposing a predetermined form that it must take.

The ‘take’ of the atoms examined above, and the corresponding role of the state in reproducing the relations of production, can then be reduced simply to these terms: these concepts all refer to the transformation of contingent events into necessary ones, of creating, out of a chance event, a constant conjunction of events that did not previously occur. ‘The fact that it is necessary’, Althusser said, ‘means simply that it has been accomplished, but everything in it could have swung the other way, depending on the encounter or non-encounter’.¹⁷⁷

Althusser emphasised the conditional logic of “‘if ... then’” as the way to think about this difference between necessity and contingency.¹⁷⁸ For dialectical thought, it is *necessary* that the social formation reproduce itself. It gives a functionalist conception of the social structure, for the structure could do nothing but reproduce itself. Aleatory materialism, on the other hand, emphasises the contingent nature of this operation. *If X occurs, then Y will follow.* Choices in this context have consequences that matter. They can genuinely affect the course of history. Thus this seems to be a comment about the *conditional* nature of social scientific predictions, in part because of the complexity of the object and difficulty in isolating its components from one another, and in part because of the role agency has in affecting the phenomena in question.¹⁷⁹ There is no surety of *either* stability or change. Members of the ruling class could, for example, fail to take the actions required to reproduce the social formation, or members of subordinate classes may disrupt these reproductive mechanisms. ‘*It all depends*’, Althusser says, ‘an aleatory, not a dialectical phrase’.¹⁸⁰

Briefly, I want to contrast this view with that of dialectical materialism. In an 1890 letter to Joseph Bloch (quoted by Althusser in *For Marx*) Engels characterised contingency as superfluous to the trajectory of events. Engels argued that ‘amidst an unending multitude of fortuities (i.e. of things and events whose intrinsic interconnections are so remote or so incapable of proof that we can regard them as non-existent and ignore them) that the economic trend ultimately asserts itself as something inevitable’.¹⁸¹ Engels’ claim is that one series of events—‘the economic trend’—cannot permanently have its course altered by another series of events—the ‘multitude of fortuities’. The problem here, as Althusser identified, is that contingency (the superstructural levels) is related to necessity (the base) as unnecessary and irrelevant. Stuff happens in the superstructure, but we are permitted to discount it entirely for it has no significant bearing on the operations of the economic base. Invoking determination in the last

¹⁷⁶ Meillassoux, *After Finitude*, 34.

¹⁷⁷ Althusser, ‘Underground Current’, *Philosophy of the Encounter*, 179

¹⁷⁸ Althusser, *Marxist in Philosophy*, 99.

¹⁷⁹ Little, *Scientific Marx*, 170.

¹⁸⁰ Althusser, ‘Philosophy and Marxism’, *Philosophy of the Encounter*, 263.

¹⁸¹ Friedrich Engels, ‘Engels to Joseph Bloch, 21–22 September 1890’, in Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Marx-Engels Collected Works: Engels, Letters 1890–1892* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 2001), XLIX, 33–37 (35).

instance, Althusser said, ‘is only a half-solution since the relation between *these accidents* and *this necessity* is neither established nor made explicit since (in what is really a denial of the relation and the problem posed by it) Engels presents even *this necessity* as completely *external* to these accidents’.¹⁸² Dialectical materialism proposes a means of adjudicating between events extraneous to the historical process in general and those events that drove the evolution of the process. The world must conform to the expectations imposed on it, and if it refuses we can write that off as an accident soon to be overridden as the expected course resumes. A *philosophical* resolution is provided to a *scientific* problem. Contingent events are the exception to necessity and will not, by definition, alter its path. What counts as important is defined *a priori*. The aleatory materialist claim is that we should think about transformation of the structure in the opposite way. Not as the assertion of necessity against contingency, but of contingency against necessity. A structural transition comes as a *break* with the existing necessitarian laws, rather than as their realisation. The dialectical materialist conception retains necessity as transhistorical fact, a movement which will occur regardless of actual events (‘accidents’). For the aleatory materialist the production and reproduction of necessities is a question of *power*—and, as we shall see, specifically class power.

4.4 Two Concepts of History

For Ellen Wood theories of history fall into two categories:

A view that theoretical knowledge—the knowledge of structures—is a matter of ‘static conceptual representation’, while motion and flux (together with history) belong to a different, empirical sphere of cognition; and, on the other hand, a view of knowledge that does not oppose structure to history, in which theory can accommodate *historical* categories.¹⁸³

Wood endorses the second type—a diachronic method—and she thinks that Althusser endorses the first—a synchronic, or structuralist, method.

The second type of theory might be seen as an argument to collapse the theory into the empirical object itself.¹⁸⁴ Althusser was right that this cannot be the case without making science indistinct from ideology. Althusser was sceptical about the possibility of full and transparent access to the real, and he denied, as I have shown, that there can be an ultimate means of judging the completeness of our knowledge. What he did not deny is the realist intuition that there is a real world prior to knowledge about that world, and he reiterated this, against the post-structuralist view, in his later writings: he argued for ‘the primacy of the gesture over the word, of the material trace over the sign’.¹⁸⁵ Wood is also a realist, and thus it is not plausible that she thinks that a theory

¹⁸² Althusser, ‘Contradiction and Overdetermination’, *For Marx*, 119.

¹⁸³ Wood, *Democracy Against Capitalism*, 79.

¹⁸⁴ See Althusser, ‘Object of Capital’, *Reading Capital*, 255–56.

¹⁸⁵ Althusser, ‘Philosophy and Marxism’, *Philosophy of the Encounter*, 265.

of history is history.¹⁸⁶

The two plausible ways of construing what Wood means by ‘a view of knowledge that does not oppose structure to history’ are:

- 1) Knowledge of past facts is necessary to explain present facts.
- 2) That new phenomena might appear and other phenomena disappear such that the theory’s concepts may only be applicable at certain points in time, and the theory must be able to incorporate new concepts to describe new phenomena because not all the possible phenomena are simultaneously present.

1) Might be taken to be trivial, since it is evidently true of any science. It is non-trivial given the context, which I will approach in a moment. 2) Is less intuitively true about any science, but it is true about some (e.g. evolutionary biology).¹⁸⁷ The first type of theory, Wood says, sees ‘structures *as against* processes, or structures that *undergo* processes’. The second type, on the other hand, works with the concept of ‘structured processes’. Wood makes this case in the context of defending the work of E. P. Thompson.¹⁸⁸ I remain sceptical about Thompson’s value as a theorist, as distinct from his role as a historian, and find Wood’s defence unpersuasive.¹⁸⁹ However, *if* Wood is right about Thompson, then I think both Thompson and Wood are in agreement with Althusser in respect to the theoretical foundations of historical materialism, despite both their protestations to the contrary.¹⁹⁰

That Althusser counter-posed structure to history is an example of the structuralist reading—that, for Althusser, everything needed to understand a structure was co-

¹⁸⁶ See Ellen Meiksins Wood, ‘What Is the “Postmodern” Agenda?’, in *Defense of History*, 1–16 (5–6).

¹⁸⁷ And it is possibly true about any science, since even the phenomena referenced by the foundational categories of physics (time, space) are often understood as originating in the Big Bang.

¹⁸⁸ Wood, *Democracy Against Capitalism*, 78–79.

¹⁸⁹ Thompson remains acutely vulnerable to the kind of criticism made by Cohen that he conflates the objective definition of a class with its self-comprehension, and Wood fails to respond adequately to the charge. See Cohen, *Karl Marx’s Theory of History*, 73–77. For Wood’s defence see: Wood, *Democracy Against Capitalism*, 79–84; Wood, *Origin of Capitalism*, 65–69.

¹⁹⁰ It has become evident that Thompson and Althusser agree on far more than Thompson believed. Consider, for example, Thompson’s distinction between ‘*structure*’ and ‘*process*’, and how Marx, ‘*caught in a trap*’, wrote *Capital* from the perspective of the first rather than the second, consequently producing ‘*a static, anti-historical structure*’ that exhibited an ‘*unreconstructed Hegelianism*’. The consequence was ‘*a study of the logic of capital, not of capitalism ... a mountainous inconsistency ... which follows too obsequiously ahistorical economic laws*’. This conception leads to the denial of ‘*history as process*, as open-ended and indeterminate eventuation—but not for that reason devoid of rational *logic* or of determining *pressures*—in which categories are defined in particular contexts but are continually undergoing redefinition’. The task seems to be, for Thompson, to ‘*find a common junction and a theoretical vocabulary capable of encompassing both process and structure*’; Thompson, *Poverty of Theory*, 77–114. I could not have come up with a better description of the Althusserian project myself.

present and thus historical inquiry was superfluous.¹⁹¹ The British Althusserians Hindess and Hirst provide an example of this view: ‘Marxism, as a theoretical and a political practice, gains nothing from its association with historical writing and historical research. The study of history is not only scientifically but also politically valueless’.¹⁹² Althusser’s attack on the ‘genetic’ method in historical explanation seems to have been interpreted as a rejection of any attempt to understand a structure as the consequence of a series of events. This is incorrect. ‘Genesis’, for Althusser, did not designate the examination of a historical fact in some sort of historical view. What he meant by this is what he later came to call reasoning from the ‘accomplished fact’, to which the theory of the encounter was his proposed alternative.¹⁹³

The view Althusser spelt out in his aleatory works is in fact close to Wood’s own theory. In ‘Philosophy and Marxism’ (1984–87) Althusser differentiated between two different ways of thinking about history.¹⁹⁴ The first way is to think history ‘as a wholly static object all of whose determinations can be studied like those of a physical object; it is an object that is dead because it is past’.¹⁹⁵ Treated as such history is an object open to investigation as a system of laws that can then be used to predict the future. It permits deduction based on past facts—that is, history is *determined*. It is visible in the same way a physical object is generally thought to be.

The second way is what he called ‘living history’. This history is ‘open to a future that is uncertain, unforeseeable, not yet accomplished, and therefore *aleatory*’.¹⁹⁶ ‘History’, he said, ‘is nothing but the permanent revocation of the accomplished fact by another undecipherable fact to be accomplished’.¹⁹⁷

In my view, the first sense is a restatement of what Althusser had formerly called the genetic method. To reason from the ‘accomplished fact’ was to take an existing fact and explain it by pointing to its presence in an origin. Perhaps the single most common way of doing this, in Marxist historical explanation, was the obstetric metaphor or what Althusser called ‘the myth of genesis’—the result is contained “‘as a seed” in the origin.¹⁹⁸ Althusser’s proposed alternative to the genetic method was to think of history as ‘living’, meaning to reason ‘not in terms of the Necessity of the accomplished fact, but in terms of the contingency of the fact to be accomplished’.¹⁹⁹

The difference might be understood as that between *reproduction* and *production*. History treated as a static object privileges existing rules of reproduction and then

¹⁹¹ Wood, *Democracy Against Capitalism*, 59. See also: Schmidt, *History and Structure*, 63–64; Elliott, ‘Althusser’s Solitude’, *Economy and Society*, 493; Comninel, *Rethinking the French Revolution*, 82–84; Thompson, *Poverty of Theory*, in particular 94–114.

¹⁹² Hindess and Hirst, *Pre-Capitalist Modes of Production*, 312.

¹⁹³ Althusser, ‘Underground Current’, *Philosophy of the Encounter*, 174.

¹⁹⁴ Althusser also makes this case in Althusser, ‘Thèses de juin’, IMEC, ALT2. A29-06.04, 5–7.

¹⁹⁵ Althusser, ‘Philosophy and Marxism’, *Philosophy of the Encounter*, 263.

¹⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 264.

¹⁹⁷ Althusser, ‘Underground Current’, *Philosophy of the Encounter*, 174.

¹⁹⁸ Althusser, ‘On Genesis’, *Décalages*, 2. See also Althusser, ‘Humanist Controversy’, *Humanist Controversy*, 296.

¹⁹⁹ Althusser, ‘Underground Current’, *Philosophy of the Encounter*, 174.

mistakes them for the mechanisms that initially produced those rules. Living history, however, attempts to show how rules of reproduction can give way to the production of new rules of reproduction. Althusser thought that there had been a persistent tendency for Marxists to treat ‘the *reproduction* of the proletariat’ as its original production, thereby ‘thinking in the accomplished fact when they think they are thinking in its becoming-accomplished’.²⁰⁰

First in his ‘Preface to *Le Concept de loi économique dans “Le Capital,”*’ by Gérard Duménil’ (1977) and then more fully in ‘Marx in His Limits’ (1978), Althusser provided a series of insightful comments about the ‘order of exposition’ of Marx’s *Capital* which would be inexplicable and confusing if Althusser had indeed endorsed a synchronic view.²⁰¹ They are, however, readily understood if the interpretation I have just advanced is correct.

Althusser argued that Marx, in *Capital*, felt compelled to begin with the most abstract category, value, because his philosophical outlook remained that of Hegelian Idealism. And *Capital* (mostly) follows a course of logical derivation from this category that is similar to the structure of Hegel’s *Science of Logic*. Value is presented at the outset of *Capital* ‘as if it were a *given*’ and the categories used to understand capitalism appear as increasingly concrete differentiations of that starting point, as if the entire system were contained in that origin.²⁰²

This procession from the abstract to the concrete—of starting with the simplest possible idea and arriving, at the end of the process, at a full idea of the real, by introducing increasingly complex categories and more empirical information—might be the required method of comprehension, Althusser argued, but it is the *logical* not the *historical* order. For Hegel, these were one and the same. As Marx says in the *Grundrisse*:

Hegel accordingly arrived at the illusion that the real was the result of thinking synthesising itself within itself, delving ever deeper into itself and moving by its inner motivation; actually, the method of advancing from the abstract to the concrete is simply the way in which thinking assimilates the concrete and reproduces it as a mental concrete. This is, however, by no means the process by which the concrete itself originates. For example, the simplest economic category, e.g. exchange value, presupposes population, population which produces under definite conditions, as well as a distinct type of family, or community, or State, etc. Exchange value cannot exist except as an abstract, one-sided relation of an already existing concrete living whole. But as a category exchange value leads an antediluvian existence. Hence to the kind of consciousness—and philosophical consciousness is precisely of this kind—which regards the comprehending mind as the real man, and only the comprehended world as such as the real world—to this consciousness, therefore, the movement of categories appears as the real act of

²⁰⁰ Ibid, 199–200.

²⁰¹ Althusser, ‘Preface to *Le Concept de loi*’, *Rethinking Marxism*, 20; Althusser, ‘Marx in His Limits’, *Philosophy of the Encounter*, 38.

²⁰² Ibid, 39; Althusser, ‘Preface to *Le Concept de loi*’, *Rethinking Marxism*, 21–23.

production.²⁰³

Althusser's case was that Marx failed to be attentive to exactly this in *Capital*.²⁰⁴ Marx wrote a scientific work from the perspective of 'the purely *philosophical* problem of the *beginning* of a philosophical work'.²⁰⁵ Hegel conflated science and philosophy, and the *Science of Logic* is structured accordingly.²⁰⁶ Marx differentiated the two, but wrote *Capital* as if he had not. In order to achieve this method of philosophical derivation, Marx had to 'bracket out' the historical reality of the emergence of capitalism. The real emergence of capitalism appears, in *Capital*, as the unfolding of the category of value, just as Being unfolds in the *Science of Logic* into ever more complex categories via the mechanism of contradiction. Where Marx does turn back to concrete history—the 'chapters on the working day, the labour process, manufacture and big industry, and the extraordinary chapter on primitive accumulation. These chapters stand outside "the order of exposition"'.²⁰⁷ They do not appear, in Althusser's view, as directly related to the main line of thought developed in *Capital*. There is an oscillation between theory and history, and it is the former that dominates. This is the contribution that Althusser thought *Capital* had made to how, in Marxist thought, real history became obscured by a reductive developmental schema of teleological evolution.²⁰⁸

Thus what Marx did predominantly in *Capital*, according to Althusser, is reason in terms of the accomplished fact rather than the contingency of the fact to be accomplished. If we start with value, capitalism cannot fail. Capitalism is the becoming of the value-form, its sequential unfolding. There is a 'mechanism of inevitability' contained in this deductive logical sequence, in which the development of capitalism is not a matter of contingency but of 'historical necessity'.²⁰⁹ Thus Althusser argued that Marx erroneously structured *Capital* around history in the first sense—capitalism 'as a wholly static object'. History in the second sense—'living history'—is present, but the chapters of *Capital* that pertain to it are an afterthought. Value is situated as a '*given*: not the result of a terribly complicated historical process, but, as it were, the "simplest" original state'.²¹⁰ Althusser thought that this mode of presentation had levied a theoretical price on Marxism: it is the reason, according to Althusser, that exploitation in the Marxist sense has been viewed as *only* about the extraction of surplus-value, presented in an "'economistic" or 'arithmetical' fashion, for the 'shortcomings' of the

²⁰³ Karl Marx, 'Introduction', in *MECW: 1857–61*, xxviii, 11–48 (38).

²⁰⁴ This can also be taken as support for the revised conception of the epistemological break outlined in section 3.3. Althusser's provocative claim was that Marx was *more* materialist in the *Grundrisse* (1857) than he was in *Capital* (1867), in which he regressed to an idealist schema.

²⁰⁵ Althusser, 'Marx in His Limits', *Philosophy of the Encounter*, 39.

²⁰⁶ See: Hegel, *Science of Logic*; Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. by A. V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 1–45.

²⁰⁷ Althusser, 'Marx in His Limits', *Philosophy of the Encounter*, 39–40.

²⁰⁸ Cf. Althusser, 'Object of *Capital*', *Reading Capital*, 258.

²⁰⁹ Althusser, 'Marx in His Limits', *Philosophy of the Encounter*, 93.

²¹⁰ *Ibid*, 39.

labour-theory of value, and the idealist theory of commodity fetishism.²¹¹

I will not examine Althusser's claims about the additional consequences of the order of exposition of *Capital*.²¹² I only seek to make the point that Althusser clearly associated the structuralist method of doing history with idealism and he rejected this method in favour of a different one. He argued that a properly materialist account of capitalism would indeed involve understanding its *actual* historical becoming. Instead of the abstract chapters of *Capital*, he sought to draw our attention to those dealing with history. In 'Underground Current' (1982) Althusser called the chapter on primitive accumulation 'the true heart of *Capital*'.²¹³ If Althusser is right about this then it is no surprise that his initial attempt to reconstruct Marxist philosophy, in *Reading Capital*, resulted in (at best) a 'flirt' with structuralism and that the attempt to correct this, in aleatory materialism, was a 'fabrication'; for in order to think Marx's science it was necessary to provide a philosophy that was not, in fact, the guiding thread in *Capital*.²¹⁴

Althusser's gripe was that there is a 'division' between 'abstract "exposition" and concrete explanations'.²¹⁵ This idea closely accords with Wood's call for a 'view of knowledge that does not oppose structure to history, in which theory can accommodate *historical* categories'.²¹⁶ The point that both of them are trying to hone in on here is that if it is the case that new phenomena can emerge in history, phenomena that have not existed before, then it is impossible to categorise them before their emergence. For a science of history to propose an exhaustive schema of possible phenomena would be to do something unscientific, and Althusser cited the list of modes of production Marx gives in the 1859 Preface to *A Contribution to a Critique of Political Economy* as an example of doing just this.²¹⁷ If our theory cannot account for previously unwitnessed phenomena in the historical process, as well as account for the disappearance of other kinds of phenomena, then it will fail as a theory of history—hence, it must be able to 'accommodate *historical* categories'.

Thus Althusser endorsed the opposite of what he is accused of by the commentators cited above—he rejected synchronic analysis in favour of diachronic analysis. Althusser has generally been thought to be a proponent of history in the first sense (as a static object). And yet, as I have argued, he definitively rejected the idea that one should 'study phenomena at a given point in time rather than in their historical evolution'.²¹⁸

²¹¹ Ibid, 44–45, 126–35. For such an 'arithmetical' view of exploitation see John Roemer, *A General Theory of Exploitation and Class* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982), 121–23.

²¹² For a helpful commentary on this see Fabio Bruschi, 'Splitting Science: The Althusserian Interpretation of *Capital*'s Multiple Orders of Exposition', *Rethinking Marxism*, 30:1 (2018), 25–43.

²¹³ Althusser, 'Underground Current', *Philosophy of the Encounter*, 199. See also Marx, 'Capital', *MECW: Capital, Volume 1*, xxxv, 704–61.

²¹⁴ Althusser, 'Correspondence', *Philosophy of the Encounter*, 211.

²¹⁵ Althusser, 'Marx in His Limits', *Philosophy of the Encounter*, 44.

²¹⁶ Wood, *Democracy Against Capitalism*, 79.

²¹⁷ Marx, 'Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy', *MECW*, xxix, 263.

²¹⁸ Samuel, 'History and Theory', in *People's History*, xlii.

Althusser has more clearly thought through some of the foundational difficulties here than Wood has. Wood repeatedly rejects the idea of contingency, seeing it as the alternative extreme to determinism.²¹⁹ Wood is right that there has been a general tendency for rigid determinism to collapse into pure contingency. However problematic the categories of ‘structuralism’ and ‘post-structuralism’ might be they can be taken as designating, at least in their caricatures, these poles. Wood is wrong, however, first to say that Althusser is an example of this, and second to reject the idea of contingency in general. In fact, I think she must endorse something like the Althusserian arguments I have presented if she is to be able to maintain her view that socialism is possible but not inevitable. All acts of agency take place within determinate contexts that both constrain and enable what is possible, but the complexity of the interactions between these factors puts predictive surety out of range.

Furthermore, Wood is scathing about the rejection of ‘totalizing’ knowledges’.²²⁰ Again, she does so for an arguably commendable reason (as a rejection of non-realist discourses). But it seems to me that her own view of historical materialism cannot be totalising, for the very reason that if the *historical* part of the equation (rather than just the materialist half) is to be taken seriously, as she demands it is, then it will never be possible to present an exhaustive theory. History may always throw up new surprises which require new categories—hence the theory can never be closed in on itself. Once more, I think Althusser and Wood arrive at a similar place via different routes (that a theory cannot be totalising was, for Althusser as much to do with materialism as it was to do with history because it is a general fact about scientific discourses—indeed, their distinguishing feature) but however an incisive and eloquent defender Wood is of a version of historical materialism that I think should be endorsed, Althusser’s discussion of its philosophical foundations is superior.

4.5 Problems of a Science of History

4.5.1 Causal Laws and the Possibility of a Science of History

In this section, I will distinguish between two different ways of understanding the term ‘law’ in social science. The main difference Althusser cited between history as a ‘wholly static object’ and ‘living history’ is their conceptions of causal laws. The first sees laws as deterministic. That is, given the same initial conditions, things can only happen one way. The second way of looking at history deploys what Althusser called ‘tendential law’ in which contingency influences the realisation of the law. While I consider ‘tendential law’ an unhelpful term, I will show that there is an important distinction between these two views.

The first conception of law refers to what we saw Engels describe above (4.3): a law that is inescapable and inevitable. It cannot fail to be fulfilled. A good example of this conception of law in the context of a theory of history are the two theses Cohen offers

²¹⁹ Wood, *Democracy Against Capitalism*, 1, 142, 145.

²²⁰ Wood, *Democracy Against Capitalism*, 2; Ellen Meiksins Wood, *The Pristine Culture of Capitalism* (London: Verso, 2015), 93.

as the foundation of historical materialism:

- (a) The productive forces tend to develop throughout history (the Development Thesis).
- (b) The nature of the production relations of a society is explained by the level of development of its productive forces (the Primacy Thesis proper).²²¹

The claim here is that if we know these laws, which are extracted from existing data about the past, we can explain if not all historical events then, at least, history's broad sweep. One can hold to these theses and permit that they can be temporarily halted, that the development of the productive forces does not always proceed at the same pace, and could in some limited cases go backwards. But what is asserted here is that over the long run productive forces develop, and that is a universal feature of human societies. It is in that sense that it is both inescapable and inevitable, for whatever else happens the productive forces will resume their upward trajectory. The commitment is to capitalism as a *necessary* outcome, a problem we shall examine in more detail in 4.6 below.

In Althusser's view, law in this sense contravenes the criteria for qualifying as a 'materialist conception' and, therefore, a science.²²² Laws in history are only to be understood as *tendential*. Althusser argued that a tendential law is a kind of regularity that may not be necessarily manifest nor universal. Given some conditions, a tendential law will be active and observable. *But* if those background conditions do not obtain then that law may be rendered ineffective. This, Althusser claimed, is both the way we should think about laws in history, and the way that Marx did (sometimes) think about laws in history.²²³ What gives such a law a tendential character, Marx argued, is that there are 'counteracting influences at work, which cross and annul the effect of the general law'.²²⁴

This conception seems to point to a difficulty about the empirical verification of laws in social science, but it cannot be said to constitute a substantively different conception of what those laws are. A causal law can only be said to exist if it does so irrespective of whether or not it is actually realised at a given moment: 'such mechanisms endure even when not acting; and act in their normal way even when the consequents of the law-like statements they ground are, owing to the operation of intervening mechanisms or countervailing causes, unrealized'.²²⁵ The problem for the social scientist is *isolating* such a law separate from other such laws (or accidents) that may intervene. But that is a claim about the difficulty of studying an object, not a claim about whether the object exhibits causal structures. Nothing just said would omit Cohen's laws from qualifying as a tendential law. 'Tendencies', Bhaskar argues, 'are roughly powers which may be exercised unfulfilled', and this describes the normal state of a law in any system not

²²¹ Cohen, *Karl Marx's Theory of History*, 134.

²²² Althusser, 'Philosophy and Marxism', *Philosophy of the Encounter*, 255.

²²³ See, for example, Karl Marx, 'Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, Volume III', in Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Marx-Engels Collected Works: Capital, Volume 3* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1998), xxxvii, 25–871 (209–65).

²²⁴ Marx, 'Capital, Vol. III', *MECW: Capital, Volume 3*, xxxvii, 230.

²²⁵ Bhaskar, *Realist Theory*, 36.

subject to experimental control.²²⁶

A more interesting picture emerges, however, when we consider how tendential laws interact with one another. It is with this that Althusser puts distance between this concept of ‘tendential law’ and the Engels/Cohen approach.

Let us suppose, as we generally do, that there is one physical reality with one set of laws, universal in time and space. Althusser’s position is that this is not the case for social scientific laws—a domain in which the laws can change. The laws of physics emerge from the properties of the natural world but social laws are reified forms of human behaviour, which is variable not fixed. There are multiple ‘worlds’ each with their own set of laws. These laws are the internal necessities of the modes of production. It is in the interactions between these laws that contingency is introduced. A tendential law is

capable of inflecting (but not contradicting) *the primary tendential law*, which means that a tendency does not possess the form or figure of a linear law, but that it can bifurcate under the impact of an encounter with another tendency, and so on *ad infinitum*. At each intersection the tendency can take a path that is unforeseeable because it is *aleatory*.²²⁷

By ‘not contradicting’ what Althusser appears to mean is that the (primary) tendential law cannot be abolished entirely within the bounds of the world in which it exists. This is by definition true, for if such a law were abolished a new world would pertain. Within a given world a law of this type could be stifled in perpetuity, but if the countervailing factors that are preventing its realisation were to disappear the law would re-assert itself. Such a law is real and active irrespective of whether it is, at a given moment, invisible owing to its suppression.

The next part of the passage quoted above concerns the interactions between laws. The encounter, as it is used here, is not between ‘atoms’ but causal laws. This is where contingency enters the picture. What seems to be the case, for Althusser, is that there are regularities which can be observed, documented, and comprehended. These are the causal laws of a given social structure that proceed, all other things remaining equal, in a predictable fashion. Social structures are not expressive totalities, however, but complex wholes. There are multiple tendential laws at work simultaneously, laws not necessarily compatible with or functional to one another. And the interactions between those laws is what is aleatory. The laws are sequences of constantly conjoined events for which we have identified an explanatory mechanism. But the consequences of their interactions are events which are unpredictable. Where Althusser had formerly tried to present this kind of idea in the dialectical materialist terminology of ‘contradiction’, in which the structure was formed from causal laws that produced contradictory effects which made the law self-limiting, this is now supplanted by the idea of the aleatory interaction of tendential laws.²²⁸

²²⁶ Ibid, 88.

²²⁷ Althusser, ‘Philosophy and Marxism’, *Philosophy of the Encounter*, 264.

²²⁸ See Balibar, ‘Basic Concepts’, *Reading Capital*, 453–63.

As Suchting has pointed out ‘tendential law’ is a deceptive label because it is not the law itself that is tendential.²²⁹ If nothing impeded the law, it would be realised and realised in a perfectly predictable manner. The point Althusser is emphasising is that the law may or may not be realised dependent on its interaction with other laws—that it is ‘tendential’ means that conditions can obtain that disrupt the operation of the law. The idea that there are ‘laws of history’ has frequently come under scrutiny because they are thought to mean law in the first sense. Much of the worry about Marxist determinism might dissipate if laws are thought about in this tendential way.

There is a distinction to be had, in Althusser’s view, between two different types of sciences which make use of, respectively, universal deterministic laws and tendential laws. ‘*The laws of nature*’, Althusser said, ‘*are not “tendential”, that is, they are not conflictual and not subject to revolutions*’—they do not change.²³⁰ The division does not quite run straightforwardly between natural and social science, but rather between those sciences which deal with unique cases and those which deal with repeatable ones. On the former side are history, psychoanalysis, and medicine. For these, experimental isolation is not possible. They use abstractions help us unlock knowledge about the individual instance. On the other side are the ‘natural sciences’ by which Althusser probably means (at a minimum) physics and chemistry:

Our philosopher can conduct *experiments* on the consecutions of aleatory sequences that he has been able to observe, and can (like Hume) work out laws of consecution, ‘customary’ laws or *constants*, that is, structured theoretical figures. These experiments will lead him to deduce universal *laws* for each type of experiment, depending on the type of entities that served as its object: that is how the natural sciences proceed ... But what transpires when it is not a question of objects which repeat themselves indefinitely and on which experiments can be repeated and rerun by the scientific community from one end of the world to the other? ... Here the materialist philosopher-traveller, who is attentive to ‘singular’ cases, cannot state ‘laws’ about them, since such cases are singular/concrete/factual and are therefore not repeated, because they are unique. What he *can* do ... is to single out ‘*general constants*’ among the encounters he has observed, the ‘variations’ of which are capable of accounting for the singularity of the cases under consideration, and thus produce knowledge of the ‘clinical’ sort as well as ideological, political and social effects. Here we again find not the universality of laws (of the physical, mathematical or logical sort), but the *generality* of the *constants* which, by their variation, enable us to apprehend what is true of such-and-such a case.²³¹

The same idea is repeated in ‘The Only Materialist Tradition: Spinoza’ (1985):

Traversed and haunted by repetitive or constant invariants ... repetitive constants—that one can rediscover under their singular variations in other singularities of the same species and genus ... generic constants or invariants, as one wishes, which arise in the existence of singular ‘cases’ and which permit their *treatment* ... generic

²²⁹ Suchting, ‘Althusser’s Late Thinking’, *Historical Materialism*, 44–45.

²³⁰ Althusser, *Non-Philosophers*, 90.

²³¹ Althusser, ‘Philosophy and Marxism’, *Philosophy of the Encounter*, 278.

and not ‘general’ constants and invariants, *constants and not laws*, which obviously do not constitute the object of a will to *verification* in an abstract renewable experimental *dispositif*, as in physics or chemistry, but whose repetitive insistence permits us to mark the form of singularity in presence and, therefore, its treatment.²³²

It has been suggested that ‘constant’ and ‘tendential law’ are synonymous.²³³ This is a mistake. By constants what Althusser referred to are those more or less persistent features of social structures that provide us with a common conceptual framework with which to examine and compare them. One thinks of politics, ideology, philosophy, science, economy, and class struggle as examples. The tendential laws are established as variants of the constant in each specific mode of production. Constants are, in this sense, not laws—they do not propose mechanisms that explain constantly conjoined events—but categories that group like phenomena. What Althusser appears to have had in mind here is a view like that offered by Marx: ‘all epochs of production, however, have certain features in common, certain common determinations. *Production in general* is an abstraction, but a reasonable abstraction in so far as it actually emphasises and defines the common aspects and thus spares us the need of repetition’.²³⁴

That historians do not have access to the same experimental methodology as the natural sciences is a well-established difference between them. Because history is composed of unrepeatable moments, it must do something different to natural sciences in which events can be repeated.²³⁵ Some natural sciences have the capacity to isolate particular kinds of event by controlling for other events. They can thus verify hypotheses experimentally, in well-defined conditions that can be replicated. No such experimental verification is available to historians, the events of history being unrepeatable, because they are unable to control for other variables in order to isolate specific mechanisms. Some disciplines, Althusser observed, are confined to locating “general constants” ... the “variations” of which are capable of accounting for the singularity of the cases’.²³⁶ As Marx put it ‘in the analysis of economic forms, moreover, neither microscopes nor chemical reagents are of use. The force of abstraction must replace both’.²³⁷

This differentiation between these two types of sciences is less sustainable and necessary than Althusser thought it was. Neither tendential laws nor constants provide us with a viable way of differentiating two different kinds of science. Suchting has argued that it is ‘based on a premodern “Aristotelian” conception’ of science; the natural sciences, just like the sciences of singular cases ‘starts with the singular and return to the singular, via “constants”’.²³⁸ As Collier points out, ‘in the natural sciences too, such

²³² Althusser, ‘Only Materialist Tradition: Spinoza’, *New Spinoza*, 9.

²³³ Suchting, ‘Althusser’s Late Thinking’, *Historical Materialism*, 44; Edgar Illas, ‘The Procrustean Bed of Class Struggle’, *Décalages*, 1:3 (2014), 1–16
<<http://scholar.oxy.edu/decalages/vol1/iss3/2>> (6).

²³⁴ Marx, ‘Introduction’, *MECW: 1857–1861*, xxviii, 23.

²³⁵ Althusser, *Marxist in Philosophy*, 28–29.

²³⁶ Althusser, ‘Philosophy and Marxism’, *Philosophy of the Encounter*, 278. See also Althusser, ‘Sur l’histoire’, *Écrits sur l’histoire*, 279–81.

²³⁷ Marx, ‘Capital, Vol. I’, *MECW: Capital, Volume 1*, xxxv, 8.

²³⁸ Suchting, ‘Althusser’s Late Thinking’, *Historical Materialism*, 50.

abstraction has to be made before experiment becomes possible. The “experimental conditions” of the laboratory are essentially reproductions in reality of abstractions that have already taken place in thought’.²³⁹ All scientific laws, in either social or natural science, should be thought of as tendential.²⁴⁰ The idea of randomness has become fundamental to modern science, as I will return to below.²⁴¹ In fact, everything Althusser said about living history ‘would seem to apply not only to social history but also to natural history, from cosmology to biological evolution’.²⁴²

I argued in section 2.1 that Althusser was a naturalist (the view that natural sciences and social sciences are instances of the same type of discourse) but not a positivist (the combination of the views that there is no distinction between essence and phenomenon, that nominalism is the correct ontological standpoint, that values are not facts, and that there is a unity of the scientific method) in the context of his 1960s writings. He could not be categorised as a positivist because he did not think there was a single scientific method definitive of the enterprise of science. Moving forward to Althusser’s 1980s writings this remains a correct description of Althusser’s commitments. A science of history should not only be considered possible, but it is not even a science of a special type. The kind of apparatus Althusser deployed can be found at work in sciences which have required no comparable justifications as to their status. It is not that a science of history is an especially unique kind of science, but that what constitutes science is subject to persistent misunderstandings.

The aleatory materialist idea ‘turns’, Althusser wrote, ‘on a certain interpretation of the single proposition *there is*’.²⁴³ This is a more formal statement of the metaphor we saw Althusser use in the last chapter of the train that is already moving when the materialist philosopher climbs aboard, without knowing where he came from and where he is going. The idealist philosopher, in contrast, knows where the train is coming from and where it is going. He is getting off at Lyon, and never doubts this. The materialist philosopher starts by knowing nothing (he does not even ‘know that the earth is round’) and consequently has to speak with the other passengers and look out of the window to find out about the journey. The idealist philosopher ‘knows the path in advance, and dives into *Le Monde* or his correspondence work during the journey’. The idealist philosopher will leave the train the same person as he arrived. The materialist, however, will have changed because of his encounters.²⁴⁴ Idealism purports to know the start and the end, and thus the journey is irrelevant. Materialism knows neither the start or the end, and thus the events of the journey become important. The raw materials that the materialist scientist has to work on are not absolutes, the keys to unlocking the whole, but contingencies, ‘the contingency of what the capitalist class struggle, the capitalist

²³⁹ Andrew Collier, ‘In Defence of Epistemology’, in *Issues in Marxist Philosophy*, III, 55–106 (95).

²⁴⁰ Roy Bhaskar, *The Possibility of Naturalism: A Philosophical Critique of the Contemporary Human Sciences* (London: Routledge, 1998), 50.

²⁴¹ Paul Cockshott, ‘On Althusser’s Philosophy of the Encounter’, *World Review of Political Economy*, 4:1 (2013), 38–62 (51–60).

²⁴² Suchting, ‘Althusser’s Late Thinking’, *Historical Materialism*, 43.

²⁴³ Althusser, ‘Underground Current’, *Philosophy of the Encounter*, 189.

²⁴⁴ Althusser, ‘Matérialisme aléatoire’, *Multitudes*, 186.

mode of production, and the dominant ideology make visible'.²⁴⁵ The idealist treats those contingencies as givens, as if they could have been no other way.

Althusser's formulations of this might lead us to think he is endorsing the kind of naïve empiricism that he had previously dismissed (see 2.1). This would be, I think, a serious error. The reason for having taken a path through Althusser's earlier work to reach this point has been to make the case that his later works should be understood on the basis of arguments provided previously, arguments that are not restated clearly in the aleatory texts proper. Althusser continued to endorse an epistemological theory developed via Spinozist parallelism, of knowledge as production 'from abstract generality to concrete singularity' for reasons that should already be clear.²⁴⁶

What we are looking at when we study the singular cases—conjunctures—that are the raw material of historical science is the presence of the laws which 'bifurcate under the impact of an encounter with another tendency'.²⁴⁷ Thus what Althusser maintained is productive of the characteristic contingency which gives history its open character is the interaction of the deterministic causal sequences with one another. What we have to work with are successive conjunctures, and from them we need to work out what are constantly conjoined events with an underlying mechanism, and what events are not constantly conjoined but occur in the aleatory interaction of these mechanisms. Althusser left the assertion about 'bifurcation' without elaboration, although it is surely one on which quite a lot rests. Clearly, there are events which are not random when occurring at the intersection of two or more laws. A body subject to air resistance and gravity follows a predictable trajectory at a predictable acceleration. While there is no indication Althusser intended for his claims to have a broader purview than history, they arguably have a wider foundation.

I will adduce a natural science example from the chemist Ilya Prigogine that will help to elaborate what Althusser was getting at.²⁴⁸ I make this comparison not to make a claim about grounding history in the properties of the natural world, but only to provide a comparison that may help to illuminate the case at hand and to demonstrate that the kind of mechanisms Althusser posited are not novel constructions. Prigogine argues that irreversible systems—systems which exhibit time-directionality—cannot be fully explained by deterministic laws. Non-equilibrium systems undergo 'fluctuations and instabilities' that are productive of a new ordering of the system in which it adopts 'a new mode of functioning'.²⁴⁹ Systems near to equilibrium tend to stay there unless they experience exogenous disruption. At far-from-equilibrium states, however, fluctuations may become amplified rendering the system unstable. Where this occurs, the system

²⁴⁵ Bruschi, 'Splitting Science', *Rethinking Marxism*, 37.

²⁴⁶ Althusser, 'Only Materialist Tradition: Spinoza', *New Spinoza*, 9–10.

²⁴⁷ Althusser, 'Philosophy and Marxism', *Philosophy of the Encounter*, 264.

²⁴⁸ Prigogine is concerned with showing how the second law of thermodynamics accounts for change through time. My selection of this example is not arbitrary. As Foster and Burkett show, not only is it untrue that Engels rejected the second law of thermodynamics but it played a major role in the thinking of Marx and Engels; John Bellamy Foster and Paul Burkett, 'Classical Marxism and the Second Law of Thermodynamics', *Organization and Environment*, 21:1 (2008), 3–37.

²⁴⁹ Prigogine, *End of Certainty*, 65; Prigogine and Stengers, *Order Out of Chaos*, 190.

has reached its 'bifurcation point' and a number of possible paths become available to it.²⁵⁰ The path the system takes is seemingly without reason: 'the system "chooses" one of the possible branches available when far from equilibrium. But nothing in the macroscopic equations justifies the preference for any one solution. This introduces an irreducible probabilistic element'.²⁵¹ Thus the question of methodological holism is raised—there is a difference between the micro- and macro-levels, each of which is not fully explicable by the other.

A full description of the system 'involves both deterministic processes (between bifurcations) and probabilistic processes (in the choice of branches)'.²⁵² The individual trajectories within the system might be described deterministically, but the state of the system as a whole can only be described statistically.²⁵³ It is these bifurcations that give these systems the characteristic of irreversibility, namely that they can only be described in one direction through time (they are directional). To do otherwise would require infinite information; hence they are subject to do what Prigogine calls an 'entropy barrier'.²⁵⁴ Irreversibility is 'the mechanism that brings order out of chaos'.²⁵⁵

Marx and Engels claimed that mechanisms of this sort were subject to 'the law of the transformation of quantity into quality'—which they may be, only that it is what the consequent 'quality' will be that is the question.²⁵⁶ For Engels, this was governed by the dialectic (so you knew what came next). For Althusser (and Prigogine), however, we should think about the results of such mechanisms in an aleatory, rather than dialectical, way.

It is irreversible systems, Prigogine argues, that account for the emergence of true novelty in nature (including, he hazards, life)—phenomena which previously did not exist.²⁵⁷ These changes occur as a consequence of the contingent outcomes of unstable systems. Prigogine emphasises that he believes this to be an *actual* description of the processes involved and not merely a lack of knowledge, nor a property introduced by the observer in their attempts to measure it.²⁵⁸ And, interestingly, Prigogine links his conception to Epicurean atomism: the swerve 'he envisaged no longer belongs to a philosophical dream that is foreign to physics. It is the very expression of dynamical instability'.²⁵⁹

In order to explain the irreversible-therefore-directional nature of these systems

²⁵⁰ Prigogine, *End of Certainty*, 63–70; Prigogine and Stengers, *Order Out of Chaos*, 160–70.

²⁵¹ Prigogine, *End of Certainty*, 68.

²⁵² *Ibid*, 69.

²⁵³ *Ibid*, 113–14.

²⁵⁴ Prigogine and Stengers, *Order Out of Chaos*, 277–80.

²⁵⁵ *Ibid*, 292.

²⁵⁶ Engels, 'Dialectics of Nature', *MECW: Anti-Dühring, Dialectics of Nature*, xxv, 356; Marx, 'Capital, Vol. I', *MECW: Capital, Volume 1*, xxxv, 313.

²⁵⁷ Prigogine and Stengers, *Order Out of Chaos*, 175–76. This is also the view of Monod; Monod, *Chance and Necessity*, 144–45.

²⁵⁸ Prigogine, *End of Certainty*, 132; Prigogine and Stengers, *Order out of Chaos*, 251–52, 274–77.

²⁵⁹ Prigogine, *End of Certainty*, 127. On the connection to Epicurus see: *ibid*, 9–56; Prigogine and Stengers, *Order Out of Chaos*, 141, 303–5.

randomness is introduced. Classical mechanics equations are time-symmetric—they work equally well both backwards and forwards in time. If a system is irreversible, however, it cannot be, by definition, returned to its former state. Thus a kind of directionality is present. As Prigogine says, ‘it is because the future is not contained in the present and that we go from the present to the future that the arrow of time is associated with the transition from present to future’.²⁶⁰ As we have seen, Althusser argued against directionality in history as a condition of its scientificity, but I think directionality in this sense is both implied by, and is necessary to, Althusser’s position. If directionality is taken in a teleological sense, as direction *to* something, then Althusser is surely right to reject that idea. There is another sense of directionality, identified by Wright and Levine, which ‘merely claims that there is some positive impulse for movement and that movement is “biased” in a certain direction’.²⁶¹ This, I think, Althusser can subscribe to. He thought that there was an impulse towards movement, and if I am right to describe his view in terms of an irreversible system then he must have also thought this movement was directional—it could not be a precise recovery of a former state.²⁶²

In section 2.3.3 I remarked that Levine’s description of Althusser’s structural causality as a ‘placeholder term’ was perceptive.²⁶³ We are now in a position to see why. Prigogine maintains that a description of the path the system takes is not reducible to the individual atomic trajectories. That is, the latter cannot be explained fully in terms of the former. Only the system-level statistical description can account for the fact of irreversibility. This is because in such systems the trajectories of the atoms beginning from the same initial conditions diverge (exhibit randomness), but they also exhibit ‘long-range correlations’.²⁶⁴ As Prigogine says of his own model, ‘we are trained to think in terms of linear causality, but we need new “tools of thought”’. This is precisely where Althusser’s structural causality enters the picture as the theory of the encounter, for they really describe one and the same idea.

The curious thing about structural causality read in this way is that its function is to explain how change is possible at all. It will be worth reminding ourselves why Althusser invoked this much-disputed concept in the first place. What Althusser thought he was dealing with, in history, were *complex* phenomena that were only intelligible when situated as part of a structure. One could not get a handle on these phenomena by imagining them as pre-given—a state of original independence.²⁶⁵ Additionally, the structure is *only* an arrangement of its parts. It does not exist ‘outside’ of them, and they

²⁶⁰ Ibid, 277.

²⁶¹ Wright, Levine, and Sober, *Reconstructing Marxism*, 79.

²⁶² Whether this is true depends on how ‘fine-grained’ one’s perspective is. Wright, Levine, and Sober argue merely that a return to a former state is less likely than a “progressive” change’, not that it is impossible. Presumably, they think that returning contemporary France to an exact repeat of fourteenth-century France is impossible, but a move from capitalism to feudalism is only improbable. On this, I think, Althusser is unclear but could subscribe to provided that new states are described in terms of *difference* from former states, rather than as ‘higher’ or ‘lower’ than them in some ordering of the states.

²⁶³ Levine, *Future for Marxism*, 117.

²⁶⁴ Prigogine, *End of Certainty*, 67.

²⁶⁵ Althusser, ‘Object of *Capital*’, *Reading Capital*, 339.

did not originate with it. Nor is there a central mechanism of coordination. ‘*The whole existence of the structure*’, Althusser wrote, ‘*consists in its effects*’.²⁶⁶

Prigogine confronts precisely the same problem. He rejects solutions that invoke an original independence of the atoms.²⁶⁷ The reason for this is because once one does so the trajectories of the atoms become time-reversible (describable by classical mechanics) and thus it cannot rule out ‘spontaneous long-term deviation from equilibrium’.²⁶⁸ On this view, irreversibility is illusory and it cannot play the constructive role assigned to it: given sufficient knowledge it can be described in terms of reversible processes. What we actually observe is the spontaneous production of newly ordered systems—‘the system evolves to a steady state’—and it is this spontaneous production that produces new phenomena.²⁶⁹ It is Prigogine’s conviction that this change is not merely illusory, but a real process. Something is *added* by the fact of structuring that was not otherwise there. Prigogine’s claim here is that matter under such conditions begins to “see”, by which he seems to mean that it behaves in a way that it does not in stable equilibrium systems.²⁷⁰ ‘Matter’s activity’, he says, ‘is related to the nonequilibrium conditions that it itself may generate’.²⁷¹ The parts are changed on account of their organisation of the structure, and the structure is nothing but those parts. The consequence is that ‘each individual action or each local intervention has a collective aspect that can result in quite unanticipated global changes’.²⁷²

Irreversible systems have their micro-foundations in the differential behaviour of the parts, but that behaviour is only explicable by the fact they exist within a system—or, structure. Such a conception has the appearance of being *causa sui* and following a structural rather than linear or expressive causality. Consider that the system cannot be explained either in terms of its initial conditions (which would give probabilistic not determinate results) nor its observed state (from which the initial conditions cannot be derived). The linear path from cause to effect appears broken. The cause is, as Althusser said, seemingly ‘absent’. The cause is contingency: ‘chance produces necessity by itself, with no intervention by God. This is tantamount to saying that the World produces itself’.²⁷³ It is absent because it is *part of* that world, not outside it. If we want to avoid the pseudo-problem of the origin, then the world must be cast as the cause of itself—as exhibiting the spontaneous generation of order without external intervention.

Structural causality in this sense describes the kind of causality at work in overdetermined structures, a concept which corresponds here to Prigogine’s ‘nonequilibrium systems’. To reach this point, however, it has necessitated re-reading these concepts through the lens of aleatory materialism. The structure, Althusser had

²⁶⁶ Ibid, 344.

²⁶⁷ Prigogine and Stengers, *Order Out of Chaos*, 246.

²⁶⁸ Prigogine, *End of Certainty*, 23.

²⁶⁹ Ibid, 26.

²⁷⁰ Ibid, 67.

²⁷¹ Prigogine and Stengers, *Order Out of Chaos*, 181.

²⁷² Ibid, 203.

²⁷³ Althusser, *Non-Philosophers*, 30.

argued in *Reading Capital*, was framed around an ‘absent cause ... a cause immanent in its effects’.²⁷⁴ We can now see that this is captured in the concept of the void. In the void there is ‘no Cause that precedes its effects ... One reasons here not in terms of the Necessity of the accomplished fact, but in terms of the contingency of the fact to be accomplished’.²⁷⁵ The void is ‘*the very form of the interiority of the structure*’, namely the background condition against which the encounters and bifurcations take place—the necessity of contingency.²⁷⁶ What Althusser’s initial statement of structural causality had lacked was any clear account of this. But the problem was not, then, structural causality, but dialectical materialism which had provided the deterministic overtones.²⁷⁷

4.5.2 Relations of Production and the Last Instance

We can now broach a remaining issue surrounding the aleatory materialist enterprise: namely, did Althusser endorse, and could he endorse consistently, a theory that can still be meaningfully described as *Marxist*? Now, we know that Althusser did not claim that aleatory materialism is itself specifically and only Marxist, in that it is neither an explicit construction of Karl Marx nor is it unique to his successors. But Althusser did claim that it should be adopted as part of Marxism, in that it could helpfully inform historical materialism. In this section I will reject the view that it is a consequence of aleatory materialism to undermine either a) the specifically Marxist theory of history or b) a science of history in general.

The kind of approach provided above will, I think, suffice for examining the internal operation of a given mode of production. Marx’s *Capital* is first and foremost an attempt to understand capitalism. Althusser had argued, in 1978, that Marxism ‘is limited to the analysis of the capitalist mode of production’.²⁷⁸ In this case, Marxism was not a science of history but a science only of capitalism. Althusser must have only temporarily held this position. Before this, as we have already seen, he was concerned with the construction of a science of history.²⁷⁹ And while I can find no explicit disavowal of this comment post-1978 the evidence speaks strongly as to Althusser having continued to see a wider purview for Marxist theory. It is clear he does not hold this view by the time of ‘The Underground Current’ (1982), and in ‘Sur l’histoire’ (1986) he said that ‘the theory of the analytical or historical invariants ... can be, if we take it seriously, a *scientific falsifiable theory*’.²⁸⁰ There are compelling reasons to think that he was right to abandon this thought. For how does one delimit capitalism from things-that-are-not-capitalism? And how can we distinguish ‘change *within* the system versus change *of* the

²⁷⁴ Althusser, ‘Object of *Capital*’, *Reading Capital*, 344.

²⁷⁵ Althusser, ‘Underground Current’, *Philosophy of the Encounter*, 173–74.

²⁷⁶ Althusser, ‘Object of *Capital*’, *Reading Capital*, 344.

²⁷⁷ Althusser portrays structural causality as ‘dialectical *materialist* causality’; Althusser, ‘Elements of Self-Criticism’, *Self-Criticism*, 126.

²⁷⁸ Althusser, ‘Marxism as a Finite Theory’, *Viewpoint Magazine*, §7. Others have also made this case; see, for example, Little, *Scientific Marx*, 40–67.

²⁷⁹ See, for example, Althusser, ‘À propos de Marx et l’histoire’, in *Écrits sur l’histoire*, 261–78 (264–75).

²⁸⁰ Althusser, ‘Sur l’histoire’, *Écrits sur l’histoire*, 280; my translation.

system'?²⁸¹ To answer these kinds of questions it is necessary to have a theory of history.²⁸²

Historical materialism has usually been understood as according specific importance to the economic field and the classes that are formed there, and it is this that makes it unique. For historical materialists, there is something about the mechanism of class struggle that is explanatorily important in a way that other forms of social conflict are not. Thus historical materialists have been faced with the challenge of justifying why it is that they award analytical priority to class agents, rather than, for example, gendered, cultural, or political agents. Marxists do so because they think relations of production are constitutive of the social world in a more fundamental way than other kinds of relations, and it is those relations of production that form classes.

Althusser argued that Marx produced a science of history, the specific novelty which differentiated it from other theories of history was that it provided alternative explanatory mechanisms to that of reading the 'accomplished fact' back into the past as if that fact was an inevitable outcome. To do so, Althusser saw a need to abandon the idea that there are transhistorical laws of history. The tendential laws are operative within the boundaries of a particular world. The possible trajectories that the world might take, including contributing to the formation of a different world, are constrained by those laws (the possibilities are not unlimited). But worlds are only formed in encounters *between* the tendential laws, the consequences of which are unknowable in advance because they are aleatory. Althusser was ultimately concerned with demonstrating not the laws of a given world, but that 'the necessity of the laws that issue from the taking-hold induced by the encounter is, even at its most stable, haunted by a *radical instability*, which explains something we find very hard to grasp ... that laws can change'.²⁸³

My reading of Althusser up to this point has been to see him as endorsing a class struggle version of historical materialism rather than a technological determinist version. My view of the aleatory Althusser is that he can only be made sense of if he is understood to be endorsing a class struggle version of historical materialism. And I think he does so in his aleatory phase less problematically and more consistently than he had previously. Therefore, I want to establish the centrality of classical historical materialist ideas to Althusser in his aleatory phase, before going on to show that these ideas are not incompatible with his proposed aleatory materialism.

There are three pieces of evidence present in the aleatory works that demonstrate Althusser's continued attention to class as of particular significance in historical explanation. These examples are by no means exhaustive, and merely reflect the most prominent topics in Althusser's late writings.

²⁸¹ Robert Brenner, 'Property and Progress: Where Adam Smith Went Wrong', in *Marxist History-Writing for the Twenty-First Century*, ed. by Chris Wickham (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 49–111 (59).

²⁸² See Althusser, 'Underground Current', *Philosophy of the Encounter*, 196.

²⁸³ *Ibid*, 195.

The first example is Althusser's continued adherence to the definition of philosophy as 'class struggle in theory' that he formulated in 1968.²⁸⁴ Althusser continues to use this definition in his 1984–87 interviews collected as 'Philosophy and Marxism'. Here he argued that philosophy is the class struggle in theory with the crucial qualifier that it is only so "in the last instance" for there are other things going on in philosophy, but it remained, for Althusser, at bottom explicable in terms of class.²⁸⁵

The second example is that Althusser singled out class struggle as particularly important for living history: 'living history obeys only a constant (not a law): the constant of class struggle'.²⁸⁶ Suchting has asserted that seeing class struggle in this way is not a good way of stating the case, for it would seem to rule out the possibility that pre-class and post-class societies are possible. Discussions about whether societies without classes have existed, do exist, or could exist aside, the possibility of their existence cannot be excluded *a priori* by the theory without compromising it, because it must allow for phenomena not yet observed.²⁸⁷ While qualifying the claim might re-admit such phenomena, one would still be saddled with the issue of explaining how class struggle initially got going.

We would do better to shift our focus by restating the central claim of historical materialism. Class struggle is important *because* the field on which classes are formed—relations of production—is important, not vice versa. In some instances, relations of production are such that there are antagonistic classes, but it is possible to envisage relations of production where that is not the case. My view is that Althusser does indeed place relations of production at the heart of his theory.

The third example is comprised of the final part of the 'Underground Current of the Materialism of the Encounter' (1982) which, in fact, falls in the middle of the archival manuscript.²⁸⁸ Althusser's intent was

to give some sense of the underground current of the materialism of the encounter, which is very important in Marx, and of its repression by a (philosophical) materialism of essence, we have to discuss the mode of production. No one can deny the importance of this concept, which serves not only to think every 'social formation', but also to periodize the history of social formations, and thus to found a theory of history.²⁸⁹

From this we know that a) after an extensive discussion of aleatory materialism we remain concerned with the foundations of a theory of history b) that we are concerned, in particular, with the concept of the 'mode of production', the concept by which the process of history can be divided into discrete units. It is evident that Althusser is not solely concerned with the *definition* of a mode of production, as a general concept or

²⁸⁴ Althusser, 'Revolutionary Weapon', *Lenin and Philosophy*, 6.

²⁸⁵ Althusser, 'Philosophy and Marxism', *Philosophy of the Encounter*, 270–71.

²⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 264.

²⁸⁷ Suchting, 'Althusser's Late Thinking', *Historical Materialism*, 43.

²⁸⁸ See Althusser, 'Ouvrage sans titre', IMEC, ALT2. A29-02.02.

²⁸⁹ Althusser, 'Underground Current', *Philosophy of the Encounter*, 196.

specific modes of production, but also with how one mode becomes another mode—a theory of transition. The literature on aleatory materialism has failed to take sufficient account of what is here both quite clearly stated and not in tension with, but *supported by*, the rest of the text.

In the pages that follow this passage, Althusser described two different theories that he called, respectively, an ‘essentialistic and philosophical’ theory and a ‘historico-aleatory conception’.²⁹⁰ The two theories pertain to the two types of historical theory differentiated in the previous section: static history and living history, respectively. My hypothesis is that the former refers to the productive force determinism version of historical materialism and the latter denotes class struggle historical materialism. These two theories are, Althusser claimed, ‘absolutely unrelated’ by which I presume he meant that they two entirely different and incompatible views about the subject in question.²⁹¹

The essentialist theory is expounded in the form of ‘the laws of development of the capitalist mode of production’. The proletariat and capitalists are two sides of the same coin, the mutual constructions of the same unfolding process. This theory treats the different elements of the capitalist mode of production as if ‘they were from all eternity destined to enter into combination, harmonize with one another, and reciprocally produce each other as their own ends, conditions and or complements ... *the structure precedes its elements and reproduces them in order to reproduce the structure*’.²⁹²

The ‘historico-aleatory’ theory, in contrast, treats capitalism as the result of an encounter between landless labour and those with money to purchase labour. These two elements came into being for independent reasons, but when they met they found themselves counterparts in launching a new mode of production, thereby contributing to a result that had nothing to do with why they existed in the first place. The mode of production comes into being by a contingent encounter between the atoms that takes place in the void.

According to Althusser, Marx proposed both theories. The former is present, in particular, in the logical deductive sequence of *Capital*. The latter is found in Marx and Engels’ works of empirical history, commencing with *The Condition of the Working Class in England* (1845) and continuing in the historical chapters of *Capital* (1867).²⁹³

What distinguishes a mode of production in the ‘historico-aleatory’ sense cannot be the presence of one or more particular elements, since the elements that come to make up the mode of production in some sense do proceed it. There is always-already something. The structure is produced from already existing entities. The point is that those entities undergo a real transformation when they become situated within a new structure. The encounter from which capitalism results is between landless labour and money owners, and in the context of the new structure they become *proletarians* and *capitalists*. What

²⁹⁰ Ibid, 198.

²⁹¹ Ibid, 197.

²⁹² Ibid, 200.

²⁹³ Ibid, 197.

distinguishes one mode of production from the previous one must, therefore, be the relations between the elements that transform them:

What then comprises the mode of production is a combination which subjects the productive forces (the means of production, the producers) to the domination of a totality, in which it is the owners of the means of production who are dominant ... a mode of production is a combination because it is a *structure* that imposes its unity on a series of elements.²⁹⁴

Althusser thus clearly endorsed a definition based on *relations*, not on a particular stage of development of *forces* of production. Consequently, we know that Althusser proposed a theory of history in which relations have a particularly important role. Are the relations Althusser has in mind the kind of relations that form classes?

We saw in section 2.3 how Althusser had sought to defend the centrality of relations of production to a theory of history via the concept of ‘determination in the last instance by the economy’. Overdetermination was useful in answering one charge levelled against Marxists, that they reduce all history’s dynamics to class struggle. Althusser argued that this was not the case, and he carved a space for the efficacy of other kinds of dynamic on the trajectory of history. But he maintained that the economy was determinant in the last instance, and it was the economy that imposed an overall schema of domination on a structure by imposing a particular order of relations between the other social practices. Thus a specifically Marxist account was defended.

This what Althusser has to say about the concept of the last instance in ‘Philosophy and Marxism’ (1984–87):

Anything can be determinant ‘in the last instance’, which is to say that anything can *dominate*. That is what Marx said about politics in Athens and religion in Rome, in an implicit theory of the displacement of the dominant instance ... But, even in the superstructure, what is determinant is also its materiality. That is why I was so interested in bringing out the real materiality of every superstructure and every ideology ... this is where the concept of the ‘last instance’ is to be sought, the displacement of materiality which is always determinant ‘in the last instance’ in every concrete conjuncture.²⁹⁵

Compare this to how Balibar articulated the idea in *Reading Capital*: ‘*The economy is determinant in that it determines which of the instances of the social structure occupies the determinant place*. Not a simple relation, but rather a relation between relations; not a transitive causality, but rather a structural causality’.²⁹⁶ As I noted in chapter 2 (see page 61 footnote 165), Althusser provided a slightly different formulation of this idea (‘On the Cultural Revolution’ (1966)) where he differentiated what

²⁹⁴ Ibid, 202–3.

²⁹⁵ Althusser, ‘Philosophy and Marxism’, *Philosophy of the Encounter*, 263. See also Althusser, ‘Thèses de juin’, IMEC, ALT2. A29-06.04, 8.

²⁹⁶ Balibar, ‘Basic Concepts’, *Reading Capital*, 385.

determines (the economy) and what *dominates* (the selected instance).²⁹⁷

In the first case, the aleatory materialist version, what is determinant is ‘materiality’. In the second case, Balibar’s version, it is the economy. Thus what Althusser seems to have abandoned is not determination, the idea of a structure-in-dominance, but the economy as the site of this determination. Is there a significant difference?

In ‘On the Cultural Revolution’ Althusser defined ‘the economic’ as ‘the relations of production’.²⁹⁸ In ‘Philosophy and Marxism’ the operative term is ‘materiality’. But we will recall, casting back to chapter 2, that everything material is produced for Althusser, not pre-given. The passage immediately preceding the one that I have just quoted from ‘Philosophy and Marxism’ is as follows:

The primacy of materiality is universal. This does not mean that the primacy of the infrastructure (mistakenly conceived as the sum of the material productive forces plus raw materials) is determinant in the last instance. The universality of this last notion is absurd unless it is brought into relation with the relations of production.²⁹⁹

Here Althusser straightforwardly rejects ‘the primacy of the infrastructure’ in favour of relations of production.

And when Althusser defines his concept of ‘mode of production’ he does so in conventional terms:

What counts in a mode of production, what makes it such-and-such, is the *mode of domination* of the structure over its elements. Thus, in the feudal mode of production, it is the *structure of dependence* which imposes their signification on the elements: possession of the manor, including the serfs who work on it, possession of the collective instruments (the mill, the farmland, etc.) by the lord, the subordinate role of money, except when, later, pecuniary relations are imposed on everyone. Thus, in the capitalist mode of production, it is the structure of exploitation that is imposed on all the elements, the subordination of the means of production and the productive forces to the process of exploitation, the exploitation of workers stripped of the means of production, the monopoly of the means of production in the hands of the capitalist class, and so forth.³⁰⁰

It is the prevailing relations of production that make it a structure in dominance and provide the grounds by which to periodise history. The difference, then, is only one of clarity: absent is reference to the ‘economic’ as determinant in the last instance. It is replaced by relations of production conceived of as the relations through which every social practice takes place. The mode of production is ‘anchored in “the last instance” by production.’³⁰¹ ‘Production’ should not be construed as referring to only economic

²⁹⁷ Anonymous [Attributed to Althusser], ‘Cultural Revolution’, *Décalages*, 12–13.

²⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 12.

²⁹⁹ Althusser, ‘Philosophy and Marxism’, *Philosophy of the Encounter*, 262–3.

³⁰⁰ Althusser, ‘Underground Current’, *Philosophy of the Encounter*, 203.

³⁰¹ Althusser, ‘Some Questions’, *Historical Materialism*, 164.

production, but the production of social life *in general*. The mode of domination in this sense is the domination of one class over others via their ownership of the means of production, means of production which are not simply economic but also produce ideological, political, and cultural power. As Goshgarian puts it, ‘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’.³⁰² The question is not whether such forms of power are grounded *economically* but *materially*. By the ‘economic’ Marxists have generally meant something more expansive than what the term is generally taken as designating, and this ambiguity has left them vulnerable to the charge of reductionism. Class, on this reading, runs through the entire field of social practices and is irreducible to any purely economic existence.

Therefore, the aleatory Althusser neither significantly overhauled nor rejected a classical Marxist understanding of why relations of production and, consequently, class, are the most important explanatory mechanisms of a science of history. Marxists think this ‘not because class is the only form of oppression or even the most frequent, consistent, or violent source of social conflict, but rather because its terrain is the social organization of production, which creates the material conditions of existence itself’.³⁰³ Class struggle enters as the principal explanatory mechanism because dependent on its course different strategies are made available to the agents to maintain the existing rules of reproduction. Class struggle has a disproportionate influence on setting the limits on 1) the other possible laws 2) the effects of the other laws 3) the overall trajectory of the process(es). It is a claim about causal asymmetry. It is not class struggle *per se* that serves as a transhistorical law, but that in societies that have relations of production that make them class-divided societies it is class struggle that serves as the most important background condition to the operation and intersection of other tendential laws.

To say that class struggle is always and directly the proximate cause of transitions is deceptive on this account. It is that transitions occur under particular conditions, conditions which are principally (but not only) set by class struggle. What transitions are *to* is dependent on a) the patterns imposed by class struggle b) what other elements are available to reconstitute a viable mode of production. The claim about importance is not one about the frequency of class struggle but about its potency.

Thus class struggle continues to retain critical importance in a hierarchy of causal laws, but does not act as an origin in the sense we have been discussing. Societies without class struggle are theoretically possible, as it is clearly possible to conceive of relations of production that do not entail differential access to the means of production for the agents.

I do not suppose this conception adds anything new. I have merely restated why it is that Marxists have tended to think of relations of production, class struggle, and class

³⁰² Goshgarian, ‘Introduction’, *Philosophy of the Encounter*, xxxviii.

³⁰³ Wood, *Democracy Against Capitalism*, 108.

as of particular importance. My aim has only been to show that:

- a) Such a view is compatible with aleatory materialism.
- b) Claims Althusser made in his aleatory period are only explicable with a view like this in mind.

Therefore:

- c) Althusser probably endorsed a view like this.
- d) Althusser has not moved between rigid determinism and pure contingency.
- e) Althusser has not abandoned a theory of history.
- f) Althusser retains a distinctively Marxist theory of history.

4.6 A Theory of Transitions

In this section, I will develop an aleatory theory of transitions between modes of productions. The central problem Althusser tried to confront with aleatory materialism is an explanation of how new rules of reproduction take hold. This must be achieved without supposing that the new laws pre-existed themselves: ‘before it there was something else, but nothing of it’.³⁰⁴ The standard dialectical materialist account of transitions explains them with the claim that because there is a continual tendency for humans to develop their forces of production, they will always eventually conflict with prevailing the relations of production. The specifically capitalist imperative to develop improved labour-saving techniques is read back through history to provide a transhistorical framework.

Fortunately, there is already an alternative theory that fulfils our criteria, namely the Brenner Thesis which I will expound in the first section. The Brenner Thesis is the *locus classicus* of the Political Marxist school. In the case Brenner studies, the transition from feudalism to capitalism in England, it is because strategies that would continue to reproduce the existing rules of reproduction become foreclosed to the ruling class that they are forced to take alternative actions that accidentally lead to the development of capitalist social relations. Elsewhere, the balance of class forces was such that strategies compatible with the continuation of feudal relations remained possible. Brenner’s account rests on the consequences of a variable, class struggle.

In the second section, I will show that the brief comments Althusser makes about an aleatory theory of transition accord, in the main, with the Brenner Thesis and Political Marxism. Althusser only outlined his aleatory theory of transitions in a cursory fashion and with little empirical detail. The more comprehensive work of the Political Marxist school can be used to fill this gap. This is notable because Political Marxists have paid little attention to Althusser, and where they have they have been critics. In fact, on the central issues at stake they are aligned. The proposition here regards affinity rather than influence. Althusser’s aleatory materialism, however, also helps supplement the Political Marxist account of transitions. As I have already argued using the example of

³⁰⁴ Althusser, *Machiavelli and Us*, 6.

Ellen Wood, Political Marxists leave the concept of contingency undertheorised while relying heavily on it for their method. My claim is that their theory is dependent on the kind of suppositions that Althusser sought to explore with aleatory materialism. If the Political Marxist theory of transitions is to be successfully generalised (applied beyond the case study of the transition from feudalism to capitalism in Western Europe) this kind of work is necessary.

4.6.1 The Brenner Thesis

Brenner argues that there are two theories of historical materialism in Marx's work. The first—found mainly between *The German Ideology* (1846) and *The Poverty of Philosophy* (1847)—is one in which developing forces of production alter the division of labour. The cumulative summation of changes in technology and, with it, the division of labour eventually produces qualitative shifts in the mode of production, complete with new forms of ideology and state.

The transition from feudalism to capitalism, on this model, can be summarised as follows: The unchecked power of lords over serfs in the countryside generated population movements towards towns. In the towns, craft manufacture became increasingly separated from agriculture. These types of production had previously taken place together within the same peasant households. In the towns, craft manufacture became divided into various branches producing different goods. Specialisation meant these goods were generally superior to those made by those engaged in mixed craft/agricultural production. The expansion of a group of skilled craftsmen dominated those involved in more menial tasks, eventually forming monopolies which attained political supremacy in the towns. The towns represented, then, a counter-power to the lords that ruled the countryside. The *production* and the *distribution* of goods became separate activities—industry and commerce undertaken by, respectively, the manufacturer and the merchant. The logic of competition took hold between manufacturers, facilitated by the spread of new production techniques via the merchants. The national market came into being with the absolutist states. Specialisation deepened, both between and within particular economic sectors. Simultaneously, in the countryside, the expansion of trade caused agricultural lords to transform serfs into tenant farmers and to evict the rest from the land. Thus capitalist property forms were established in the country, and a landless class headed to the towns in search of work.³⁰⁵

‘All collisions in history’, Marx and Engels argued, ‘have their origin, according to our view, in the contradiction between the productive forces and the form of intercourse’. This contradiction is expressed in what Marx called its ‘subsidiary forms’: ‘collisions of various classes, contradictions of consciousness, battle of ideas, political struggle,

³⁰⁵ Robert Brenner, ‘Bourgeois Revolution and the Transition to Capitalism’, in *The First Modern Society*, ed. by A. L. Beier, David Cannadine, and James M. Rosenheim (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 271–304 (274–80). See: Marx and Engels, ‘German Ideology’, *MECW: 1845–1847*, v, 64–74; Marx and Engels, ‘Communist Manifesto’, *MECW: 1845–1848*, vi, 482–96.

etc.’.³⁰⁶ What they here call ‘the form of intercourse’, the concept that is concordant with what Marx called ‘social relations’ from *The Poverty of Philosophy* onwards, is a static structure. It is the forces of production that change from one moment to the next and eventually, at the point they conflict with the prevailing social relations, induce macro-level change. Thus Marx and Engels produced the dichotomy between structure (the social relations) and history (the forces of production) that plagued historical materialism ever since.

Brenner criticises this model of transitions for seeing capitalism as a natural evolution. Given the starting premises, it is as if nothing but the increasing differentiation of labour, and its differentiation in this precise way, could have occurred. Brenner calls this account ‘*techno-functionalism*’. All historical change is reducible to the development of the forces of production, and these forces develop inevitably and cumulatively. Class struggles are, therefore, the effect and not the cause of the ‘inexorable development of the division of labour via the progress of the productive forces’.³⁰⁷ In this theory forces of production had a one-to-one correspondence with certain relations of production, an idea most succinctly expressed by Marx as ‘the hand-mill gives you society with the feudal lord; the steam-mill, society with the industrial capitalist’.³⁰⁸ Relations of production are neatly explained as outcomes of developing forces of production. In Brenner’s view, this was to take what was a unique feature of capitalism—the compulsion to constantly improve forces of production—and use it to explain how it was that that compulsion took hold in the first place.

In the second sequence of texts that Brenner identifies, from the *Grundrisse* (1857–58) onwards, Marx developed a different theory of transitions in which it is changes in the relations of production that explain changes in the forces of production. In this theory, pre-capitalist relations of production provide no compulsion to produce competitively by innovation and cost-cutting, and thus did not encourage the producers to accumulate beyond levels necessary for household subsistence. In other words, relations of production indeed restricted the growth of forces of production, but there was no reason that the forces of production should exceed what the prevailing relations of production could accommodate. There was no transhistorical law that dictated the forces of production should advance beyond the restrictions imposed by the relations. Pre-capitalist modes of production involved trade and markets, but the direct producers generally felt no compulsion to produce for exchange. Markets might supplement household goods, but the producers were not dependent upon those markets for their livelihoods. In the absence of competitive pressures in the economy at large merchants found it easier to maintain their profits by securing monopoly control via political alliances than they did by deploying labour-saving techniques. There was nothing intrinsic to feudalism that should cause it to break down and be replaced with capitalism. None of the major classes in feudalism experienced any direct incentive from feudalism itself to overthrow and replace it. Agents tended to take actions that *reproduced* existing relations of production, both because the possible actions they

³⁰⁶ Marx and Engels, ‘German Ideology’, *MECW: 1845–1847*, v, 75.

³⁰⁷ Brenner, ‘Bourgeois Revolution’, *First Modern Society*, 285.

³⁰⁸ Marx, ‘Poverty of Philosophy’, *MECW: 1845–1848*, vi, 166.

could take were constrained by the context in which they took them and because the actions that would reproduce those relations are the actions most likely to appear as to those agents as rational ones.³⁰⁹

On the first account, feudalism contains within itself the tendency towards its own dissolution, and a dissolution that can only result in capitalism. This directionality is accounted for by the development of the forces of production. The second account rejects any overarching mechanism that might account for transitions between modes of production. What, then, does explain how feudal societies became capitalist ones? It is here that Brenner thinks we must go beyond Marx:

Marx never went much beyond the foregoing posing of the problem of the transition from feudalism to capitalism. He did not systematically analyse the operation of pre-capitalist systems ... nor did he explain how their own functioning could bring about a transition to capitalism.³¹⁰

Having better understood the problem, the Brenner Thesis is an attempt to fill this gap in Marx's corpus. In two articles, 'Agrarian Class Structure and Economic Development in Pre-Industrial Europe' and 'The Agrarian Roots of European Capitalism', Brenner lays out his account of the transition from feudalism to capitalism. The feudal mode of production is composed of specific laws that dictate certain rhythms or patterns of change. The most important of these were Malthusian cycles, where populations increased disproportionately to agricultural productivity, consequently leading to demographic decline. Brenner's contention is that this, or any other pattern of feudalism, cannot explain what we need it to. He thinks this because different feudal societies subjected to the same trends experienced different outcomes. There must be, at a minimum, some other factor at work present in some places and not others. How else to explain, for example, serfdom east of the Elbe and its absence west of it?³¹¹

Serfdom was imposed by landlords in conditions of peasant scarcity in order to better secure their incomes. Demographic decline caused corresponding reductions in revenues, as fewer peasants produced less surplus for the lords to appropriate. In Eastern Europe, the excess of landlord power meant enserfment was possible. In Western Europe attempts to solve the lords' revenue crisis in this way were unsuccessful: 'this option was foreclosed to those in the west by the relatively greater strength of the western peasants'.³¹² The absence of serfdom is then explicable as the outcome of the enhanced bargaining position of peasants vis-à-vis landlords in conditions of peasant scarcity. Both outcomes can be made sense of as the rational responses of the respective beneficiary classes in conditions of demographic decline.

³⁰⁹ Brenner, 'Bourgeois Revolution', *First Modern Society*, 285–95.

³¹⁰ *Ibid*, 293.

³¹¹ If Malthusian cycles do not serve as an adequate explanation because responses to them were different places, then nor does the Smithian thesis of a transition ignited by expansion of trade for the reason that trade expanded while Malthusian cycles persisted. See Brenner, 'Property and Progress', *Marxist History-Writing*, 49–52.

³¹² Robert Brenner, 'The Agrarian Roots of European Capitalism' in *The Brenner Debate: Agrarian Class Structure and Economic Development in Pre-Industrial Europe*, ed. by T. H. Aston and C. H. E. Philpin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 213–327 (277).

The outcome which prevailed in a given situation then becomes a question of class power. In societies experiencing the same cyclical trends different outcomes are possible because the conflicts they provoked had different beneficiaries in different places: ‘the element of indeterminacy’, Brenner writes, ‘emerges in relation to the different character and results of these conflicts in different regions’.³¹³ The Malthusian cycles ‘acquired their economic significance for the distribution of income and the development of the productive forces only in connection with the specific, historically developed systems of social-property relations and given balances of class forces’.³¹⁴

The key to the take-off of economic development and, with it, the escape of feudalism, thus lies, for Brenner, in the consequences of class struggles. England and France are the relevant comparative cases here. In both, as across Western Europe, peasants established a degree of control over their land lacked by their Eastern counterparts. England, however, experienced capitalist growth much earlier than France and it was only in England, Brenner argues, that capitalism is established endogenously. The difference between them was that the French peasantry had been more successful in their struggle against the aristocracy than peasants had been in England. The French peasantry achieved this in alliance with the monarchical state, which intervened on their side against the landlords and provided them with legal guarantees of their freehold rights. The French state was able to emerge as a centralised surplus-extractor in its own right, ‘one feudal “political accumulator” among many ... emerged and established itself as a greater lordship over and against, *in competition with*, the more localized, more individualized lordships’.³¹⁵ The result was absolutist monarchy.³¹⁶ The fragmented land ownership structure, combined with the sympathetic attitude of the state to assertions of peasant rights against the lords, was the main reason that the way to capitalist primitive accumulation was barred in France. The effect was backwardness in economic output when compared with England.

In the English case, the peasantry had been relatively unsuccessful in its struggle for power against the aristocracy. While strong enough to resist serfdom, the English peasantry had been unable to establish freehold rights over their land. The relative cohesion of the English aristocracy, a consequence of the Norman conquest, had imbued them with a greater sense of their commonality as a ruling class, and a degree of organisation to match.³¹⁷ Consequently, the English monarchy was unable to circumvent landlord power, as it had in France, and instead became restricted by it, expressed in the expanding power of parliament. The English lords held greater power to extend direct ownership over the land than their French counterparts, and they beat back peasant revolts to do so: ‘with the peasants’ failure to establish essentially freehold control over the land, the landlords were able to engross, consolidate and enclose, to create large farms and to lease them to capitalist tenants who could afford to make

³¹³ Robert Brenner, ‘Agrarian Class Structure and Economic Development in Pre-Industrial Europe’, in *Brenner Debate*, 10–63 (36). See also Brenner, ‘Property and Progress’, *Marxist History-Writing*, 81–82.

³¹⁴ Brenner, ‘Agrarian Roots’, *Brenner Debate*, 213.

³¹⁵ *Ibid*, 261.

³¹⁶ See on this Brenner, ‘Property and Progress’, *Marxist History-Writing*, 91–93.

³¹⁷ *Ibid*, 96.

capital investments'.³¹⁸ In a situation where serfdom had been resisted but a combination of the failure by the peasants to establish freehold rights and a high degree of aristocratic class unity prevented absolutism, the English ruling class took a unique path.³¹⁹

In France, population decrease had permitted peasants to assert greater control over the land, preventing the lords from assimilating unoccupied land into their own holdings. A cyclical upturn in population size, part of a Malthusian cycle, then led to increasing parcellisation of the land. The result was to sharply limit the possibilities for growth which, when taxes were eventually increased to pay for wars in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, 'forced the economy as a whole into protracted, systemic crisis'.³²⁰ The English response, however, would initiate advance of the forces of production in qualitative excess of any precedent. The English landlords found themselves in a position to expand their own holdings by taking into their possession unoccupied, formerly common, land.³²¹ Because the lords owned the land, but the peasants were not tied to it, a system of leaseholds prevailed. The result was

competition among tenants for the land and among landlords for tenants stimulated cost-cutting, thus specialization and improvement, leading over time to the replacement of small, relatively inefficient peasant tenants by larger capitalist tenants, thus underpinning an agricultural transformation.³²²

By subjecting both classes to market imperatives this situation induced competitive compulsions leading to increased productivity.

The key points of Brenner's theory are as follows: The strategies for self-reproduction available to the respective classes under feudalism did not tend towards promoting economic growth, but rather towards maximising their position within the *existing* system of social relations.³²³ The extent to which they were able to do so was dependent on '*long-term processes of class formation*'.³²⁴ It is because the reproduction strategies pursued elsewhere were, in England, shut-off, first to the landlord class and then to the peasantry, that an alternate route opened. Thus what became the capitalist path was far from the most *obvious* or *rational* strategy available to feudal agents. There were alternative trajectories beyond feudalism, of which the absolutist monarchies were one example.³²⁵ It is a change in the relations of production that facilitated the take-off in growth of the forces of production that is peculiar to capitalism and, thus far, not found in any other mode of production. Capitalism, on this reading, was not even the most common way that feudal societies tried to extract themselves from crisis: indeed, it is a path that very well could not have been taken at all had the unique configuration of class forces and social relations of early modern England not been in place. Thus it is a

³¹⁸ Brenner, 'Agrarian Class Structure', *Brenner Debate*, 49.

³¹⁹ Brenner, 'Agrarian Roots', *Brenner Debate*, 293.

³²⁰ *Ibid*, 291.

³²¹ *Ibid*, 294.

³²² *Ibid*, 297. See also *ibid*, 301.

³²³ Brenner, 'Social Basis', *Analytical Marxism*, 28–31.

³²⁴ Brenner, 'Agrarian Roots', *Brenner Debate*, 215.

³²⁵ *Ibid*, 288–89.

fundamental contention of Brenner's theory that the establishment of capitalism was not *inevitable*, for there is nothing about feudalism that suggests it must ultimately transform into capitalism

4.6.2 An Aleatory Theory of Transitions

Brenner's methodological standpoint closely resembles Althusser's on three counts. Firstly, on the question of what a scientific theory entails. Brenner's theory is based on a refusal to accept the logic of capitalism could account for the rise of capitalism. The explanandum and the explanans cannot be the same. In Althusserian language, this constitutes a rejection of origins. Capitalism must be accounted for as a rupture from what preceded it, and consequently as the emergence of something that did not pre-exist itself. History cannot be seen as a linear process, in which social systems could only change in one direction. Secondly, the view that feudalism does not transcend itself, as per the logic of the negation of the negation. Brenner argues that

Social-property systems, once established, tend to set strict limits and impose certain overall patterns upon the course of economic evolution. They do so because they tend to restrict the economic actors to certain limited options, indeed quite specific strategies, in order best to reproduce themselves—that is, to maintain themselves in their established socio-economic positions.³²⁶

The tendency is for agents to reproduce the existing relations not to construct new ones.³²⁷ For both Brenner and Althusser, the emergence of capitalist social relations cannot be understood by looking at contemporary capitalist social relations—it required historical work. Thirdly, Brenner and Althusser have a common view about Marx's writings on this subject and what fell to later Marxists to work out. Brenner's argument that there are two theories of transition in Marx's work, a techno-functionalist account and a class struggle account, closely resembles Althusser's views about an epistemological break (see 3.3 above). Brenner's division of Marx's theories map onto Althusser's division between an essentialist theory and a historico-aleatory theory. For both, the second theory was only passingly spelt out in Marx's work and remained underdeveloped.

For Althusser, the transition from feudalism to capitalism occurred as the result of an encounter between '*elements that are independent of each other*'.³²⁸ The elements that gave rise to capitalism were not the product of an essential feudal tendency, but the consequences of different processes. It is only in their co-presence and encounter that capitalism occurs as an accidental consequence. The elements that we know in hindsight were required for capitalism to occur, Althusser argued, are a group who have accumulated sufficient money for investment, and a group without land or money, leaving them with only their labour-power to sell.³²⁹ Additionally, a certain level of

³²⁶ Ibid, 213.

³²⁷ Brenner, 'Social Basis', *Analytical Marxism*, 26.

³²⁸ Althusser, 'Underground Current', *Philosophy of the Encounter*, 199.

³²⁹ Ibid, 197.

technology, availability of raw materials, and ‘a *domestic market*’ are all necessary.³³⁰ It is the encounter, or conjunction, of these elements that gave rise to the capitalist mode of production. What Althusser was plainly trying to escape here is the techno-functional version of the transition in which cumulative technological advance induced a need for a proletariat, which came into being, just as ordered, via the mechanism of enclosure. On the aleatory materialist account industrialisation was *consequence* not *cause* of capitalism, just as it is for Brenner.

Brenner argues that capitalism is agrarian in origin. It first appears in the English countryside where a change in the relations between landlords, peasants, and their means of production (principally, land) occurs. Capitalism pertains where the members of the main feudal classes (landlords and peasants) have both become dependent on the market for the acquisition of their means of survival. What must happen, according to Brenner, for these relations to come into existence? There must be a fairly cohesive state with a broad class basis amongst the aristocracy. Land ownership must be relatively concentrated with a correspondingly limited number of smallholders. And peasants must have been strong enough to resist enserfment.

There are, at least, two distinct processes at work in the existence of those elements in early modern England. The distinctive nature of the English state was the consequence of the Norman conquest and the external imposition of a new ruling class. The prevailing patterns of land ownership that produced a preponderance of tenant farmers and, in an upturn of a Malthusian cycle, competitive pressures were a consequence of a preceding feudal class struggle. These processes had no necessary relationship and are, therefore, contingent facts. Each is mutually exclusive and may never have occurred at all, let alone have occurred within the same social formation.³³¹ What is at work in Brenner’s account is the aleatory logic of the contingent encounter that consequently produces new necessities. As another Political Marxist, Charles Post, says with respect to the transition to capitalism in the USA, ‘the changing structure of the social relations of production’ was ‘determined by the *unpredictable* and *historically contingent* outcome of class-conflict’.³³²

Wood argues that ‘without English capitalism there would probably have been no capitalist system of any kind’.³³³ The elements that enabled the construction of capitalism were not destined to meet each other *anywhere*. That it did occur is the consequence of this ‘distinctive combination’ of factors in the same place at the same time.³³⁴ What happens in this encounter, in Althusser’s account, is the creation of a structure ‘that imposes its unity on a series of elements’. It welds the diverse atoms together into a seemingly unified totality that transforms them according to the new logic. When the encounter takes hold it becomes a ‘*mode of domination*’ of the structure

³³⁰ Ibid, 198; Althusser, *Non-Philosophers*, 134.

³³¹ Wood, *Origin of Capitalism*, 98.

³³² Charles Post, *The American Road to Capitalism: Studies in Class-Structure, Economic Development and Political Conflict, 1620–1877* (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 245.

³³³ Wood, *Origin of Capitalism*, 142.

³³⁴ Ibid, 99.

over its elements'.³³⁵

There are some differences between the elements Althusser claims are necessary, and those that Political Marxists claim are necessary. Arguably those Althusser identified have more to do with capitalism 'taking'—the conditions of its reproduction—than with its initial advent, strictly understood. For Brenner and Wood, the emergence of a mass dispossessed class is indeed the product of capitalist processes. Enclosure is explained by landowners attempting to put their land to more profitable use.³³⁶ It is a consequence, then, of a distinctively capitalist drive for profit, but the creation of a proletarian class is an accidental by-product. Nevertheless, it was a fortuitous result. Dispossession was necessary for capitalism to endure, for without it there would have been no landless class compelled to sell its labour-power nor a domestic market which could absorb the goods produced. Agrarian capitalism required no particular technological preponderance compared to contemporary feudalism (although arguably there is a minimum threshold of technological advance only beyond which capitalism becomes possible), but for it to become industrial capitalism continued expansion of the means of production had to take hold. The move from agricultural to industrial production is a process which Wood says is perhaps not an inevitable consequence of agrarian capitalism but 'a strong historical impulse'.³³⁷ And any society experiencing this kind of rapid economic expansion that did not have easy access to raw materials was liable to stall. Althusser incorrectly specifies the minimum necessary criteria for capitalism's emergence because he fails to identify its agrarian origins. There is, however, a degree of agreement between Althusser and the Political Marxist account that some further things must happen or be present for capitalism to endure over time. Even once we witness capitalism's first occurrence there is no guarantee of its expanded reproduction—that the encounter will 'take'.

Althusser argues that there are several instances in Europe where the encounter failed to endure because something was missing. This, again, closely accords with Political Marxism. Wood provides the example of a "failed transition" in the Dutch Republic. Here there was a high degree of wealth accumulation and technological advance but no significant landless class. For his part, Althusser attributed failed transitions to the lack of state centralisation rather than the lack of landless labour. He does this because he abstracted from a case he examined closely—Machiavelli's attempt to construct a centralised state in Italy.³³⁸ That is perhaps plausible in the cases of the Italian city-states, but on the whole relatively centralised states were not lacking in Western Europe even if none approached the degree of unity present in the English case. Nevertheless, it is the logic of encounter rather than the empirical facts of the various case studies that concerns us here—and that is what is implied by Wood's account and stated in Althusser's.

³³⁵ Althusser, 'Underground Current', *Philosophy of the Encounter*, 203.

³³⁶ Wood, *Origin of Capitalism*, 108–9.

³³⁷ *Ibid*, 143.

³³⁸ Althusser, 'Underground Current', *Philosophy of the Encounter*, 198. See also Althusser, *Machiavelli and Us*.

The final commonality between Althusser's theory of transitions and that of the Political Marxists is on the question of bourgeois revolutions. What Althusser said about this is that '*there is no satisfactory theory of the bourgeoisie in Marx*' despite its apparent centrality to his account.³³⁹ The concept of the bourgeoisie as the revolutionary agent of capitalism is, Althusser thought, irrevocably tied to the essentialist theory. The bourgeoisie should be seen as the 'culmination' or 'crowning perfection' of feudalism, not its gravedigger. Seeing the bourgeoisie as the culmination of feudalism rather than the initiators of capitalism allows us to abandon the vexed question of the bourgeois revolutions: 'the bourgeois revolutions, such as the French Revolution, which are supposed, come hell or high water, to be capitalist, yet are not'.³⁴⁰ Althusser argued that the bourgeoisie was not a class apart from the aristocracy. In many cases, they were feudal landowners engaged in investment.³⁴¹ This is rather like Brenner's view, with the significant difference that Althusser does not disaggregate 'capitalist' and 'bourgeoisie' as Brenner does. The abandonment of the paradigm of bourgeois revolutions is among the most significant contributions of the Political Marxist project.³⁴²

There were a number of places in Western Europe richer, technically superior, and with a larger bourgeoisie than England, and yet the only endogenous European transition occurred there. That is the central conundrum presented by the bourgeois revolution model. In the Dutch Republic, the mercantile state *par excellence*, it is precisely because of its success as a trading power, Wood argues, that no capitalism emerged there. Trade cheapened inputs for peasant farmers, just as it built merchant wealth, permitting expansion of household production and reducing competitive pressures.³⁴³ Bourgeois merchants were in large part dependent on luxury consumption by landlords, not antagonistic to them. And landlords were content to expend their wealth on that consumption, rather than labour-saving techniques. The prosperity of the Dutch Republic under the prevailing relations of production, unsurprisingly, corresponded to a disincentive to engage in the kind of strategies seen in England. Because the Dutch Republic was doing well compared to its rivals, its agents lacked the compulsion to engage in the kind of novel and risky changes required to initiate capitalism. Rather than undermining feudalism, 'the merchant class thus tended to live off the old socio-economic order and to constitute one of its main bulwarks'.³⁴⁴ In other words, a strong bourgeoisie made capitalism less and not more likely.

Brenner, too, thinks that the concept of bourgeois revolution is a leftover of Marx's initial techno-functionalist formulation of historical materialism.³⁴⁵ There was no bourgeois revolution in England. Capitalist relations emerge between landlords and peasants and transform them into capitalists and proletarians respectively, not in a class struggle between bourgeoisie and aristocracy. The distinctive character of the

³³⁹ Althusser, 'Underground Current', *Philosophy of the Encounter*, 202.

³⁴⁰ *Ibid*, 201.

³⁴¹ Althusser, *Non-Philosophers*, 134.

³⁴² It is also one of the most hotly contested aspects of Political Marxism; see Neil Davidson, *How Revolutionary Were the Bourgeois Revolutions?* (Chicago: Haymarket, 2012).

³⁴³ Wood, *Origin of Capitalism*, 90.

³⁴⁴ Brenner, 'Bourgeois Revolution', *First Modern Society*, 291.

³⁴⁵ *Ibid*, 294–303. See also Wood, *Origin of Capitalism*, 61–64, 116–21.

British state compared to its Continental European counterparts, even today, owes (at least in part) to the endogenous construction of capitalism, and this transformation of landlords into capitalists, rather than its lack of a genuine confrontation between a rising capitalist bourgeoisie and a declining aristocracy.³⁴⁶ Where there were bourgeois revolutions, they did not correlate with the establishment of capitalism.³⁴⁷ Events such as these certainly contributed to the distinctive characters of the social formations in which they occurred, and even over the long-term may have advanced capitalist development, but they were neither origin nor culmination of the process of transition, nor were they necessary to it or obviously explicable by it. The whole category of 'bourgeois revolution', for Political Marxists is emblematic of the circular logic of capitalism pre-existing itself. It obscured more than it illuminated because it forced the facts to fit the theory: if bourgeois revolutions were necessary to the establishment of capitalism, we must find bourgeois revolutions everywhere that we find capitalism, and so events are labelled as such irrespective of whether there was meaningful bourgeois participation.³⁴⁸ These concerns adhere closely to Althusser's, and he seems to have reached much the same conclusions as Political Marxists have. The focus on a shift in relations between the atoms—the swerve—and their consequent transformation, rather than a clash between rising and descending classes nurtured within the preceding structure echoes his earlier views about 'the *primacy of class struggle over classes*'.³⁴⁹

Therefore, we see that both Althusser and Political Marxists endorse the view that

the capitalist mode of production was born at the heart of the feudal mode of production, *but as the result of a combination of relatively autonomous processes* that might not have encountered each other, or might have encountered each other under conditions that would not have allowed the capitalist mode of production to appear.³⁵⁰

It is only in England that there arises, from the crisis of feudalism, commercial landlords, landless wage labourers, and tenant farmers. A pattern of dialectical development, contradictions generating their own resolutions, would expect this to appear everywhere where the same background conditions existed. But it is uniquely in

³⁴⁶ Ellen Meiksins Wood, *The Pristine Culture of Capitalism* (London: Verso, 2015). Cf. Anderson, *English Questions*.

³⁴⁷ Post has argued that the American Civil War is the exception to the rule; see Post, *American Road to Capitalism*.

³⁴⁸ Comminel, *Rethinking the French Revolution* is the classic attack on the use of this logic in the French case, the supposed example of a bourgeois revolution *par excellence*. The 1789 French Revolution might be said to be bourgeois insofar as 'the leadership of the Revolution came to rest with the bourgeoisie', but there was nothing specifically capitalist about the bourgeoisie. Those leaders were mostly 'lawyers, officials, and professionals, rather than men of commerce and industry'. Nor were the bourgeoisie at clear odds with the aristocracy in either economic interests or ideological outlook, and it was with the aristocracy that opposition to the absolutist monarchy in fact originated; Althusser had made this argument as far back as 1959, as Goshgarian has pointed out. See: Althusser, 'Montesquieu', *Politics and History*, 99–102; Goshgarian, 'Introduction', *Philosophy of the Encounter*, xxxi–xxxii. Althusser did not hold this view consistently. See Althusser, *On the Reproduction*, 217.

³⁴⁹ Althusser, 'Marx in His Limits', *Philosophy of the Encounter*, 20; Althusser, 'Some Questions', *Historical Materialism*, 163–64.

³⁵⁰ Althusser, *Non-Philosophers*, 135.

England that it does. Thus what is implied by this theory is that there is a (at least one) contingent factor at play (class struggle) which, in its encounter with common background conditions that follow a more or less deterministic logic, produces novel results.

Despite the criticisms Political Marxists have levelled at Althusser, and the reservations about contingency that I have noted, Political Marxists are clearly far closer to the aleatory Althusser than they have tended to accept. Wood argues that the difference with their approach in respect to other versions of historical materialism is ‘not simply that between Marxist theories which give primacy to “forces of production” and those that give priority to “relations of production” and class struggle’. Rather it is between ‘theories that posit some general, transhistorical and universal law of historical change—which invariably means some kind of technological determinism—and those that stress the specificity of every social form’.³⁵¹ It is to the second category that both Political Marxism and Althusser’s aleatory materialism belong. What Althusser does with aleatory materialism is a) specify precisely what is flawed in the transhistorical (idealist) approach b) make explicit the kind of philosophical assumptions that the alternative theory of specific social forms (materialist) rests on and c) by doing so provide to historical materialism a better idea of how to approach its object.

4.7 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have explored Althusser’s idea of aleatory materialism as a theory of encounter and irruption. Aleatory materialism emphasises the contingent nature of every social arrangement and provides a model with which to think the becoming of new forms of being without invoking them as their own antecedent. The theory of the encounter accounts for how new entities can result from other entities that seem stable and permanent. To do so, it is necessary to abandon the central thesis of idealism of providing a universal truth, via origins and ends, in which exceptions either do not arise or, if they do, do not matter. On the contrary, aleatory materialism asserts that such exceptions are not only intrinsic to any apparently regulated state of affairs but are the events from which new entities are potentially created. It is by highlighting this that aleatory materialism undermines the naturalisation of any social order. Politically, it shatters the claim that capitalism is a necessary way of organising society. Dialectical materialism had retained, in Althusser’s view, the basic feature of idealism in casting history as following an inevitable path, and thus had both readily lent itself to ideologies of domination, and been unable to provide an adequate account of how modes of production arise in history, a problem with obvious import for those seeking a transition to socialism. I have shown how the Brenner Thesis breaks with dialectical logic in order to do just that. Aleatory materialism renders explicit the philosophical claims implicit in this operation.

A philosophical framework adopted from Epicurus and Lucretius, supplemented with Machiavelli and Spinoza among others, fills a gap in Marx, viz. his absent philosophy.

³⁵¹ Wood, *Democracy Against Capitalism*, 110.

In the absence of aleatory materialism, Marx did not have the resources to develop a theory of the encounter. Consequently, he fell back, for the most part, on Hegelian dialectics as the foundation for his science of history. In doing so, he was led to see capitalism as the progressive unfolding of an essence, an origin. Aleatory materialism promotes a different way of thinking about transitions between modes of production, as the consequence of swerves and chance encounters. In doing so it makes visible the presence of another theory of the beginnings of capitalism in Marx's work, an underground current buried beneath the Hegelian surface, as a contingent, even unique, consequence of the intersection of different processes irreducible to a single common factor. It is this theory that Brenner developed, and it is this theory that avoids the methodological pitfalls that have been identified. Althusser's contribution is to highlight and defend the philosophical commitments required by such a theory and to defend such a theory as a specifically *scientific* one.

One objection to the case of history being admitted as a science is that because it is 'living', because it is a chain of singularities the direction of which is open, it does not admit to scientific explanation. There cannot be a science of history because history is contingent, and therefore indeterminate and unpredictable. One response is to say that history is indeed a law-governed object in the full sense, and thus a science of a 'normal' sort is possible. In this chapter, I have shown how Althusser resolved this problem in a different direction by embracing indeterminism. There are, as I have argued, compelling reasons to accept such a view, and not just in a theory of history. It is a mistake to think that determinism is a qualifying criterion of scientificity to which a theory of history must conform if it is to be admitted. Althusser's claim was that contingency is not just compatible with realist science, but necessary to it; for it only by invoking contingency that we can avoid the resort to origins. Aleatory materialism thus presents an alternative theory of macro-level changes in social systems that is neither linear nor essentialist. By doing so, it provides tools to assist the scientific research programme of historical materialism. If philosophy gives 'science its problems, its purposes, and its inspiration', as Popper thinks it does, then aleatory materialism should be seen as an effort to restructure the conceptual space of historical and social theory by rooting out the question-begging logic common to theories of transitions between systems.³⁵²

³⁵² Karl R. Popper, *Quantum Theory and the Schism in Physics*, ed. by W. W. Bartley (Totowa: Rowan and Littlefield, 1982), 165.

5. Conclusion

Emancipatory politics must always destroy the appearance of a 'natural order', must reveal what is presented as necessary and inevitable to be a mere contingency, just as it must make what was previously deemed to be impossible seem attainable.¹

Mark Fisher

Historians purport to explain certain facts about the world, not just catalogue them. The supposition is that there are identifiable mechanisms behind the apparent chaos of experience—history submits to scientific investigation. What we must account for is an apparent peculiarity of history, that different laws pertain at different times and in different places. They change and vary, rather than being universal. Resolutions have generally gone in two directions. The first invokes a prime mover to explain change, an origin that requires no corresponding explanation of its own. This first cause determines the action of agents, at least in broad sweep and over the long term. The changing laws are only the surface representations of a deeper, inescapable, law of nature. Thus history is given a meaning or direction: a set path imposed by its origin. The second resolution denies that history is a meaningful object of scientific study. It is an unstructured process, a sequence of events in which no overarching and enduring systems are evident. At best, the sources of causation are too diverse to say anything about history in general. The first has been the most common strategy in Marxist social science. The second has been the post-structuralist resort in the face of the failure of theories of the first type.

In proposing that history had a meaning, *telos*, or a fixed pattern of development, the first theory had erred. Far from importing the achievements of the natural sciences to the social, such determinism rested on unscientific premises. The resort to origins produced question begging explanations, explanations that tended to amount to justifications for existing phenomena rather than real demonstrations of how they came to be. But the instinct that the actions of agents were law-governed was correct. The second type of theory had abandoned attempts to construct a general theory of history leaving, in its wake, an incapacity to show the potential for transformative political practice. But in its emphasis on the diversity of possible directions the process may take, it had offered a corrective to the first.

Aleatory materialism is a philosophical defence of a realist science. The main features that gave classical historical materialism the character of a grand narrative theory—the prioritisation of relations of production, class struggle as the most important explanatory mechanism, the division of history into modes of production—continue to be present. It seeks to expel, however, the imposition of meaning or fixed directionality

¹ Fisher, *Capitalist Realism*, 17.

by invoking contingency. The ways in which the determinate mechanisms interact may produce effects that exceed them. Such effects are not extraneous to the overall trajectory of the process but influence it, sometimes profoundly, and give it the character of an open process, in which many different futures are possible. The effect of the determinate laws is thus to constrain the possible paths the system may take, but not to dictate its course.

Social structures are not expressions of a single driving mechanism, but complex wholes in which multiple causal mechanisms intersect to produce contingent events. The parts of the structure are not made for one another. They do not change according to a single timetable or plan, but the relations of production nevertheless impose an overarching logic. Thus there is a causal hierarchy within the structure. Tensions and antagonisms are endemic to structures of this sort. If the parts did not adequately sustain one another the structure would not endure, and we would not observe it; but it does not follow that those parts must be optimally functional, merely sufficient for continued reproduction to occur. The agents are subjected to a multiplicity of different, and sometimes competing, demands. The state, via the purveyance of ideology and deployment of repression, attempts to secure continual reproduction by imposing some sort of unity of purpose. This reproduction is not automatic but pursued principally through the efforts of the ruling class to establish and maintain hegemony. It is only ever an imperfect process. The necessities of a given social system exist only against the backdrop of the necessity of contingency. Every structure 'is, even at its most stable, haunted by a *radical instability*'.²

Such is the demand to situate ourselves in the void, not as a factual claim about the beginnings of the world but as a way of thinking without origins. The default state of the world is change and disorder. Matter is always-already in motion. Stability is imposed on the atoms falling in the void. Without mechanisms capable of rendering encounters between those atoms durable social structures are liable to disintegrate. No structure is the necessary outcome of history. Its beginnings lie in contingency, and contingency also perpetually presents the possibility of its end.

This, then, is the link between emancipatory politics and science. If we are to explain historical events scientifically, we must make use of contingency. Only then can we avoid the circular reasoning of the genetic method, the presupposition of the existence of the very thing we seek to explain. If every social form owes its existence in part to contingency, and it cannot abolish that contingency, then it must be the case that no social form is inevitable, natural, nor final. If that is true, then the main strategy by which existing social arrangements are justified, and their proposed alternatives rubbished, is punctured. No particular set of social relations best accords with a fixed human nature, for it is the social relations themselves that construct the features of that nature that are actually important for historical explanation and political practice. Humans might be rational creatures, but the actions that appear to them as the rational course vary according to context. Nor are sets of social relations dictated by certain

² Althusser, 'Underground Current', *Philosophy of the Encounter*, 195.

levels of technological advance. While it is unlikely that capitalist social relations could take hold at any level of economic development no particular invention, nor any aggregate of them, dictates that they will spring into existence. The unprecedented economic expansion witnessed under capitalism is the *consequence* not *cause* of those social relations. It is only in the contingent interaction of some prior trends that these social relations became established, by the chance occurrence of the actions that previously appeared as rational to the agents being foreclosed to them, thus leading them to pursue alternative courses which, in this case, led to an enduring structure that outcompeted—and in doing so, transformed—its rivals. In other cases, where the reproduction of the existing structure in the existing ways becomes no longer possible, we may very well find the opposite effects: technological stagnation or regression, political decomposition, cultural destruction, social fragmentation. Capitalism is not the rule nor destiny. If it is meaningful to continue speaking in such language, it is exception—but then so also is every other macro-level transition event. The establishment of every new kind of structure—new modes of production—is undertaken in contravention of the existing tendencies, not as the culmination of a purpose inscribed in them from the start. The laws established by a particular mode of production are laws *in* history but not laws *of* history. They may cease to pertain. Things may always be other than they are, even if not every moment—or even many moments—allow the possibility for relegating the present to the past.

When Engels sought to study the world ‘just as it is, without alien addition’ he was on the right lines.³ But, Althusser contended, this aspiration should not be understood as an exit from philosophy. To abdicate the terrain of philosophy was to invite idealism—as the dominant philosophy—to fill the gap. Nevertheless, the task was indeed to start ‘out from the facts’, and draw ‘from them the consequences that they contained, without adding anything else’.⁴ To do so, however, it was necessary to proceed by way of philosophy, if for no other reason than to *displace* the dominant ideological theses. In order to enable science, one must combat the common sense idealism that it was continually exposed to. Materialism is about making use of philosophy to expose the blind spots and dead ends that arise in the course of scientific inquiry, particularly that undertaken within socio-political orders that may be threatened by the products of such inquiry.

Althusser’s explicit and most direct target was dialectical materialism. Such a concern may seem arcane at the present juncture. The contemporary revival of Marxist social theory has not been accompanied by any corresponding resurrection of that doctrine. Indeed, dialectics has undergone so many attempts to render it intelligible and useful that it is no longer altogether clear what it is supposed to mean. Nevertheless, the kind of optimism that dialectics justified, that capitalism necessarily produces its own socialist negation, continues to exert an influence. In respect to the classic formulation of dialectics as the endogenous transformation of two antagonistic elements, into a third, new, element I have argued that Althusser rejected the idea that this operated as a universal pattern of change, although he left open that it may continue to serve as a

³ Engels, ‘Dialectics of Nature’, *MECW: Anti-Dühring, Dialectics of Nature*, xxv, 479.

⁴ Althusser, *Marxist in Philosophy*, 99.

model in certain limited contexts. As a claim to a general method, however, Althusser rightly thought that dialectical materialism obscured more than it clarified. What remains of dialectical materialism is its relational ontology and the proposition that entities should be treated as constantly changing. History is a *process* without a subject or goal.

But just as aleatory materialism allows us to posit emancipatory possibilities by stressing the instability of every social form, it also implicitly serves us with a warning. ‘Socialism or barbarism’ are our watchwords here.⁵ Taken literally and alone such a statement is clearly far too schematic, and yet it reminds us that the possibilities ahead are not all positive ones. The Fourth Industrial Revolution may at last put us in reach of what Keynes called the resolution of our ‘economic problem, the problem of subsistence’, relegating need and necessary labour, if not totally then at least mostly, to the past.⁶ But such developments also present us with other prospects. There is no simple link between technological advance and freedom.⁷ The question of whether the development of the productive forces will yield ‘the all-round development of the individual’, ‘the springs of common wealth’, and the crossing of the ‘narrow horizon of bourgeois right’, is a question of political struggle.⁸ What if that horizon is not crossed? What if the trajectory towards increasing inequality, the concentration of wealth in the hands of a few, and the declining availability of sufficient waged labour to support the many, continues unabated? What if the same trends that put the resolution to our economic problem within sight bolster the defences of capital without a corresponding resistance emerging to match it? ‘*It all depends*: an aleatory, not a dialectical phrase’.⁹

⁵ Rosa Luxemburg, ‘Speeches and Letters on War and Revolution, 1918–19’, in *The Rosa Luxemburg Reader*, ed. by Peter Hudis and Kevin B. Anderson (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2004), 342–78 (350).

⁶ John Maynard Keynes, ‘Economic Possibilities for Our Grandchildren’, in *Essays in Persuasion* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 321–32 (326).

⁷ See James Bridle, *New Dark Age: Technology and the End of the Future* (London: Verso, 2018).

⁸ Marx, ‘Critique of the Gotha Programme’, *MECW: 1874–1883*, XXIV, 87.

⁹ Althusser, ‘Philosophy and Marxism’, *Philosophy of the Encounter*, 263.

6. Bibliography

6.1 Primary Sources

- Althusser, Louis, 'How to Read Marx's "Capital"', *Marxism Today*, October 1969, 302–5
- , 'Lettre de Louis Althusser à propos de révolution dans la révolution?', in *La Critique Des Armes*, by Régis Debray (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1974), 262–69
- , *Essays in Self-Criticism*, trans. by Grahame Lock (London: New Left Books, 1976)
- , 'Marxisme et lutte de classe', in *Positions* (Paris: Éditions Sociales, 1976), 61–66
- , 'On The Twenty-Second Congress of the French Communist Party', trans. by Ben Brewster, *New Left Review*, I, 104 (1977), 3–22
- , 'The Crisis of Marxism', in *Power and Opposition in Post-Revolutionary Societies*, by Rossana Rossanda, Daniel Stinger, Leonid Plyushch, Giorgio Girardet, Franz Marek, Jiri Pelikan, and others, trans. by Grahame Lock (London: Ink Links, 1979), 225–37
- , 'An interview with Louis Althusser: The Crisis of Marxism', trans. by Ron Salaj, 1980 <<http://www.versobooks.com/blogs/3312-the-crisis-of-marxism-an-interview-with-louis-althusser>> [accessed 17 July 2017]
- , 'Fragments de les thèses sur Feuerbach', 1982, IMEC, ALT2. A29-03.04
- , 'Fragments divers de l'ouvrage de 1982 avec une numérotation différente de la numérotation définitive', 1982, IMEC, ALT2. A29-03.01
- , 'Fragments du livre de 1982 tiré de "Sur la pensée Marxistes"', 1982, IMEC, ALT2. A29-03.02
- , 'Fragments du livre de 1982, non numéroté', 1982, IMEC, ALT2. A29-03.03
- , 'Ouvrage sans titre commençant par "j'écris ce livre en octobre 1982"', 1982, IMEC, ALT2. A29-02.01
- , 'Ouvrage sans titre commençant par "j'écris ce livre en octobre 1982"', 1982, IMEC, ALT2. A29-02.02
- , 'Sur la mort du P.C.F.', 1982, IMEC, ALT2. A29-01.05
- , 'Thèses provisoires', 1982, IMEC, ALT2. A29-01.04
- , 'Enrichissez-vous', 1985, IMEC, ALT2. A29-04.02
- , 'La Philosophie c'est enfantin', 1985, IMEC, ALT2. A29-04.08
- , 'Les 2 grands courants de l'histoire de la philosophie', 1985, IMEC, ALT2. A29-04.09
- , 'Qu'y faire? Que faire?', 1985, IMEC, ALT2. A29-05.05
- , 'Que faire?', 1985, IMEC, ALT2. A29-05.06
- , 'Thèses de juin', 1986, IMEC, ALT2. A29-06.03
- , 'Thèses de juin', 1986, IMEC, ALT2. A29-06.04
- , 'Thèses de juin (86)', 1986, IMEC, ALT2. A29-06.02

- , ‘Sur la pensée Marxiste’, in *Sur Althusser passages* (Paris: Éditions L’Harmattan, 1993), 11–30
- , *Écrits philosophiques et politiques*, ed. by François Matheron (Paris: Éditions Stock/IMEC, 1994), I
- , *L’Avenir dure longtemps suivi de Les Faits*, ed. by Olivier Corpet and Yann Moulier Boutang (Paris: Éditions Stock/IMEC, 1994)
- , ‘Note sur les thèses sur Feuerbach’, *Magazine Littéraire*, 324 (1994), 38–42
- , *Sur la philosophie* (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1994)
- , *The Future Lasts a Long Time and The Facts*, ed. by Olivier Corpet and Yann Moulier Boutang, trans. by Richard Veasey (London: Vintage, 1994)
- , *Écrits philosophiques et politiques* (Paris: Éditions Stock/IMEC, 1995), II
- , *Writings on Psychoanalysis: Freud and Lacan*, ed. by François Matheron and Olivier Corpet, trans. by Jeffrey Mehlman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996)
- , ‘The Only Materialist Tradition, Part 1: Spinoza’, in *The New Spinoza*, ed. by Warren Montag and Ted Stolze, trans. by Ted Stolze (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 3–19
- , *Lettres à Franca : 1961–1973*, ed. by François Matheron and Yann Moulier Boutang (Paris: Éditions Stock/IMEC, 1998)
- , *Solitude de Machiavel et autres textes*, ed. by Yves Sintomer (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1998)
- , *Machiavelli and Us*, ed. by François Matheron, trans. by Gregory Elliott (London: Verso, 1999)
- , *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, trans. by Ben Brewster (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2001)
- , *The Humanist Controversy and Other Writings (1966–67)*, ed. by François Matheron, trans. by G. M. Goshgarian (London: Verso, 2003)
- , ‘Du matérialisme aléatoire’, *Multitudes*, 21:2 (2005), 179–94
<<https://www.cairn.info/revue-multitudes-2005-2-page-179.htm>>
- , *For Marx*, trans. by Ben Brewster (London: Verso, 2005)
- , ‘À Propos de l’article de Michel Verret sur “mai étudiant”’, in *Penser : Louis Althusser* (Pantin: Les Temps Des Cerises, 2006), 69–84
- , *Philosophy of the Encounter: Later Writings, 1978–87*, ed. by François Matheron and Oliver [sic] Corpet, trans. by G. M. Goshgarian (London: Verso, 2006)
- , *Politique et histoire de Machiavel à Marx : cours à l’École Normale Supérieure de 1955 à 1972*, ed. by François Matheron (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2006)
- , ‘Letter to the Central Committee of the PCF, 18 March 1966’, trans. by William S. Lewis, *Historical Materialism*, 15:2 (2007), 153–72
- , *Politics and History: Montesquieu, Rousseau, Marx*, trans. by Ben Brewster (London: Verso, 2007)
- , *Lettres à Hélène*, ed. by Olivier Corpet (Paris: Éditions Grasset/IMEC, 2011)

- , ‘Student Problems’, trans. by Dick Bateman, *Radical Philosophy*, 170 (2011), 11–15
- , *Philosophy and the Spontaneous Philosophy of the Scientists*, ed. by Gregory Elliott, trans. by Warren Montag, James H. Kavanagh, Ben Brewster, Grahame Lock, and Thomas E. Lewis (London: Verso, 2011)
- , ‘On Genesis’, trans. by Jason E. Smith, *Décalages*, 1:2 (2012), 1–4
<<http://scholar.oxy.edu/decalages/vol1/iss2/11>>
- , *Cours sur Rousseau*, ed. by Yves Vargas (Paris: Le Temps des Cerises, 2012)
- , ‘On Marxist Thought’, trans. by Asad Haider and Salar Mohandesi, *Viewpoint Magazine*, 2, 2012 <<http://viewpointmag.com/2012/09/12/on-marxist-thought/>> [accessed 11 December 2016]
- , *On the Reproduction of Capitalism: Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses*, trans. by G. M. Goshgarian (London: Verso, 2014)
- , *The Spectre of Hegel: Early Writings*, ed. by François Matheron, trans. by G. M. Goshgarian (London: Verso, 2014)
- , *Initiation à la philosophie pour les non-philosophes*, ed. by G. M. Goshgarian (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2014)
- , ‘On the Contemporary Phenomenon of “Fashion”’, trans. by Daniel Fairfax, *Décalages*, 1:4 (2015), 1–14 <<http://scholar.oxy.edu/decalages/vol1/iss4/3>>
- , ‘Some Questions Concerning the Crisis of Marxist Theory and of the International Communist Movement’, trans. by David Broder, *Historical Materialism*, 23:1 (2015), 152–78
- , *Être Marxiste en philosophie*, ed. by G. M. Goshgarian (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2015)
- , *Des Rêves d’angoisse sans fin*, ed. by Olivier Corpet and Yann Moulier Boutang (Paris: Éditions Grasset/IMEC, 2015)
- , ‘A Letter from Louis Althusser on Gramsci’s Thought’, trans. by Warren Montag, *Décalages*, 2:1 (2016), 1–6 <<http://scholar.oxy.edu/decalages/vol2/iss1/18>>
- , *Les Vaches noires*, ed. by G. M. Goshgarian (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2016)
- , *Psychoanalysis and the Human Sciences*, ed. by Olivier Corpet and François Matheron, trans. by Steven Rendell (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016)
- , *How to Be a Marxist in Philosophy*, trans. by G. M. Goshgarian (London: Bloomsbury, 2017)
- , ‘Marxism as a Finite Theory’, trans. by Asad Haider, *Viewpoint Magazine*, 2017 <<http://www.viewpointmag.com/2017/12/14/marxism-finite-theory-1978>> [accessed 11 January 2018]
- , *Philosophy for Non-Philosophers*, trans. by G. M. Goshgarian (London: Bloomsbury, 2017)
- , *Écrits sur l’histoire*, ed. by G. M. Goshgarian (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2018)
- , ‘Preface to *Le Concept de loi économique dans “Le Capital,”* by Gérard Duménil’, trans. by G. M. Goshgarian, *Rethinking Marxism*, 30:1 (2018), 4–24

- , ‘The Crisis of Marxism (Lecture Delivered in Nijmegen on 27 May 1978)’, trans. by G. M. Goshgarian, *Décalages*, 2:2 (2018), 1–14 <<http://scholar.oxy.edu/decalages/vol2/iss2/1>>
- , ‘On the Objectivity of History’, trans. by Charles Gelman, *Décalages*, 2:2, 2018 <<http://scholar.oxy.edu/decalages/vol2/iss2/2>>
- Althusser, Louis, and Étienne Balibar, *Reading Capital*, trans. by Ben Brewster (London: Verso, 2009)
- Althusser, Louis, Étienne Balibar, Roger Estabiet, Pierre Macherey, and Jacques Rancière, *Reading Capital: The Complete Edition*, trans. by Ben Brewster and David Fernbach (London: Verso, 2016)
- Anonymous, [Attributed to Louis Althusser], ‘On the Cultural Revolution’, trans. by Jason E. Smith, *Décalages*, 1:1 (2010), 1–18 <<http://scholar.oxy.edu/decalages/vol1/iss1/9>>

6.2 Secondary Sources

- Adams, Robert Merrihew, *Leibniz: Determinist, Theist, Idealist* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994)
- Albiac, Gabriel, ‘Althusser/Spinoza : La Fin des fins’, *La Pensée*, 382 (2015), 151–58
- ‘Aleatory, Adj.’, in *OED Online* (Oxford University Press, 2018) <www.oed.com/view/Entry/4795> [accessed 20 September 2018]
- Anderson, Kevin, *Lenin, Hegel, and Western Marxism: A Critical Study* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1995)
- , ‘The Althusserian Cul-de-Sac’, *Logos: A Journal of Modern Society and Culture*, 13:1–2 (2014) <<http://logosjournal.com/2014/anderson-2/>>
- Anderson, Perry, ‘Components of the National Culture’, *New Left Review*, I, 50 (1968), 3–57
- , *Lineages of the Absolutist State* (London: New Left Books, 1974)
- , *Passages from Antiquity to Feudalism* (London: New Left Books, 1974)
- , *Considerations on Western Marxism* (London: Verso, 1979)
- , *Arguments Within English Marxism* (London: Verso, 1980)
- , *In the Tracks of Historical Materialism* (London: Verso, 1983)
- , *English Questions* (London: Verso, 1992)
- , *A Zone of Engagement* (London: Verso, 1992)
- , *The Origins of Postmodernity* (London: Verso, 1998)
- Angermuller, Johannes, *Why There Is No Poststructuralism in France* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015)
- Anievas, Alexander, and Kerem Nişancıoğlu, *How the West Came to Rule: The Geopolitical Origins of Capitalism* (London: Pluto Press, 2015)
- Antognazza, Maria Rosa, *Leibniz: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016)
- Arditi, Benjamin, ‘Louis Althusser’, in *Palgrave Advances in Continental Political Thought*, ed. by Terrell Carver and James Martin (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan,

2006), 182–95

Aristotle, *The Metaphysics*, trans. by Hugh Lawson-Tancred (Penguin Books, 1998)

Aron, Raymond, *D'une sainte famille à l'autre : essais sur les Marxismes imaginaires* (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1969)

Ashcraft, Richard, 'Locke's Political Philosophy', in *The Cambridge Companion to Locke*, ed. by Vere Chappell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 226–51

Asmis, Elizabeth, "Free Action and the Swerve". Review Article of Walter G. Englert's *Epicurus on the Swerve and Voluntary Action*, *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy*, 8 (1990), 269–85

Assiter, Alison, 'Althusser and Structuralism', *The British Journal of Sociology*, 35:2 (1984), 272–96

———, *Althusser & Feminism* (London: Pluto Press, 1990)

Aston, T. H., and C. H. E. Philpin, eds., *The Brenner Debate: Agrarian Class Structure and Economic Development in Pre-Industrial Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985)

Avineri, Shlomo, *The Social and Political Thought of Karl Marx* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968)

———, *Hegel's Theory of the Modern State* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972)

Ayers, Michael R., 'The Foundations of Knowledge and the Logic of Substance: The Structure of Locke's General Philosophy', in *Locke's Philosophy: Content and Context*, ed. by G. A. J. Rogers (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 49–74

Badiou, Alain, 'Qu'est-ce que Louis Althusser entend par "philosophie"', in *Politique et Philosophie dans l'oeuvre de Louis Althusser*, ed. by Sylvain Lazarus (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1993), 29–45

———, *Theoretical Writings*, trans. by Ray Brassier and Alberto Toscano (London: Continuum, 2004)

———, *Metapolitics*, trans. by Jason Barker (London: Verso, 2005)

———, *The Adventure of French Philosophy*, trans. by Bruno Bosteels (London: Verso, 2012)

Bailey, Cyril, 'Karl Marx on Greek Atomism', *The Classical Quarterly*, 22:3/4 (1928), 205–6

———, *The Greek Atomists and Epicurus: A Study* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1928)

Balibar, Étienne, 'Self Criticism: Answer to Questions from "Theoretical Practice"', *Theoretical Practice*, 7/8 (1973), 56–72

———, *Cinq études du matérialisme historique* (Paris: Maspero, 1974)

———, 'À Nouveau sur la contradiction. Dialectiques des luttes de classes et lutte de classes dans la dialectique', in *Sur la dialectique* (Paris: Éditions Sociales, 1977), 17–63

———, *On the Dictatorship of the Proletariat*, trans. by Grahame Lock (London: New Left Books, 1977)

———, 'Irrationalism and Marxism', trans. by Patrick Camiller, *New Left Review*, I, 107

- (1978), 3–18
- , *Écrits pour Althusser* (Paris: Éditions La Découverte, 1991)
- , ‘For Louis Althusser’, trans. by Lieselotte Wolff, Carole Biewener, and Richard Wolff, *Rethinking Marxism*, 4:1 (1991), 9–12
- , ‘Foucault and Marx: The Question of Nominalism’, in *Michel Foucault Philosopher*, trans. by Timothy J. Armstrong (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1992), 38–57
- , *Masses, Classes, Ideas: Studies on Politics and Philosophy Before and After Marx*, trans. by James Swenson (New York: Routledge, 1994)
- , ‘Althusser’s Object’, trans. by Margaret Cohen and Bruce Robbins, *Social Text*, 39, 1994, 157–88
- , ‘The Infinite Contradiction’, trans. by Jean-Marc Poisson and Jacques Lezra, *Yale French Studies*, 88, 1995, 142–64
- , ‘Structuralism: A Destitution of the Subject’, trans. by James Swenson, *Differences*, 14:1 (2003), 1–21
- , ‘*Potentia Multitudinis, Quae Una Veluti Mente Ducitur*: Spinoza on the Body Politic’, in *Current Continental Theory and Modern Philosophy*, ed. & trans. by Stephen H. Daniel (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2005), 70–99
- , *The Philosophy of Marx*, trans. by Chris Turner (London: Verso, 2007)
- , *Spinoza and Politics*, trans. by Peter Snowdon (London: Verso, 2008)
- , ‘Althusser and the Rue d’Ulm’, trans. by David Fernbach, *New Left Review*, II, 58 (2009), 91 – 107
- , ‘Une Rencontre en Romagne’, in *Machiavel et nous*, by Louis Althusser (Paris: Éditions Tallandier, 2009), 9–30
- , ‘Structure: Method or Subversion of the Social Sciences?’, trans. by Knox Peden, *Radical Philosophy*, 165 (2011), 17–22
- , ‘Althusser and “Communism”’, trans. by Joseph Serrano, *Crisis and Critique*, 2:2 (2015), 9–23
- , ‘After the Other May’, trans. by Patrick King, *Viewpoint Magazine*, 2017 <<https://www.viewpointmag.com/2017/12/18/after-the-other-may-1981/>> [accessed 12 January 2018]
- , ‘State, Party, Transition’, trans. by Patrick King, *Viewpoint Magazine*, 2017 <<https://www.viewpointmag.com/2017/12/18/state-party-transition-1978/>> [accessed 11 January 2018]
- , “‘Being in the True?’ Science and Truth in the Philosophy of Georges Canguilhem”, trans. by Andrew Fan, *Décalages*, 2:2 (2018), 1–15 <<http://scholar.oxy.edu/decalages/vol2/iss2/3>>
- Balibar, Étienne, Yves Duroux, Fabio Bruschi, and Eva Mancuso, ‘Althusser : une nouvelle pratique de la philosophie entre politique et idéologie. Conversation avec Étienne Balibar et Yves Duroux (Partie I)’, *Cahiers du GRM*, 7 (2015), 1–24 <<http://grm.revues.org/641>>
- , ‘Althusser : une nouvelle pratique de la philosophie entre politique et idéologie. Conversation avec Étienne Balibar et Yves Duroux (Partie II)’, *Cahiers du GRM*, 8

(2015), 1–23 <<http://grm.revues.org/722>>

- Balibar, Étienne, and Peter Osborne, 'Conjectures and Conjunctures', *Radical Philosophy*, 97 (1999), 30–41
- Baltas, Aristides, 'Louis Althusser and Joseph D. Sneed: A Strange Encounter in Philosophy of Science?', in *Imre Lakatos and Theories of Scientific Change*, ed. by Kostas Gavroglu, Yorgos Goudaroulis, and Pantelis Nicolacopoulos (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1989), 269–86
- , 'Review: *Philosophy and the Spontaneous Philosophy of the Scientists* and Other Essays by Louis Althusser', *Philosophy of Science*, 60:4 (1993), 647–658
- Bargu, Banu, 'In the Theater of Politics: Althusser's Aleatory Materialism and Aesthetics', *Diacritics*, 40:3 (2012), 86–113
- Barker, Jason, 'Are We (Still) Living in a Computer Simulation?: Althusser and Turing', *Diacritics*, 43:2 (2015), 92–121
- , 'Althusser's Philosophical Disorder', *Los Angeles Review of Books*, 2016 <<https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/althussers-philosophical-disorder>> [accessed 23 July 2018]
- Barker, Jason, and G. M. Goshgarian, 'From the Editors', *Diacritics*, 43:2 (2015), 3–8
- Barrett, Michèle, *Women's Oppression Today: The Marxist/Feminist Encounter* (London: Verso, 2014)
- Barthes, Roland, 'The Death of the Author', in *Image, Music, Text*, trans. by Stephen Heath (London: Fontana Press, 1977), 142–48
- Baur, Michael, ed., *G. W. F. Hegel: Key Concepts* (London: Routledge, 2015)
- Beck Holm, Andreas, 'Rethinking Althusser's Meta-Marxism', *Décalages*, 2:1 (2016), 1–38 <<http://scholar.oxy.edu/decalages/vol2/iss1/25>>
- Becker, Uwe, 'Class Theory: Still the Axis of Critical Social Scientific Analysis?', in *The Debate on Classes*, ed. by Erik Olin Wright (London: Verso, 1989), 127–53
- Beetz, Johannes, *Materiality and Subject in Marxism, (Post-)Structuralism, and Material Semiotics* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016)
- Beiser, Frederick, *Hegel* (New York: Routledge, 2005)
- Benjamin, Walter, 'Theses on the Philosophy of History', in *Illuminations*, ed. by Hannah Arendt, trans. by Harry Zorn (London: Pimlico, 1999), 245–55
- Bennington, Geoff, and Robert Young, 'Introduction: Posing the Question', in *Post-Structuralism and the Question of History*, ed. by Derek Attridge, Geoff Bennington, and Robert Young (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 1–11
- Benton, Ted, *The Rise and Fall of Structural Marxism: Althusser and His Influence* (London: Macmillan, 1984)
- Berkeley, George, *Principles of Human Knowledge / Three Dialogues*, ed. by Roger Woolhouse (London: Penguin, 1988)
- Bernstein, Richard J., *Praxis and Action: Contemporary Philosophies of Human Activity* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999)
- Bevir, Mark, Jill Hargis, and Sara Rushing, 'Introduction: Histories of Postmodernism', in *Histories of Postmodernism*, ed. by Mark Bevir, Jill Hargis, and Sara Rushing (Abingdon: Routledge, 2007), 1–24

- Bhaskar, Roy, *The Possibility of Naturalism: A Philosophical Critique of the Contemporary Human Sciences* (London: Routledge, 1998)
- , *A Realist Theory of Science* (London: Routledge, 2008)
- , *Dialectic: The Pulse of Freedom* (London: Routledge, 2008)
- Bidet, Jacques, *Exploring Marx's Capital: Philosophical, Economic and Political Dimensions* (Leiden: Brill, 2007)
- , 'The Interpellated Subject: Beyond Althusser and Butler', trans. by Ted Stolze, *Crisis and Critique*, 2:2 (2015), 63–85
- Birchall, Ian, 'Autonomy of Theory', *International Socialism*, 2, 10 (1980), 51–91
- Blackledge, Paul, and Graeme Kirkpatrick, eds., *Historical Materialism and Social Evolution* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002)
- Bloch, Olivier, 'L'Esprit du matérialisme et son destin', *La Pensée*, 382 (2015), 47–55
- Boer, Roland, 'Althusser, Myth & Genesis 1–3', *Journal of Philosophy & Scripture*, 1:2 (2004), 1–9
- , 'Althusser's Catholic Marxism', *Rethinking Marxism*, 19:4 (2007), 469–86
- Bonal, Matt, 'Review of Louis Althusser and the Traditions of French Marxism', *Décalages*, 1:1 (2010), 1–5 <<http://scholar.oxy.edu/decalages/vol1/iss1/11>>
- Bosteels, Bruno, 'Alain Badiou's Theory of the Subject: The Recommencement of Dialectical Materialism', *Pli*, 12 (2001), 200–229
- , 'Reviewing Rancière, or, the Persistence of Discrepancies', *Radical Philosophy*, 170 (2011), 25–31
- Bottomore, Tom, Laurence Harris, V. G. Kiernan, and Ralph Miliband, eds., *A Dictionary of Marxist Thought* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991)
- Bourdin, Jean-Claude, 'The Uncertain Materialism of Louis Althusser', trans. by Charles T Wolfe, *Graduate Faculty Philosophy Journal*, 22:1 (2000), 271–87
- , 'La Rencontre du matérialisme et de l'aléatoire chez Louis Althusser', *Multitudes*, 21:2 (2005), 139–47 <<https://www.cairn.info/revue-multitudes-2005-2-page-139.htm>>
- , 'Matérialisme aléatoire et pensée de la conjoncture. Au-delà de Marx', in *Althusser : une lecture de Marx*, ed. by Jean-Claude Bourdin (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2008), 193–228
- , 'Machiavel, philosophe sans guillemets', *La Pensée*, 382 (2015), 73–84
- Boyer, Anne, 'Kill the Philosopher in Your Head', *The New Inquiry*, 2014 <<https://thenewinquiry.com/kill-the-philosopher-in-your-head/>> [accessed 7 August 2018]
- Breckman, Warren, *Marx, the Young Hegelians, and the Origins of Radical Social Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999)
- Brenner, Robert, 'The Origins of Capitalist Development: A Critique of Neo-Smithian Marxism', *New Left Review*, I, 104 (1977), 25–92
- , 'Bourgeois Revolution and the Transition to Capitalism', in *The First Modern Society*, ed. by A. L. Beier, David Cannadine, and James M. Rosenheim (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 271–304

- Breton, Stanislas, 'Althusser aujourd'hui', *Archives de Philosophie*, 56:3 (1993), 417–30
- Bridle, James, *New Dark Age: Technology and the End of the Future* (London: Verso, 2018)
- Brown, Alison, *The Return of Lucretius to Renaissance Florence* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010)
- Brown, Brian, and Sheelagh Strawbridge, 'Letters on Strawbridge and Althusser', *Radical Philosophy*, 41 (1985), 51–52
- Brown, Nathan, 'Red Years: Althusser's Lesson, Rancière's Error and the Real Movement of History', *Radical Philosophy*, 170 (2011), 16–24
- Brown, Wendy, *States of Injury: Power and Freedom in Late Modernity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995)
- Brudney, Daniel, *Marx's Attempt to Leave Philosophy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998)
- Bruschi, Fabio, 'Accumulation primitive et dictature du prolétariat. Étude sur la conception Althusserienne de l'histoire et de la politique', *Cahiers du GRM*, 7 (2015), 1–12
<<http://grm.revues.org/615>>
- , 'Discours scientifique, formation théorique et parti expérimentateur. Une étude de la politique du théoricisme', *Décalages*, 2:2 (2018), 1–32
<<http://scholar.oxy.edu/decalages/vol2/iss2/5>>
- , 'Splitting Science: The Althusserian Interpretation of *Capital's* Multiple Orders of Exposition', *Rethinking Marxism*, 30:1 (2018), 25–43
- Bruschi, Fabio, and Eva Mancuso, 'Editorial', *Cahiers du GRM*, 7 (2015), 1–11
<<http://grm.revues.org/584>>
- , 'Editorial', *Cahiers du GRM*, 8 (2015), 1–3 <<http://grm.revues.org/678>>
- Buci-Glucksmann, Christine, 'May '68 and the Crisis of Marxism', trans. by Patrick King, *Viewpoint Magazine*, 2017 <<https://www.viewpointmag.com/2017/12/18/may-68-crisis-marxism-1978/>> [accessed 12 January 2018]
- , 'On the Left-Wing Critique of Stalinism', trans. by Patrick King, *Viewpoint Magazine*, 2017 <<https://www.viewpointmag.com/2017/12/18/left-wing-critique-stalinism-1976/>> [accessed 12 January 2018]
- Buonamano, Roberto, 'The Legal Subject in Althusser's Political Theory', *Law and Critique*, 25:3 (2014), 231–48
- Burawoy, Michael, 'The Limits of Wright's Analytical Marxism and an Alternative', in *The Debate on Classes*, ed. by Erik Olin Wright (London: Verso, 1989), 78–99
- Burns, Tony, 'Materialism in Ancient Greek Philosophy and in the Writings of the Young Marx', *Historical Materialism*, 7:1 (2000), 3–39
- Busk, Larry Alan, and Elizabeth Portella, 'Who Are the True Machiavellians? Althusser and Merleau-Ponty Reading *The Prince*', *Rethinking Marxism*, 29:3 (2017), 405–15
- Butler, Judith, *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (New York: Routledge, 1997)
- , *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997)

- , *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 2006)
- Callari, Antonio, and David F. Ruccio, eds., *Postmodern Materialism and the Future of Marxist Theory: Essays in the Althusserian Tradition* (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 1996)
- Callinicos, Alex, *Althusser's Marxism* (London: Pluto Press, 1976)
- , *Is There a Future for Marxism?* (London: Macmillan, 1982)
- , *Marxism and Philosophy* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983)
- , ed., *Marxist Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989)
- , 'The Limits of "Political Marxism"', *New Left Review*, I, 184 (1990), 110–15
- , 'England's Transition to Capitalism', *New Left Review*, I, 207 (1994), 124–33
- , 'Lost Illusions', *Radical Philosophy*, 74 (1995), 42–44
- , *Theories and Narratives: Reflections on the Philosophy of History* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995)
- , *Making History: Agency, Structure, and Change in Social Theory* (Leiden: Brill, 2004)
- , *The Resources of Critique* (Cambridge: Polity, 2006)
- , 'G. A. Cohen and the Critique of Political Economy', *Science & Society*, 70:2 (2006), 252–74
- , *Social Theory: A Historical Introduction* (Cambridge: Polity, 2007)
- , *Deciphering Capital: Marx's Capital and Its Destiny* (London: Bookmarks, 2014)
- Campbell, David, 'Louis Althusser and the End of Classical Russian Marxism: Spinoza, Hegel and the Critique of Dogmatic Marxism', *Critique: Journal of Socialist Theory*, 42:4, 527–53
- Carlin, Laurence, *The Empiricists: A Guide for the Perplexed* (London: Continuum, 2009)
- Carling, Alan, 'Rational Choice Marxism', *New Left Review*, I, 160 (1986), 24–62
- , 'In Defence of Rational Choice: A Reply to Ellen Meiksins Wood', *New Left Review*, I, 184 (1990), 97–109
- Carnap, Rudolf, *The Logical Structure of the World*, trans. by Rolf A. George (Chicago: Open Court, 2003)
- Carver, Terrell, and Daniel Blank, *A Political History of the Editions of Marx and Engels's 'German Ideology Manuscripts'* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014)
- Cavazzini, Andrea, 'Recension à Jean-Claude Bourdin (Coord.), *Althusser : une lecture de Marx*', *Décalages*, 1:1 (2014), 1–5 <<http://scholar.oxy.edu/decalages/vol1/iss1/10>>
- Cesarale, Giorgio, 'Philosophy and Forms of Objectivity: Althusser vis-à-vis Hegel', *Parallax*, 21:4 (2015), 375–95
- Chateigner, Frédéric, 'From Althusser to Mao: Les Cahiers Marxistes-Léninistes', *Décalages*, 1:4 (2015), 1–15 <<http://scholar.oxy.edu/decalages/vol1/iss4/6>>
- Chibber, Vivek, 'What Is Living and What Is Dead in the Marxist Theory of History?', *Historical Materialism*, 19:2 (2011), 60–91

- Chitty, Andrew, and Martin McIvor, eds., *Karl Marx and Contemporary Philosophy* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009)
- Choat, Simon, *Marx through Post-Structuralism: Lyotard, Derrida, Foucault, Deleuze* (London: Continuum, 2010)
- , ‘From Marxism to Poststructuralism’, in *The Edinburgh Companion to Poststructuralism*, ed. by Benoît Dillet, Iain MacKenzie, and Robert Porter (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013), 47–68
- Choi, Won, ‘Inception or Interpellation? The Slovenian School, Butler, and Althusser’, *Rethinking Marxism*, 25:1 (2013), 23–37
- Clarke, Desmond M., ‘Descartes’ Philosophy of Science and the Scientific Revolution’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Descartes*, ed. by John Cottingham (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 258–85
- Clarke, Simon, ‘Althusserian Marxism’, in *One-Dimensional Marxism*, by Simon Clarke, Terry Lovell, Kevin McDonnell, Kevin Robins, and Victor Jeleniewski Seidler (London: Alison & Busby, 1980), 5–102
- , ed., *The State Debate* (London: Macmillan, 1991)
- Clegg, Sue, ‘The Remains of Louis Althusser’, *International Socialism*, 2, 53 (1991), 57–78
- Cockshott, Paul, ‘On Althusser’s *Philosophy of the Encounter*’, *World Review of Political Economy*, 4:1 (2013), 38–62
- Cohen, G. A., *History, Labour, and Freedom: Themes from Marx* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988)
- , *If You’re an Egalitarian, How Come You’re So Rich?* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000)
- , *Karl Marx’s Theory of History: A Defence* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000)
- , ‘Complete Bullshit’, in *Finding Oneself in the Other*, ed. by Michael Otsuka (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), 94–114
- , ‘Valedictory Lecture: My Philosophical Development (and Impressions of Philosophers Whom I Met along the Way)’, in *Finding Oneself in the Other*, ed. by Michael Otsuka (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), 175–92
- Colletti, Lucio, *From Rousseau to Lenin: Studies in Ideology and Society*, trans. by John Merrington and Judith White (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1972)
- , ‘Marxism: Science or Revolution?’, in *Ideology in Social Science*, ed. by Robin Blackburn (Bungay: Fontana/Collins, 1972), 369–77
- , *Marxism and Hegel*, trans. by Lawrence Garner (London: New Left Books, 1973)
- , ‘A Political and Philosophical Interview’, *New Left Review*, I, 86 (1974), 3–28
- , ‘Marxism and the Dialectic’, trans. by John Mathews, *New Left Review*, I, 93 (1975), 3–29
- , ‘Introduction’, in *Karl Marx: Early Writings*, by Karl Marx, trans. by Rodney Livingstone and Gregor Benton (London: Penguin, 1992), 7–56
- Collier, Andrew, *Scientific Realism and Socialist Thought* (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1989)

- , *Critical Realism: An Introduction to Roy Bhaskar's Philosophy* (London: Verso, 1994)
- Comninel, George C., *Rethinking the French Revolution* (London: Verso, 1987)
- Connell, R. W., 'A Critique of the Althusserian Approach to Class', *Theory and Society*, 8:3 (1979), 303–345
- Connolly, William E., *Appearance and Reality in Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981)
- Constantine, Simon, 'Philosophy Without an Object', *Parallax*, 21:4 (2015), 353–56
- Coole, Diana, and Samantha Frost, eds., *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010)
- Cornforth, Maurice Campbell, *Communism and Philosophy: Contemporary Dogmas and Revisions of Marxism* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1980)
- Corrigan, Philip, and Derek Sayer, 'Hindess and Hirst: A Critical Review', *Socialist Register*, 15 (1978), 194–214
- Cottingham, John, *The Rationalists* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988)
- , 'Cartesian Dualism: Theology, Metaphysics, and Science', in *The Cambridge Companion to Descartes*, ed. by John Cottingham (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 236–57
- , *A Descartes Dictionary* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993)
- , ed., *Descartes* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998)
- Creaven, Sean, 'The "Two Marxisms" Revisited: Humanism, Structuralism and Realism in Marxist Social Theory', *Journal of Critical Realism*, 14:1 (2015), 7–53
- Critchley, Simon, and William R. Schroeder, eds., *A Companion to Continental Philosophy* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1999)
- Cruddas, Jon, 'The Humanist Left Must Challenge the Rise of Cyborg Socialism', *New Statesman*, 23 April 2018
<<https://www.newstatesman.com/politics/uk/2018/04/humanist-left-must-challenge-rise-cyborg-socialism>> [accessed 12 July 2018]
- Cutler, Anthony, 'The Concept of Epistemological Break', *Theoretical Practice*, 3/4, 1971, 63–81
- Cutler, Anthony, and Michael Gane, 'Statement: On the Question of Philosophy for a Theory of Theoretical Practice', *Theoretical Practice*, 7/8, 1973, 37–50
- Cutler, Anthony, Barry Hindess, Paul Hirst, and Athar Hussain, *Marx's 'Capital' and Capitalism Today* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1977), I
- , *Marx's 'Capital' and Capitalism Today* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978), II
- Daly, Glyn, 'Marxism and Postmodernity', in *Marxism and Social Science*, ed. by Andrew Gamble, David Marsh, and Tony Tant (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1999), 61–84
- Datta, Ronjon Paul, 'Security and the Void: Aleatory Materialism Contra Governmentality', in *Anti-Security*, ed. by George S. Rigakos and Mark Neocleous (Ottawa: Red Quill, 2011), 217–41
- Davidson, Neil, *How Revolutionary Were the Bourgeois Revolutions?* (Chicago:

- Haymarket, 2012)
- Day, Ronald E., 'The Aleatory Encounter and the Common Name Reading Negri Reading Althusser', *Journal of Communication Inquiry*, 35:4 (2011), 362–69
- De Boer, Karin, 'Hegel's Account of Contradiction in the Science of Logic Reconsidered', *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, 48:3 (2010), 345–373
- De Ípola, Emilio, *Althusser, The Infinite Farewell*, trans. by Gavin Arnall (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018)
- Dear, Peter, *The Intelligibility of Nature: How Science Makes Sense of the World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006)
- Del Lucchese, Filippo, 'On the Emptiness of an Encounter: Althusser's Reading of Machiavelli', trans. by Warren Montag, *Décalages*, 1:1 (2010), 1–19
<<http://scholar.oxy.edu/decalages/vol1/iss1/5>>
- Del Lucchese, Filippo, Fabio Frosini, and Vittorio Morfino, eds., *The Radical Machiavelli: Politics, Philosophy, and Language* (Leiden: Brill, 2015)
- Deleuze, Giles, and Felix Guattari, *What Is Philosophy?*, trans. by Hugh Tomlinson and Graham Burchell (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994)
- Deleuze, Giles, *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, trans. by Hugh Tomlinson (London: Athlone Press, 1983)
- , 'How Do We Recognize Structuralism?', in *Desert Islands and Other Texts, 1953–1974*, ed. by David Lapoujade, trans. by Michael Taomina (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2004), 170–92
- Demirovic, Alex, 'Why Should We Read Althusser (Again)?', trans. by Michael Shane Boyle, *Viewpoint Magazine*, 2016 <<https://www.viewpointmag.com/2016/07/18/why-should-we-read-althusser-again/>> [accessed 25 April 2017]
- Derrida, Jacques, 'My Chances/Mes Chances: A Rendezvous with Some Epicurean Stereophonies', in *Taking Chances: Derrida, Psychoanalysis, and Literature*, ed. by Joseph H. Smith and William Kerrigan (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1984), 1–32
- Descartes, René, *Principles of Philosophy*, trans. by Valentine Rodger Miller and Reese P. Miller (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1982)
- , *Discourse on Method and Meditations on First Philosophy*, trans. by Donald A. Cress (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1998)
- Descombes, Vincent, *Modern French Philosophy*, trans. by L. Scott-Fox and J. M. Harding (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980)
- Dews, Peter, *Logics of Disintegration: Post-Structuralist Thought and the Claims of Critical Theory* (London: Verso, 1987)
- Dews, Peter, Talita Cavaignac, and Thomas Amorim, 'The Idea of Hope', *New Left Review*, II, 112 (2018), 99–129
- Diefenbach, Katja, 'Is It Simple to Be a Spinozist in Philosophy?', trans. by Benjamin Carter, *Radical Philosophy*, 199 (2016), 26–34
- Diefenbach, Katja, Peter Thomas, Gal Kirn, and Sara R. Farris, eds., *Encountering Althusser: Politics and Materialism in Contemporary Radical Thought* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013)

- 'Doctor Althusser', *Radical Philosophy*, 12 (1974), 44
- Domingo Sanchez, Juan, 'A Dead Dog Is Immortal. On Louis Althusser, *Initiation à la philosophie pour les non-philosophes*', trans. by Vanessa Brutsche, *Décalages*, 1:4 (2015), 1–14 <<http://scholar.oxy.edu/decalages/vol1/iss4/31>>
- Dosse, François, *History of Structuralism: The Rising Sign, 1945–66*, trans. by Deborah Glassman (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), I
- , *History of Structuralism: The Sign Sets, 1967–Present*, trans. by Deborah Glassman (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), II
- Douailler, Stéphane, 'The Patient Cannot Last Long', trans. by Emiliano Battista, *Radical Philosophy*, 170 (2011), 32–34
- Doust, Dariush M., 'Rain in the Gallery', *Los Angeles Review of Books*, 2016 <<https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/rain-in-the-gallery>> [accessed 23 July 2018]
- Downing, Lisa, 'Locke's Ontology', in *The Cambridge Companion to Locke's 'Essay Concerning Human Understanding'*, ed. by Lex Newman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 352–80
- Draper, Hal, *The Two Souls of Socialism* (Berkeley: Independent Socialist Committee, 1966)
- , *The 'Dictatorship of the Proletariat' from Marx to Lenin* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1987)
- Dunn, John, *The Political Thought of John Locke* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969)
- , 'Social Theory and Political Action', in *Social Theory and Political Practice*, ed. by Christopher Lloyd (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983), 109–35
- Durkheim, Émile, *The Rules of Sociological Method*, ed. by Steven Lukes, trans. by W. D. Halls (London: Macmillan, 1982)
- Eagleton, Terry, *Criticism and Ideology: A Study in Marxist Literary Theory* (London: Verso, 1978)
- , *Ideology: An Introduction* (London: Verso, 1991)
- , 'Lenin in the Postmodern Age', in *Lenin Reloaded: Toward a Politics of Truth*, ed. by Sebastian Budgen, Stathis Kouvelakis, and Slavoj Žižek (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), 42–58
- , *Materialism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016)
- Earle, Joe, Cahal Moran, and Zach Ward-Perkins, *The Econocracy: The Perils of Leaving Economics to the Experts* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2017)
- Ebner, Timm, 'Traitor Figures in Nazi Fiction: Ideology as Inversion of Defense and Attack', *Rethinking Marxism*, 29:2 (2017), 318–39
- Elliott, Gregory, 'The Odyssey of Paul Hirst', *New Left Review*, I, 159 (1986), 81–105
- , 'Althusser's Solitude', *Economy and Society*, 17:4 (1988), 480–98
- , 'Further Adventures of the Dialectic: Merleau-Ponty, Sartre, Althusser', in *Contemporary French Philosophy*, ed. by A. Phillips Griffiths (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 195–214
- , ed., *Althusser: A Critical Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994)

- , 'Fateful Rendezvous: The Young Althusser', *Radical Philosophy*, 84 (1997), 36–40
- , 'Ghostlier Demarcations: On the Posthumous Edition of Althusser's Writings', *Radical Philosophy*, 90 (1998), 20–32
- , 'The Necessity of Contingency: Some Notes', *Rethinking Marxism*, 10:3 (1998), 74–79
- , *Althusser: The Detour of Theory* (Leiden: Brill, 2006)
- Elster, Jon, *Explaining Technical Change* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983)
- , *Making Sense of Marx* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985)
- , *An Introduction to Karl Marx* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986)
- Englert, Walter G., *Epicurus on the Swerve and Voluntary Action* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1987)
- Epicurus, *Epicurus: The Extant Remains*, trans. by Cyril Bailey (London: Oxford University Press, 1926)
- Establet, Roger, 'On Althusser', trans. by Frank Ruda, *Crisis and Critique*, 2:2 (2015), 293–95
- Establet, Roger, and Christian Baudelot, *L'École capitaliste en France* (Paris: Maspero, 1972)
- Éwanjé-Épée, Félix Boggio, and G. M. Goshgarian, 'Philosophy and Revolution: An Interview with G. M. Goshgarian', trans. by Patrick King, *Viewpoint Magazine*, 2016 <<http://viewpointmag.com/2016/07/18/philosophy-and-revolution-an-interview-with-g-m-goshgarian/>> [accessed 3 March 2017]
- Farr, James, 'Marx No Empiricist', *Philosophy of the Social Sciences*, 13:4 (1983), 465–72
- Feenberg, Andrew, 'Subversive Rationalization: Technology, Power, and Democracy', in *Technology and the Politics of Knowledge*, ed. by Andrew Feenberg and Alastair Hannay (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), 3–22
- Ferretter, Luke, *Louis Althusser* (London: Routledge, 2006)
- Feyerabend, Paul K., *Against Method* (London: Verso, 2010)
- Filsfeder, Matthew, 'Morality or Enjoyment? On Althusser's Ideological Supplement of the Law', *Mediations*, 30:2 (2017), 37–44
- Fisher, Mark, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (Zero Books, 2009)
- Foster, John Bellamy, *Marx's Ecology: Materialism and Nature* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2000)
- Foster, John Bellamy, and Paul Burkett, 'Classical Marxism and the Second Law of Thermodynamics', *Organization and Environment*, 21:1 (2008), 3–37
- Foucault, Michel, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews & Other Writings, 1972–1977*, ed. by Colin Gordon, trans. by Colin Gordon, Leo Marshall, John Mepham, and Kate Soper (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980)
- , *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (London: Routledge, 2002)
- Frase, Peter, *Four Futures: Life After Capitalism* (London: Verso, 2016)

- Fraser, John, 'Louis Althusser on Science, Marxism and Politics', *Science & Society*, 40:4 (1976), 438–64
- Friedman, Geraldine, 'The Spectral Legacy of Althusser: The Symptom and Its Return', *Yale French Studies*, 1995, 165–82
- Fukuyama, Francis, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: The Free Press, 1992)
- Gallas, Alexander, 'Revisiting Conjunctural Marxism: Althusser and Poulantzas on the State', *Rethinking Marxism*, 29:2 (2017), 256–80
- Gane, Michael, 'Althusser in English', *Theoretical Practice*, 1, 1971, 4–14
- Garaudy, Roger, *Karl Marx: The Evolution of His Thought*, trans. by N. Apotheker (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1967)
- Garner, Bryan A., ed., "'Aleatory Contract'", in *Black's Law Dictionary* (St. Paul, MN: West, 2009), 366
- Garo, Isabelle, *Foucault, Deleuze, Althusser & Marx : La Politique Dans La Philosophie* (Paris: Demopolis, 2011)
- Gartman, David, 'Structuralist Marxism and the Labor Process: Where Have the Dialectics Gone?', *Theory and Society*, 12:5 (1983), 659–669
- Geras, Norman, 'Essence and Appearance: Aspects of Fetishism in Marx's "Capital"', *New Left Review*, I, 65 (1971), 69–85
- , 'Althusser's Marxism: An Account and Assessment', *New Left Review*, I, 71 (1972), 57–86
- , 'Marxism and Proletarian Self-Emancipation', *Radical Philosophy*, 6 (1973), 20–22
- , *Marx and Human Nature: Refutation of a Legend* (London: Verso, 1983)
- , *Literature of Revolution: Essays on Marxism* (London: Verso, 1986)
- , 'Post-Marxism?', *New Left Review*, I, 163 (1987), 40–82
- Gerratana, Valentino, 'Althusser and Stalinism', trans. by Patrick Camiller, *New Left Review*, I, 101/102 (1977), 110–21
- , 'Heidegger and Marx', *New Left Review*, I, 106 (1977), 51–58
- Geuss, Raymond, *Philosophy and Real Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008)
- Giddens, Anthony, *Central Problems in Social Theory: Action, Structure and Contradiction in Social Analysis* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1979)
- Glucksmann, André, 'A Ventriloquist Structuralism', *New Left Review*, I, 72 (1972), 68–92
- Glucksmann, Miriam, *Structuralist Analysis in Contemporary Social Thought: A Comparison of the Theories of Claude Lévi-Strauss and Louis Althusser*. (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1974)
- Goldmann, Lucien, *The Human Sciences and Philosophy*, trans. by Hayden V. White and Robert Anchor (London: Jonathan Cape, 1969)
- , *The Hidden God: A Study of Tragic Vision in the Pensées of Pascal and the Tragedies of Racine*, trans. by Philip Thody (London: Routledge, 2013)

- Goldstein, Philip, *Post-Marxist Theory: An Introduction* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005)
- Goshgarian, G. M., 'Introductory Note, "Sur la genèse"', *Décalages*, 1:2 (2012), 1–3
<<http://scholar.oxy.edu/decalages/vol1/iss2/8>>
- , 'Note sur le texte', *Décalages*, 1:3 (2013), 1–3
<<http://scholar.oxy.edu/decalages/vol1/iss3/8>>
- Gramsci, Antonio, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, ed. by Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1971)
- Grant, John, *Dialectics and Contemporary Politics* (London: Routledge, 2011)
- Gronow, Jukka, *On the Formation of Marxism* (Leiden: Brill, 2016)
- Gurvitch, Georges, *Études sur les classes sociales* (Paris: Éditions Gonthier, 1966)
- Haider, Asad, 'Crisis Theory', *Viewpoint Magazine*, 2017
<<https://www.viewpointmag.com/2017/12/14/crisis-theory>> [accessed 16 December 2017]
- , *Mistaken Identity: Race and Class in the Age of Trump* (London: Verso, 2018)
- , 'A New Practice of Politics: Althusser and Marxist Philosophy', *Verso*, 2018
<<https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/3713-a-new-practice-of-politics-althusser-and-marxist-philosophy>> [accessed 4 April 2018]
- Haider, Asad, and Salar Mohandesi, 'Underground Currents: Louis Althusser's "On Marxist Thought"', *Viewpoint Magazine*, 2, 2012
<<https://viewpointmag.com/2012/09/12/underground-currents-louis-althussers-on-marxist-thought/>>
- Hall, Stuart, 'In Defence of Theory', in *People's History and Socialist Theory*, ed. by Raphael Samuel (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981), 378–85
- , 'The Great Moving Right Show', in *The Politics of Thatcherism*, ed. by Stuart Hall and Martin Jacques (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1983), 19–39
- , 'Signification, Representation, Ideology: Althusser and the Post-Structuralist Debates', *Critical Studies in Mass Communication*, 2:2 (1985), 91–114
- Hall, Stuart, Chas Critcher, Tony Jefferson, John Clarke, and Brian Roberts, *Policing the Crisis: Mugging, the State, and Law and Order* (London: Macmillan, 1978)
- Hallward, Peter, 'Order and Event', *New Left Review*, II, 53 (2008), 97–122
- Hallward, Peter, and Knox Peden, eds., *Concept and Form: Interviews and Essays on the Cahiers pour l'Analyse* (London: Verso, 2012), II
- , eds., *Concept and Form: Selections from the Cahiers pour l'Analyse* (London: Verso, 2012), I
- Hamilton, Scott, *The Crisis of Theory: E. P. Thompson, the New Left and Postwar British Politics* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2011)
- Hamza, Agon, 'The Function of Philosophy and the Crisis of Marxism', *Crisis and Critique*, 1:3 (2014), 145–73
- , 'Fidelity That Is Not Interpellation: Reading Althusser's Misreadings', *Crisis and Critique*, 2:2 (2015), 263–91
- , *Althusser and Pasolini* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016)

- , ed., *Althusser and Theology: Religion, Politics and Philosophy* (Leiden: Brill, 2016)
- , ‘Marx’s Dyslexia’, *Los Angeles Review of Books*, 2018
<<https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/marxs-dyslexia>> [accessed 23 July 2018]
- Hamza, Agon, and Frank Ruda, ‘Interview with Pierre Macherey’, trans. by Frank Ruda, *Crisis and Critique*, 2:2 (2015), 297–305
- Hardt, Michael, and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000)
- Hardy, Nick, ‘Theory From the Conjuncture: Althusser’s Aleatory Materialism and Machiavelli’s Dispositif’, *Décalages*, 1:3 (2013), 1–33
<<http://scholar.oxy.edu/decalages/vol1/iss3/5>>
- , ‘Wolff, Althusser, and Hegel: Outlining an Aleatory Materialist Epistemology’, *Rethinking Marxism*, 26:4 (2014), 454–71
- Harman, Chris, ‘Philosophy and Revolution’, *International Socialism*, 2, 21 (1983), 58–87
- , ‘The Emperor Has No Clothes’, *International Socialism*, 2, 125 (2010), 71–84
- Harrison, Oliver, *Revolutionary Subjectivity in Post-Marxist Thought: Laclau, Negri, Badiou* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2014)
- Hartsock, Nancy, and Neil Smith, ‘On Althusser’s Misreading of Marx’s 1857 “Introduction”’, *Science & Society*, 43:4 (1979), 486–89
- Hay, Colin, ‘Marxism and the State’, in *Marxism and Social Science*, ed. by Andrew Gamble, David Marsh, and Tony Tant (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1999), 152–74
- Hazareesingh, Sudhir, *Intellectuals and the French Communist Party: Disillusion and Decline* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991)
- Hegel, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. by A. V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977)
- , *The Science of Logic*, trans. by George Di Giovanni (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010)
- Heidegger, Martin, *Being and Time*, trans. by Joan Stambaugh (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996)
- Hewitt, Simon, ‘Rusticating Marx’, *Radical Philosophy*, 191 (2015), 66–67
- Hilferding, Rudolf, *Finance Capital*, ed. by Tom Bottomore, trans. by Morris Watnick and Sam Gordon (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981)
- Hindess, Barry, ‘The Empiricist Conception of Knowledge: A Reply to Mr. Pickvance’, *Economy and Society*, 2:4 (1973), 510–12
- , *Philosophy and Methodology in the Social Sciences* (Hassocks: Harvester Press, 1977)
- , ‘The Althusserian Moment and the Concept of Historical Time’, *Economy and Society*, 36:1 (2007), 1–18
- Hindess, Barry, and Paul Hirst, *Pre-Capitalist Modes of Production* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1975)
- , *Mode of Production and Social Formation* (London: Macmillan, 1977)

- Hirst, Paul, 'Althusser and Philosophy', *Theoretical Practice*, 2, 1971, 16–30
- , *On Law and Ideology* (London: Macmillan, 1979)
- , *Marxism and Historical Writing* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1985)
- Hobbes, Thomas, *Leviathan*, ed. by Richard Tuck (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991)
- Holden, Adam, and Stuart Elden, "It Cannot Be a Real Person, a Concrete Individual": Althusser and Foucault on Machiavelli's Political Technique', *Borderlands*, 4:2 (2005) <http://www.borderlands.net.au/vol4no2_2005/eldenhold_foucault.htm>
- Howard, Dick, 'The Historical Context', in *The Unknown Dimension: European Marxism since Lenin*, ed. by Dick Howard and Karl E. Klare (New York: Basic Books, 1972), 34–78
- Hume, David, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. by Peter Millican (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007)
- Humphries, Jordan, 'Althusser, Ideology, and Stalinism: A Response to Andrew Ryder', *International Socialist Review*, 102 (2016) <<http://isreview.org/issue/102/althusser-ideology-and-stalinism>>
- Ibrahim, Annie, ed., *Autour d'Althusser - penser un matérialisme aléatoire : problèmes et perspectives* (Paris: Le Temps des Cerises, 2012)
- Ichida, Yoshihiko, and François Matheron, 'Un, deux, trois, quatre, dix mille Althusser?', *Multitudes*, 21:2 (2005), 167–78 <<https://www.cairn.info/revue-multitudes-2005-2-page-167.htm>>
- Illas, Edgar, 'The Procrustean Bed of Class Struggle', *Décalages*, 1:3 (2013), 1–16 <<http://scholar.oxy.edu/decalages/vol1/iss3/2>>
- Illuminati, Augusto, 'Recent Italian Translations of Althusser's Texts on Aleatory Materialism', trans. by Arianna Bove, *Borderlands*, 4:2 (2005) <http://www.borderlands.net.au/vol4no2_2005/illuminati_transl.htm>
- Irr, Caren, 'Introduction: An Althusser for the Twenty-First Century', *Mediations*, 30:2 (2017), 29–35
- Israel, Jonathan I., *Radical Enlightenment: Philosophy and the Making of Modernity, 1650–1750* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001)
- Izzo, Francesca, 'Althusser and Italy: A Two-Fold Challenge to Gramsci and Della Volpe', *International Critical Thought*, 5:2 (2015), 200–210
- Jacoby, Russell, *Dialectic of Defeat: Contours of Western Marxism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981)
- Jain, Dhruv, 'The Atomic Prince: A Lucretian Interpretation of Machiavelli' (Toronto: York University, 2017)
- James, Susan, *The Content of Social Explanation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984)
- , 'Althusserian Materialism in England', in *Studies in Anglo-French Cultural Relations*, ed. by Ceri Crossley and Ian Small (Houndmills: Macmillan, 1988), 187–209
- , 'Spinoza and Materialism', in *Current Continental Theory and Modern Philosophy*, ed. by Stephen H. Daniel (Evanston: Northwestern University Press,

- 2005), 100–113
- , *Spinoza on Philosophy, Religion, and Politics: The Theologico-Political Treatise* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012)
- Jameson, Fredric, *Postmodernism: Or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London: Verso, 1991)
- , ‘Future City’, *New Left Review*, II, 21 (2003), 65–79
- Janik, Mateusz, ‘Louis Althusser, *On the Reproduction of Capitalism*: Three Reading Strategies’, *Décalages*, 1:4 (2015), 1–9
<<http://scholar.oxy.edu/decalages/vol1/iss4/30>>
- Jay, Martin, *Marxism and Totality: The Adventures of a Concept from Lukács to Habermas* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984)
- Jelly-Schapiro, Eli, ‘Historicizing Repression and Ideology’, *Mediations*, 30:2 (2017), 45–50
- Jessop, Bob, *The Capitalist State: Marxist Theories and Methods* (Oxford: Martin Robertson, 1982)
- , *Nicos Poulantzas: Marxist Theory and Political Strategy* (London: Macmillan, 1985)
- Johnson, Douglas, ‘Althusser’s Fate’, *London Review of Books*, 3:7 (1981), 13–15
- Johnson, Richard, ‘Against Absolutism’, in *People’s History and Socialist Theory*, ed. by Raphael Samuel (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981), 386–96
- Johnson, Richard W., *The Long March of the French Left* (London: Macmillan, 1981)
- Johnston, Adrian, *Prolegomena to Any Future Materialism: The Outcome of Contemporary French Philosophy* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2013), 1
- , ‘Humanity, That Sickness: Louis Althusser and the Helplessness of Psychoanalysis’, *Crisis and Critique*, 2:2 (2015), 217–61
- Jones, Gareth Stedman, ‘Engels and the End of Classical German Philosophy’, *New Left Review*, I, 79 (1973), 17–36
- Judt, Tony, *Marxism and the French Left: Studies in Labour and Politics in France, 1830–1981* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986)
- , ‘Elucubrations: The “Marxism” of Louis Althusser’, in *Reappraisals: Reflections on the Forgotten Twentieth Century* (New York: Penguin, 2008), 106–15
- Kalampokas, Giorgos, Tassos Betzelos, and Panagiotis Sotiris, ‘State, Political Power and Revolution: Althusser, Poulantzas, Balibar and the “Debate on the State”’, *Décalages*, 2:2 (2018), 1–31 <<http://scholar.oxy.edu/decalages/vol2/iss2/6>>
- Kang, Kyong-Deok, ‘Gramsci and Althusser: The Theorists of Topography?’, *Décalages*, 2:1 (2016), 1–24 <<http://scholar.oxy.edu/decalages/vol2/iss1/5>>
- Kant, Immanuel, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. by Paul Guyer and Allen Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998)
- Karczmarczyk, Pedro Diego, ‘Althusser and Wittgenstein: Ideology and Therapeutic Analysis of Language’, *Rethinking Marxism*, 25:4 (2013), 534–48
- Karol, K. S., ‘The Tragedy of the Althusserians’, *New Left Review*, I, 124 (1980), 93–95

- Karsz, Saül, *Théorie et Politique : Louis Althusser* (Paris: Fayard, 1974)
- Kates, Joshua, 'Against the Period', *Differences*, 23:2 (2012), 136–64
- Kavanagh, James H., Thomas E. Lewis, Étienne Balibar, and Pierre Macherey, 'Interview: Etienne Balibar and Pierre Macherey', *Diacritics*, 12:1 (1982), 46–51
- Keat, Russell, and John Urry, *Social Theory As Science* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 2010)
- Kellner, Douglas, 'Western Marxism', in *Modern Social Theory: An Introduction*, ed. by Austin Harrington (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 154–74
- Kelly, M., 'Louis Althusser and the Problems of a Marxist Theory of Structure', *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy. Section C: Archaeology, Celtic Studies, History, Linguistics, Literature*, 78 (1978), 199–212
- Kelly, Mark G. E., 'Foucault against Marxism: Althusser beyond Althusser', in *(Mis)Readings of Marx in Continental Philosophy*, ed. by Jernej Habjan and Jessica Whyte (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 83–98
- Keucheyan, Razmig, *The Left Hemisphere: Mapping Critical Theory Today*, trans. by Gregory Elliott (London: Verso, 2013)
- Keynes, John Maynard, 'Economic Possibilities for Our Grandchildren', in *Essays in Persuasion* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 321–32
- Khachaturian, Rafael, 'How (Not) to Kill a Philosopher', *Dissent*, 2014
<<https://www.dissentmagazine.org/blog/how-not-to-kill-a-philosopher>> [accessed 7 August 2018]
- King, Patrick, 'Introduction: Althusser's Theoretical Experiments', *Viewpoint Magazine*, 2016 <<https://viewpointmag.com/2016/07/18/introduction-althussers-theoretical-experiments>> [accessed 3 July 2017]
- Kirkpatrick, Graeme, 'Philosophical Foundations of Analytical Marxism', *Science & Society*, 58:1 (1994), 34–52
- Klein, Julie R., 'Étienne Balibar's Marxist Spinoza', *Philosophy Today*, 44 (2000), 41–50
- Knafo, Samuel, and Benno Teschke, 'The Rules of Reproduction of Capitalism: A Historicist Critique', *University of Sussex Centre for Global Political Economy*, Working Paper No. 12 (2017), 1–28
- Kolakowski, Leszek, 'Althusser's Marx', *Socialist Register*, 8 (1971), 111–28
- , *Positivist Philosophy: From Hume to the Vienna Circle*, trans. by Norbert Guterman (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972)
- Korsch, Karl, *Marxism and Philosophy*, trans. by Fred Halliday (London: New Left Books, 1970)
- Kouvelakis, Stathis, 'Marx's Critique of the Political: From the Revolutions of 1848 to the Paris Commune.', trans. by Jean Klucinskas, *Situations*, 2:2 (2007), 81–93
- Krips, Henry, 'Interpellation, Antagonism, Repetition', *Rethinking Marxism*, 7:4 (1994), 59–71
- Kuhn, Thomas, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996)
- Laclau, Ernesto, 'The Specificity of the Political: The Poulantzas-Miliband Debate', trans. by Elizabeth Nash and William Rich, *Economy and Society*, 4:1 (1975), 87–110

- Laclau, Ernesto, and Chantal Mouffe, 'Post-Marxism Without Apologies', *New Left Review*, I, 166 (1987), 79–106
- , *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* (London: Verso, 2001)
- Lahtinen, Mikko, *Politics and Philosophy: Niccolò Machiavelli and Louis Althusser's Aleatory Materialism*, trans. by Gareth Griffiths and Kristina Köhli (Leiden: Brill, 2009)
- Lakatos, Imre, *The Methodology of Scientific Research Programmes: Philosophical Papers*, ed. by John Worrall and Gregory Currie (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), I
- Lampert, Matthew, 'Resisting Ideology: On Butler's Critique of Althusser', *Diacritics*, 43:2 (2015), 124–47
- Lane, Melissa, *Greek and Roman Political Ideas* (London: Penguin, 2014)
- Larrain, Jorge, *The Concept of Ideology* (London: Hutchinson, 1979)
- Lazarus, Sylvain, 'Althusser, la politique et l'histoire', in *Politique et Philosophie dans l'oeuvre de Louis Althusser*, ed. by Sylvain Lazarus (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1993), 9–27
- Lecourt, Dominique, *Marxism and Epistemology: Bachelard, Canguilhem and Foucault*, trans. by Ben Brewster (London: New Left Books, 1975)
- , *Proletarian Science?: The Case of Lysenko*, trans. by Ben Brewster (London: New Left Books, 1977)
- , *The Mediocracy: French Philosophy Since the Mid-1970s*, trans. by Gregory Elliott (London: Verso, 2002)
- Lefebvre, Henri, *Au-delà du structuralisme* (Paris: Éditions Anthropos, 1971)
- Leibniz, Gottfried Wilhelm, *Philosophical Writings*, ed. by G. H. R. Parkinson, trans. by Mary Morris and G. H. R. Parkinson (London: Rowman and Littlefield, 1973)
- Leiter, Brian, 'The Hermeneutics Of Suspicion: Recovering Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud', in *The Future of Philosophy*, ed. by Brian Leiter (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2006), 74–105
- , 'Why Marxism Still Does Not Need Normative Theory', *Analyse Und Kritik*, 37:1/2 (2015), 23–50
- Lenin, Vladimir I., *Lenin Collected Works: May 1901–February 1902*, ed. by Victor Jerome, trans. by Joe Fineberg and George Hanna (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1960), V
- , *Lenin Collected Works: 1908*, ed. by Clemens Dutt, trans. by Abraham Fineberg (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1962), XIV
- , *Lenin Collected Works: March–December 1913*, trans. by George Hanna and Robert Daghish (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1963), XIX
- , *Lenin Collected Works: June–September 1917*, ed. by Stepan Apresyan and Jim Riordan (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1964), XXV
- Leopold, David, 'The Structure of Marx and Engels' Considered Account of Utopian Socialism', *History of Political Thought*, 26:3 (2005), 443–66

- , *The Young Karl Marx: German Philosophy, Modern Politics, and Human Flourishing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007)
- , 'Marxism and Ideology: From Marx to Althusser', in *The Oxford Handbook of Political Ideologies*, ed. by Michael Freeden, Lyman Tower Sargent, and Marc Stears (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 20–37
- , 'On Marxian Utopophobia', *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, 54:1 (2016), 111–34
- Leopold, David, and Marc Stears, eds., *Political Theory: Methods and Approaches* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008)
- Lesjak, Carolyn, 'Althusser and the University Today', *Mediations*, 30:2 (2017), 51–56
- Lestienne, Rémy, *The Creative Power of Chance*, trans. by E. C. Neher (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1998)
- Levine, Andrew, 'Althusser's Marxism', *Economy and Society*, 10:3 (1981), 243–83
- , *A Future for Marxism?: Althusser, the Analytical Turn, and the Revival of Socialist Theory* (London: Pluto Press, 2003)
- Levine, Norman, *Marx's Discourse with Hegel* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012)
- Lévi-Strauss, Claude, *Structural Anthropology*, trans. by Claire Jacobson and Brooke Grundfest Schoepf (New York: Basic Books, 1963)
- Lewis, David K., *On the Plurality of Worlds* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986)
- Lewis, John, 'The Althusser Case (Part 1)', *Marxism Today*, January 1972, 23–28
- , 'The Althusser Case (Part 2)', *Marxism Today*, February 1972, 35, 43–48
- Lewis, Tyson E., 'A Marxist Education of the Encounter: Althusser, Interpellation, and the Seminar', *Rethinking Marxism*, 29:2 (2017), 303–17
- Lewis, William, 'Knowledge versus "Knowledge": Louis Althusser on the Autonomy of Science and Philosophy from Ideology', *Rethinking Marxism*, 17:3 (2005), 455–70
- , 'The Under-Theorization of Overdetermination in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*', *Borderlands*, 4:2 (2005)
<http://www.borderlands.net.au/vol4no2_2005/lewis_overdetermination.htm>
- , *Louis Althusser and the Traditions of French Marxism* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2005)
- , 'Concrete Analysis and Pragmatic Social Theory (Notes Towards an Althusserian Critical Theory)', *International Studies in Philosophy*, 39:2 (2007), 97–116
- , 'Is There Less Bullshit in *For Marx* than in *Reading Capital*?', *Crisis and Critique*, 2:2 (2015), 143–65
- , 'Listening to *Reading Capital*', *Viewpoint Magazine*, 2016
<<https://www.viewpointmag.com/2016/07/18/listening-to-reading-capital/>>
[accessed 26 April 2017]
- , 'Althusser's Scientism and Aleatory Materialism', *Décalages*, 2:1 (2016), 1–72
<<http://scholar.oxy.edu/decalages/vol2/iss1/22>>
- , 'Louis Althusser', *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 2018
<<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/althusser/>> [accessed 8 July 2018]

- Lewis, William, and David McInerney, 'On the Subject of Theoretical Practice: William S. Lewis in Dialogue with David McInerney', *Borderlands*, 4:2 (2005)
<http://www.borderlands.net.au/vol4no2_2005/lewis_interview.htm>
- Lezra, Jacques, 'Editor's Preface: Labors of Reading', *Yale French Studies*, 88, 1995, 1–5
- , 'Spontaneous Labor', *Yale French Studies*, 88, 1995, 78–117
- Li, Promise, 'Althusser's Clinamen: Aleatory Materialism and Revolutionary Politics', *Mediations*, 30:2 (2017), 57–62
- Lih, Lars T., *Lenin Rediscovered: What Is To Be Done? In Context* (Chicago: Haymarket, 2008)
- Lipietz, Alain, *The Enchanted World: Inflation, Credit and the World Crisis*, trans. by Ian Patterson (London: Verso, 1985)
- Little, Daniel, *The Scientific Marx* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986)
- Lock, Grahame, 'Louis Althusser: Philosophy and Leninism', *Marxism Today*, June 1972, 180–87
- , 'Louis Althusser and G. A. Cohen: A Confrontation', *Economy and Society*, 17:4 (1988), 499–517
- Locke, John, *The Second Treatise of Government*, ed. by John Wiedhofft Gough (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1966)
- , *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975)
- Lucas, Robert E., 'Macroeconomic Priorities', *American Economic Review*, 93:1 (2003), 1–14
- Luce, Edward, 'Trump Will Be Much More than a Footnote in Obama's "arc of History"', *Financial Times*, 28 June 2018 <<https://www.ft.com/content/6d339f8c-7a2e-11e8-8e67-1e1a0846c475>> [accessed 12 July 2018]
- Lucretius, *On the Nature of Things*, trans. by Martin Ferguson Smith (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2001)
- Lukács, Georg, *History and Class Consciousness*, trans. by Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1971)
- Lukes, Steven, *Essays in Social Theory* (London: Macmillan, 1977)
- Lumsden, Simon, 'Poststructuralism and Modern European Philosophy', in *The Edinburgh Companion to Poststructuralism*, ed. by Benoît Dillet, Iain MacKenzie, and Robert Porter (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013), 23–46
- Lundy, Craig, 'From Structuralism to Poststructuralism', in *The Edinburgh Companion to Poststructuralism*, ed. by Benoît Dillet, Iain MacKenzie, and Robert Porter (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013), 69–92
- Luxemburg, Rosa, 'Speeches and Letters on War and Revolution, 1918–19', in *The Rosa Luxemburg Reader*, ed. by Peter Hudis and Kevin B. Anderson (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2004), 342–78
- Lyotard, Jean-François, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. by Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984)
- , *Phenomenology*, trans. by Brian Beakley (Albany: State University of New York

Press, 1991)

- Macciocchi, Maria Antonietta, *Letters from Inside the Italian Communist Party to Louis Althusser*, trans. by Stephen M. Hellman (London: New Left Books, 1973)
- Macherey, Pierre, 'L'Histoire de la philosophie considérée comme une lutte de tendances', *La Pensée*, 185 (1976), 3–25
- , *A Theory of Literary Production*, trans. by Geoffrey Wall (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978)
- , *In a Materialist Way: Selected Essays*, ed. by Warren Montag, trans. by Ted Stolze (London: Verso, 1998)
- , 'Althusser and the Concept of the Spontaneous Philosophy of Scientists', trans. by Robin Mackay, *Parrhesia*, 6 (2009), 14–27
- , *Hegel or Spinoza*, trans. by Susan M. Ruddick (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011)
- , 'Althusser and Young Marx', trans. by Patrick King, *Viewpoint Magazine*, 2016 <<https://www.viewpointmag.com/2016/07/18/althusser-and-the-young-marx/>> [accessed 26 April 2017]
- Macherey, Pierre, and Roger Celestin, 'A Production of Subjectivity', *Yale French Studies*, 88, 1995, 42–52
- Machiavelli, Niccoló, *The Prince*, trans. by George Bull (London: Penguin, 2004)
- Macpherson, C. B., *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism: Hobbes to Locke* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1964)
- Majumdar, Margaret A., *Althusser and the End of Leninism?* (London: Pluto Press, 1995)
- Mallarmé, Stéphane, *Collected Poems and Other Verse*, trans. by E. H. Blackmore and A. M. Blackmore (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006)
- Mancuso, Eva, 'Indication as Concept: Althusser, Spinoza and the Logic of the "Groupes Althussériens" (1965–1968)', trans. by Patrick King, *Viewpoint Magazine*, 2016 <<http://www.viewpointmag.com/2016/07/18/indication-as-concept-althusser-spinoza-and-the-logic-of-the-groupes-althusseriens-1965-1968/>> [accessed 26 April 2017]
- Mandel, Ernest, *Formation of the Economic Thought of Karl Marx: 1843 to Capital*, trans. by Brian Pearce (London: New Left Books, 1971)
- Marshall, Richard, and William Lewis, 'The Fall and Rise of Louis Althusser', 3:AM *Magazine*, 707 <<http://www.3ammagazine.com/3am/althussers-return/>> [accessed 23 July 2017]
- Martin, Bill, 'Continental Marxist Thought', in *The Continuum Companion to Continental Philosophy*, ed. by John Mullarkey and Beth Lord (London: Continuum, 2009), 127–44
- Marty, Éric, *Louis Althusser, un sujet sans procès : anatomie d'un passé très récent* (Paris: Gallimard, 1999)
- Marx, Karl, and Friedrich Engels, *Marx-Engels Collected Works: Marx and Engels, 1843–1844* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1975), III
- , *Marx-Engels Collected Works: Marx and Engels, 1844–1845* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1975), IV

- , *Marx-Engels Collected Works: Marx, 1835–43* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1975), I
- , *Marx-Engels Collected Works: Marx and Engels, 1845–1847* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1976), V
- , *Marx-Engels Collected Works: Marx and Engels, 1845–1848* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1976), VI
- , *Marx-Engels Collected Works: Marx and Engels, Letters 1856–1859* (New York: International Publishers, 1983), XL
- , *Marx-Engels Collected Works: Marx and Engels, 1867–1870* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1985), XXI
- , *Marx-Engels Collected Works: Marx and Engels. 1864–1868* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1985), XX
- , *Marx-Engels Collected Works: Marx, 1857–61* (New York: International Publishers, 1986), XXVIII
- , *Marx-Engels Collected Works: Engels, Anti-Dühring, Dialectics of Nature* (New York: International Publishers, 1987), XXV
- , *Marx-Engels Collected Works: Marx and Engels, Letters, 1864–1868* (New York: International Publishers, 1987), XLII
- , *Marx-Engels Collected Works: Marx, 1857–1861* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1987), XXIX
- , *Marx-Engels Collected Works: Marx and Engels, Letters 1868–1870* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1988), XLIII
- , *Marx-Engels Collected Works: Marx and Engels, 1874–1883* (New York: International Publishers, 1989), XXIV
- , *Marx-Engels Collected Works: Engels, 1882–1889* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1990), XXVI
- , *Marx-Engels Collected Works: Capital, Volume 1* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1996), XXXV
- , *Marx-Engels Collected Works: Capital, Volume 3* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1998), XXXVII
- , *Marx-Engels Collected Works: Engels, Letters 1890–1892* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 2001), XLIX
- Mason, Paul, *PostCapitalism: A Guide to Our Future* (London: Allen Lane, 2015)
- Matheron, François, ‘The Recurrence of the Void in Louis Althusser’, trans. by Erin A. Post, *Rethinking Marxism*, 10:3 (1998), 22–37
- , ‘Louis Althusser, or the Impure Purity of the Concept’, in *Critical Companion to Contemporary Marxism*, ed. by Stathis Kouvelakis and Jacques Bidet (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 503–27
- , ‘“Des Problèmes qu’il faudra bien appeler d’un autre nom et peut-être politique” Althusser et l’insituabilité de la politique’, in *Machiavel et nous*, by Louis Althusser (Paris: Éditions Tallandier, 2009), 183–203
- Matthys, Jean, ‘“Dans le principe, les idées vraies servent toujours le peuple”. Science et

émancipation chez Althusser', *Cahiers du GRM*, 7 (2015), 1–14
<<http://grm.revues.org/585>>

McCarney, Joseph, 'For and Against Althusser', *New Left Review*, I, 176 (1989), 115–28
———, *Social Theory and the Crisis of Marxism* (London: Verso, 1990)

———, 'The True Realm of Freedom: Marxist Philosophy After Communism', *New Left Review*, I, 189 (1991), 19–38

McInerney, David, 'Althusser's Underground Railroad: From Dialectical Materialism to the Non-Philosophy of the Non-State', *Borderlands*, 4:2 (2005)
<http://www.borderlands.net.au/vol4no2_2005/mcinerney_intro.htm>

McIvor, Martin, 'The Young Marx and German Idealism: Revisiting the Doctoral Dissertation', *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, 46:3 (2008), 395–419

McKenna, Tony, 'Against Post-Marxism: How Post-Marxism Annuls Class-Based Historicism and the Possibility of Revolutionary Practice', *International Critical Thought*, 4:2 (2014), 142–59

McLachlan, Hugh V, *Althusser on Empiricism: An Innocent Reader's Reflections on Locke* (Glasgow: Department of Social Sciences, Glasgow Caledonian University, 1995)

McLellan, David, 'Marx & the Missing Link', *Encounter*, November 1970, 34–45

———, *The Thought of Karl Marx* (London: Papermac, 1980)

McLennan, Mathew R., and T. Mars McDougall, 'Adrift of Alienation: Mapping Lyotard's Critique of Althusser', *Décalages*, 2:2 (2018), 1–34
<<http://scholar.oxy.edu/decalages/vol2/iss2/9>>

Meikle, Scott, *Essentialism in the Thought of Karl Marx* (London: Duckworth, 1985)

Meillassoux, Quentin, *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency*, trans. by Ray Brassier (London: Continuum, 2008)

———, 'The Contingency of the Laws of Nature', trans. by Robin Mackay, *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 30:2 (2012), 322–34

———, *The Number and the Siren: A Decipherment of Mallarmé's Coup De Dés*, trans. by Robin Mackay (Falmouth: Urbanomic, 2012)

Melzer, Arthur M., *Philosophy Between the Lines* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014)

Memos, Christos, 'Castoriadis On Althusser and the Crisis of Marxism', *Cosmos and History*, 8:2 (2012), 100–116

Mepham, John, 'Who Makes History? Althusser's Anti-Humanism', *Radical Philosophy*, 6, 1973, 23–29

Mepham, John, and David-Hillel Ruben, eds., *Issues in Marxist Philosophy: Dialectics and Method* (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1979), I

———, eds., *Issues in Marxist Philosophy: Epistemology, Science, Ideology* (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1979), III

———, eds., *Issues in Marxist Philosophy: Materialism* (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1979), II

———, eds., *Issues in Marxist Philosophy: Social and Political Philosophy* (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1981), IV

- Miliband, Ralph, 'Marx and the State', *Socialist Register*, 2 (1965), 278–96
- , 'The Capitalist State – Reply to N. Poulantzas', *New Left Review*, I, 59 (1970), 53–60
- , 'Poulantzas and the Capitalist State', *New Left Review*, I, 82 (1973), 83–92
- , *Marxism and Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977)
- , 'Constitutionalism and Revolution: Notes on Eurocommunism', *Socialist Register*, 15 (1978), 158–71
- , *The State in Capitalist Society* (Pontypool: Merlin Press, 2009)
- Monod, Jacques, *Chance and Necessity*, trans. by Austryn Wainhouse (New York: Vintage Books, 1972)
- Montag, Warren, 'The Emptiness of a Distance Taken: Freud, Althusser, Lacan', *Rethinking Marxism*, 4:1 (1991), 31–38
- , "'The Soul Is the Prison of the Body": Althusser and Foucault, 1970–1975', *Yale French Studies*, 88, 1995, 53–77
- , 'Althusser's Nominalism: Structure and Singularity (1962–6)', *Rethinking Marxism*, 10:3 (1998), 64–73
- , *Bodies, Masses, Power: Spinoza and His Contemporaries* (London: Verso, 1999)
- , *Louis Althusser* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003)
- , "'Foucault and the Problematic of Origins": Althusser's Reading of *Folie et Déraison*', *Borderlands*, 4:2 (2005)
<http://www.borderlands.net.au/vol4no2_2005/montag_foucault.htm>
- , 'On The Function of the Concept of Origin: Althusser's Reading of Locke', in *Current Continental Theory and Modern Philosophy*, ed. by Stephen H. Daniel (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2005), 148–61
- , 'Politics: Transcendent or Immanent?: A Response to Miguel Vatter's "Machiavelli After Marx"', *Theory & Event*, 7:4 (2005) <muse.jhu.edu/article/244118>
- , 'The Late Althusser: Materialism of the Encounter or Philosophy of Nothing?', *Culture, Theory and Critique*, 51:2 (2010), 157–70
- , 'Introduction to Althusser's "Student Problems"', *Radical Philosophy*, 170 (2011), 8–10
- , 'Spectres of Althusser', *Historical Materialism*, 19:3 (2011), 147–56
- , *Althusser and His Contemporaries: Philosophy's Perpetual War* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013)
- , 'Althusser's Lenin', *Diacritics*, 43:2 (2015), 48–66
- , 'Discourse and Decree: Spinoza, Althusser and Pêcheux', *Cahiers du GRM*, 7 (2015), 1–21 <<http://grm.revues.org/600>>
- , 'Introduction to Louis Althusser, "Some Questions Concerning the Crisis of Marxist Theory and of the International Communist Movement"', *Historical Materialism*, 23:1 (2015), 141–51
- , 'Althusser's Empty Signifier: What Is the Meaning of the Word "Interpellation"?', *Mediations*, 30:2 (2017), 63–68

- Morejón, Gil, 'Overdetermination, Complication, Beatitude: Althusser's Physics of Social Modes', *Décalages*, 2:2 (2018), 1–11 <<http://scholar.oxy.edu/decalages/vol2/iss2/11>>
- Morel, Pierre-Marie, 'Epicurean Atomism', in *The Cambridge Companion to Epicureanism*, ed. by James Warren (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 65–83
- Morfino, Vittorio, 'An Althusserian Lexicon', trans. by Jason Smith, *Borderlands*, 4:2 (2005) <http://www.borderlands.net.au/vol4no2_2005/morfino_lexicon.htm>
- , 'Causa Sui or Wechselwirkung: Engels between Spinoza and Hegel', trans. by Peter Thomas, *Historical Materialism*, 16:1 (2008), 9–35
- , 'Lire Gramsci après Althusser', *Décalages*, 1:2 (2012), 1–7 <<http://scholar.oxy.edu/decalages/vol1/iss2/7/>>
- , *Plural Temporality: Transindividuality and the Aleatory Between Spinoza and Althusser* (Leiden: Brill, 2014)
- , 'The Concept of Structural Causality in Althusser', trans. by Dave Messing, *Crisis and Critique*, 2:2 (2015), 87–107
- Moufî, Mohamed, 'Althusser, lecteur de Machiavel', *Décalages*, 1:3 (2013), 1–12 <<http://scholar.oxy.edu/decalages/vol1/iss3/1>>
- Moulier Boutang, Yann, 'Le Matérialisme comme politique aléatoire', *Multitudes*, 21:2 (2005), 159–65 <<https://www.cairn.info/revue-multitudes-2005-2-page-159.htm>>
- Muñoz, Jesús, 'The Power of Marx-Engels Scientific Research Program and Its Fulfilled Predictions: A Note on Heterodox Epistemology', *World Review of Political Economy*, 4:1 (2013), 63–85
- Murray, Christopher John, ed., *Encyclopedia of Modern French Thought* (New York: Fitzroy Dearborn, 2004)
- Nagel, Ernest, *The Structure of Science: Problems in the Logic of Scientific Explanation* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1961)
- Nagel, Jennifer, *Knowledge: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014)
- Navarro, Fernanda, 'An Encounter with Althusser', *Rethinking Marxism*, 10:3 (1998), 93–98
- , 'Celebrating Althusser's Legacy', *Crisis and Critique*, 2:2 (2015), 47–61
- Nesbitt, Nick, ed., *The Concept in Crisis: Reading Capital Today* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017)
- Newman, Lex, 'Locke on Knowledge', in *The Cambridge Companion to Locke's 'Essay Concerning Human Understanding'*, ed. by Lex Newman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 313–51
- Nichols, Robert, *The World of Freedom: Heidegger, Foucault, and the Politics of Historical Ontology* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2014)
- Nicolaus, Martin, 'Foreword', in *Grundrisse*, by Karl Marx, trans. by Martin Nicolaus (Penguin Books, 1973), 7–63
- Nietzsche, Friedrich, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, ed. by Carol Diethe, trans. by Keith Ansell-Pearson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994)

- , *Beyond Good and Evil*, ed. by Rolf-Peter Horstmann and Judith Norman, trans. by Judith Norman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002)
- Nir, Oded, 'Althusser, or The System', *Mediations*, 30:2 (2017), 69–74
- Norris, Christopher, *Spinoza and the Origins of Modern Critical Theory* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1991)
- Nouailhat, René, 'La Rencontre avec Stanislas Breton', *La Pensée*, 382 (2015), 161–74
- Nowak, Jörg, 'Louis Althusser's Critique of the Communist Party and the Question of the Postrevolutionary State', *Rethinking Marxism*, 29:2 (2017), 234–55
- Nozick, Robert, *Philosophical Explanations* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press, 1981)
- O'Boyle, Brian, and Terrence McDonough, 'Critical Realism and the Althusserian Legacy', *Journal for The Theory of Social Behaviour*, 46:2 (2016), 143–64
- O'Hagan, Timothy, "'Machiavelli's Solitude": An Introduction', *Economy and Society*, 17:4 (1988), 461–67
- O'Keefe, Tim, *Epicurus on Freedom* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005)
- , 'Action and Responsibility', in *The Cambridge Companion to Epicureanism*, ed. by James Warren (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 142–57
- Ollman, Bertell, *Alienation: Marx's Conception of Man in Capitalist Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976)
- , *Dance of the Dialectic: Steps in Marx's Method* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2003)
- Olsen, Erik K., 'Social Ontology and the Origins of Mode of Production Theory', *Rethinking Marxism*, 21:2 (2009), 177–95
- , 'The Althusserian Controversy in Retrospect and Prospect', *Rethinking Marxism*, 29:2 (2017), 340–60
- Osborne, Peter, 'From Structure to Rhizome: Transdisciplinarity in French Thought', *Radical Philosophy*, 165 (2011), 15–16
- Oulc'hen, Hervé, 'Un Moment Machiavélien dans la théorie. Sur Althusser', *Cahiers du GRM*, 8 (2015), 1–17 <<http://grm.revues.org/707>>
- Pace, David, 'Structuralism in History and the Social Sciences', *American Quarterly*, 30:3 (1978), 282–97
- Panitch, Leo, and Sam Gindin, 'Marxist Theory and Strategy: Getting Somewhere Better', *Historical Materialism*, 23:2 (2015), 3–22
- Park, Hyun Woong, 'Overdetermination: Althusser versus Resnick and Wolff', *Rethinking Marxism*, 25:3 (2013), 325–40
- Parkinson, G. H. R., ed., *Marx and Marxisms* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982)
- Pashukanis, Evgeny Bronislavovich, *Law and Marxism: A General Theory* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2002)
- Passmore, John, 'The Idea of a History of Philosophy', *History and Theory*, 5 (1965), 1–32
- Patton, Paul, 'Althusser's Epistemology: The Limits of the Theory of Theoretical Practice', *Radical Philosophy*, 19 (1978), 8–18

- Pêcheux, Michel, and Étienne Balibar, 'Definitions', *Theoretical Practice*, 3/4, 1971, 10–12
- Peden, Knox, *Spinoza Contra Phenomenology: French Rationalism from Cavailles to Deleuze* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2014)
- , 'Problems and Pseudo-Problems in Althusserian Science', *Crisis and Critique*, 5:1 (2018), 299–311
- Pepper, Thomas, 'Kneel and You Will Believe', *Yale French Studies*, 88, 1995, 27–41
- Pfaller, Robert, 'Negation and Its Reliabilities: An Empty Subject for Ideology?', in *Cogito and the Unconscious*, ed. by Slavoj Žižek (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1998), 225–46
- , 'Althusser's Best Tricks', *Crisis and Critique*, 2:2 (2015), 25–45
- Pfeifer, Geoff, 'On Althusser on Science, Ideology, and the New, or Why We Should Continue to Read *Reading Capital*', *Crisis and Critique*, 2:2 (2015), 125–41
- , *The New Materialism: Althusser, Badiou, and Žižek* (New York: Routledge, 2015)
- Piaget, Jean, *Structuralism*, trans. by Chaninah Maschler (New York: Basic Books, 1970)
- Pickvance, C. G., 'Althusser's "empiricist" Conception of Knowledge: A Comment on Mr. Hindness's Review Article', *Economy and Society*, 2:4 (1973), 506–10
- Pinzolo, Luca, 'Sur le matérialisme aléatoire de Louis Althusser' (Nice: Université de Nice-Sophia Antipolis, 2011)
- , *Il Materialismo aleatorio. Una filosofia per Louis Althusser* (Milan: Mimesis, 2012)
- Pinzolo, Luca, and Vittorio Morfino, 'Le Primat de la rencontre sur la forme. Le Dernier Althusser entre nature et histoire', *Multitudes*, 21:2 (2005), 149–58
<<https://www.cairn.info/revue-multitudes-2005-2-page-149.htm>>
- Pippa, Stefano, 'Althusser's Perpetual War', *Radical Philosophy*, 186 (2014), 41–43
- , 'Althusser and Contingency' (London: Kingston University, 2015)
- , 'The Necessity of Contingency', *Radical Philosophy*, 199 (2016), 15–25
- Plekhanov, Georgi, 'On the Question of the Individual's Role in History', in *Selected Works of G.V. Plekhanov*, trans. by Julius Katzer (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1976), II, 283–315
- Pluth, Ed, 'Freeing Althusser from Spinoza: A Reconsideration of Structural Causality', *Crisis and Critique*, 1:3 (2014), 337–52
- Popper, Karl R., *Conjectures and Refutations: The Growth of Scientific Knowledge* (New York: Basic Books, 1962)
- , *Quantum Theory and the Schism in Physics*, ed. by W. W. Bartley (Totowa: Rowan and Littlefield, 1982)
- , *The Open Universe: An Argument for Indeterminism*, ed. by W. W. Bartley (London: Routledge, 1982)
- , *The Logic of Scientific Discovery* (London: Routledge, 2002)
- , *The Poverty of Historicism* (London: Routledge, 2002)
- , *The Open Society and Its Enemies: Hegel and Marx* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2003),

- Post, Charles, *The American Road to Capitalism: Studies in Class-Structure, Economic Development and Political Conflict, 1620–1877* (Leiden: Brill, 2011)
- Poulantzas, Nicos, *Political Power and Social Classes*, trans. by Timothy O'Hagan (London: New Left Books, 1973)
- , *The Poulantzas Reader: Marxism, Law, and the State*, ed. by James Martin (London: Verso, 2008)
- , *State, Power, Socialism*, trans. by Patrick Camiller (London: Verso, 2014)
- , 'The State, Social Movements, Party: Interview with Nicos Poulantzas', trans. by Patrick King, *Viewpoint Magazine*, 2017
<<https://www.viewpointmag.com/2017/12/18/state-social-movements-party-interview-nicos-poulantzas-1979/>> [accessed 12 January 2018]
- Power, Nina, 'Reading Transdisciplinarily: Sartre and Althusser', *Theory, Culture & Society*, 32:5–6 (2015), 109–24
- , 'Althusser: The Law, The Cop, and The Subject', *Los Angeles Review of Books*, 2016 <<https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/althusser-law-cop-subject/>> [accessed 23 July 2018]
- Prigogine, Ilya, *The End of Certainty: Time, Chaos, and the New Laws of Nature* (New York: The Free Press, 1997)
- Prigogine, Ilya, and Isabelle Stengers, *Order Out of Chaos: Man's New Dialogue with Nature* (Toronto: Bantam Books, 1984)
- Rademacher, Lee M., *Structuralism vs. Humanism in the Formation of the Political Self: The Philosophy of Politics of Jean-Paul Sartre and Louis Althusser* (Lewiston: E.Mellen Press, 2002)
- Rancière, Jacques, *Althusser's Lesson*, trans. by Emiliano Battista (London: Continuum, 2011)
- Rapley, John, *Twilight of the Money Gods: Economics as a Religion and How It All Went Wrong* (London: Simon & Schuster, 2017)
- Raymond, Pierre, *Le Passage au matérialisme* (Paris: Maspero, 1973)
- , 'Althusser's Materialism', *Historical Materialism*, 23:2 (2015), 176–88
- Read, Jason, 'Primitive Accumulation: The Aleatory Foundation of Capitalism', *Rethinking Marxism*, 14:2 (2002), 24–49
- , 'A Universal History of Contingency: Deleuze and Guattari on the History of Capitalism', *Borderlands*, 2:3 (2003)
<http://www.borderlands.net.au/vol2no3_2003/read_contingency.htm>
- , *The Micro-Politics of Capital: Marx and the Prehistory of the Present* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003)
- , 'The Althusser Effect: Philosophy, History, and Temporality', *Borderlands*, 4:2 (2005) <http://www.borderlands.net.au/vol4no2_2005/read_effect.htm>
- , 'Review: *Philosophy of the Encounter: Later Writings 1978–1987*', *Contemporary Political Theory*, 6:4 (2007), 484–87
- , 'The Order and Connection of Ideas: Theoretical Practice in Macherey's Turn to

- Spinoza', *Rethinking Marxism*, 19:4 (2007), 500–520
- , 'Reading the Tendencies', *Postmodern Culture*, 24:1 (2013)
- , 'Ideology as Individuation, Individuating Ideology', *Mediations*, 30:2 (2017), 75–82
- Read, Malcolm K., 'Towards a Notion of the Ideological Unconscious: Marx, Althusser, Juan Carlos Rodríguez', *Historical Materialism*, 25:4 (2017), 139–65
- Reed, Joel, 'Althusser and Hume: A Materialist Encounter', in *Current Continental Theory and Modern Philosophy*, ed. by Stephen H. Daniel (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2005), 210–22
- Rehmann, Jan, *Theories of Ideology: The Powers of Alienation and Subjection* (Leiden: Brill, 2013)
- Resch, Robert, *Althusser and the Renewal of Marxist Social Theory* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992)
- , 'Review: Philosophy and the Spontaneous Philosophy of the Scientists by Louis Althusser', *Theory and Society*, 22:3 (1993), 442–47
- , 'A Rock and a Hard Place: Althusser, Structuralism, Communism and the Death of the Anticapitalist Left', in *Histories of Postmodernism*, ed. by Mark Bevir, Jill Hargis, and Sara Rushing (Abingdon: Routledge, 2007), 75–102
- Resnick, Stephen, and Richard Wolff, *Knowledge and Class: A Marxian Critique of Political Economy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987)
- , 'Althusser's Contribution', *Rethinking Marxism*, 4:1 (1991), 13–16
- , 'Everythingism, or Better Still, Overdetermination', *New Left Review*, I, 195 (1992), 124–26
- , 'On Overdetermination and Althusser: Our Response to Silverman and Park', *Rethinking Marxism*, 25:3 (2013), 341–49
- Ricoeur, Paul, *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation*, trans. by Denis Savage (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970)
- Roberts, Michael, *The Long Depression* (Chicago: Haymarket, 2016)
- Roemer, John, *A General Theory of Exploitation and Class* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982)
- , ed., *Analytical Marxism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986)
- Romé, Natalia, 'What Colour Is Theoreticism? Faust Reading Althusser', *Crisis and Critique*, 2:2 (2015), 109–23
- , 'For Theoreticism: Theoretical Practice and Philosophical Unconscious', *Crisis and Critique*, 5:1 (2018), 349–75
- Romer, Paul, 'The Trouble with Macroeconomics', *The American Economist*, Forthcoming
- Rooney, Ellen, 'Better Read Than Dead: Althusser and the Fetish of Ideology', *Yale French Studies*, 88, 1995, 183–200
- Rosen, Michael, *Hegel's Dialectic and Its Criticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982)
- , *On Voluntary Servitude: False Consciousness and the Theory of Ideology*

- (Cambridge: Polity, 1996)
- Rosen, Michael, and Jonathan Wolff, 'The Problem of Ideology', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, Supplementary Volumes*, 70 (1996), 209–41
- Rousseau, Jean-Jacques, *A Discourse on Inequality*, trans. by Maurice Cranston (London: Penguin, 1984)
- , *The Social Contract*, trans. by Maurice Cranston (London: Penguin, 2004)
- Ruben, David-Hillel, *Marxism and Materialism: A Study in Marxist Theory of Knowledge* (Sussex: Harvester Press, 1979)
- Russell, Daniel C., 'Epicurus and Lucretius on Saving Agency', *Phoenix*, 54:3/4 (2000), 226–43
- Rworty, Richard, 'The Historiography of Philosophy: Four Genres', in *Philosophy in History*, ed. by Richard Rworty, J. B. Schneewind, and Quentin Skinner (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 49–75
- Ryder, Andrew, 'Althusser's Theory of Ideology', *International Socialist Review*, 99 (2015) <<http://isreview.org/issue/99/althussers-theory-ideology>>
- , 'The Legacy of Louis Althusser: A Reply to Jordan Humphreys', *International Socialist Review*, 103 (2016), 144–46 <<https://isreview.org/issue/103/legacy-louis-althusser>>
- Said, Edward, *Orientalism* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978)
- Samuel, Raphael, 'History and Theory', in *People's History and Socialist Revolution*, ed. by Raphael Samuel (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981), xl–lvi
- de Saussure, Ferdinand, *Course in General Linguistics*, ed. by Perry Meisel and Haun Saussy, trans. by Wade Baskin (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011)
- Sayer, Derek, *Marx's Method: Ideology, Science and Critique in Capital* (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1979)
- , *The Violence of Abstraction: The Analytic Foundations of Historical Materialism* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987)
- Sayers, Sean, 'Dualism, Materialism and Dialectics', in *Hegel, Marx and Dialectic: A Debate*, by Richard Norman and Sean Sayers (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1980), 67–145
- , 'Marxism and the Dialectical Method: A Critique of G. A. Cohen', *Radical Philosophy*, 36 (1984), 4–13
- Schmidt, Alfred, *The Concept of Nature in Marx*, trans. by Ben Fowkes (London: New Left Books, 1971)
- , *History and Structure: An Essay on Hegelian-Marxist and Structuralist Theories of History*, trans. by Jeffrey Herf (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1981)
- Scruton, Roger, *A Short History of Modern Philosophy: From Descartes to Wittgenstein* (London: Routledge, 2002)
- , *Spinoza: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002)
- , *Fools, Frauds and Firebrands: Thinkers of the New Left* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015)
- Sedgwick, Peter, *Descartes to Derrida: An Introduction to European Philosophy* (Oxford:

Blackwell, 2001)

- Sève, Lucien, 'Althusser et la dialectique', in *Althusser philosophe*, ed. by Pierre Raymond (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1997), 105–36
- , 'Le Rejet de la dialectique', *La Pensée*, 382 (2015), 21–29
- Seymour, Richard, 'Marxist Underground', *Los Angeles Review of Books*, 2016
<<https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/marxist-underground>> [accessed 31 January 2017]
- Sharp, Hasana, "Is It Simple to Be a Feminist in Philosophy?": Althusser and Feminist Theoretical Practice', *Rethinking Marxism*, 12:2 (2000), 18–34
- , 'The Force of Ideas in Spinoza', *Political Theory*, 35:6 (2007), 732–55
- Sharp, Hasana, and Jason E. Smith, eds., *Between Hegel and Spinoza* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2012)
- Sharzer, Greg, 'The Ideology of Localism', *Los Angeles Review of Books*, 2016
<<https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/the-ideology-of-localism>> [accessed 23 July 2018]
- Shin, Jo-Young, 'Althusser's Contribution to a Postmodern (Overdeterminist) Marxism', *Rethinking Marxism*, 8:2 (1995), 112–22
- Silverman, Mark S., "Overdetermined" or "Indeterminate"? Remarks on Knowledge and Class', *Rethinking Marxism*, 25:3 (2013), 311–24
- Sim, Stuart, *Post-Marxism: An Intellectual History*, 29 (London: Routledge, 2000)
- Skinner, Quentin, 'Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas', *History and Theory*, 8:1 (1969), 3–53
- , 'A Reply to My Critics', in *Meaning and Context*, ed. by James Tully (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), 231–88
- Smith, Neil, 'Symptomatic Silence in Althusser: The Concept of Nature and the Unity of Science', *Science & Society*, 44:1 (1980), 58–81
- Smith, Steven B., 'Althusser and the Overdetermined Self', *Review of Politics*, 46:4 (1984), 516–38
- , 'Althusser's Marxism Without a Knowing Subject', *The American Political Science Review*, 79:3 (1985), 641–55
- , 'Ideology and Interpretation: The Case of Althusser', *Poetics Today*, 10:3 (1989), 493–510
- Solomon, Samuel, 'L'Espace de la lecture: Althusser, Derrida, and the Theory of Reading', *Décalages*, 1:2 (2012), 1–25
<<http://scholar.oxy.edu/decalages/vol1/iss2/4>>
- Soper, Kate, *Humanism and Anti-Humanism* (London: Hutchinson, 1986)
- Sorrell, Tom, *Descartes: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000)
- Sotiris, Panagiotis, 'Contradictions of Aleatory Materialism: On Louis Althusser's Later Writings', 2006, 1–18
- , 'The Difficult Encounter with Materialism', *Historical Materialism*, 16:3 (2008), 147–78

- , ‘How To Make Lasting Encounters: Althusser and Political Subjectivity’, *Rethinking Marxism*, 26:3 (2014), 398–413
- , ‘Neither as Instrument nor a Fortress: Poulantzas’s Theory of the State and His Dialogue with Gramsci’, *Historical Materialism*, 22:2 (2014), 135–57
- , ‘Rethinking Structure and Conjuncture in Althusser’, *Historical Materialism*, 22:3/4 (2014), 5–51
- , “‘Struggle, Not Destiny’: Introduction to Pierre Raymond, “Althusser’s Materialism””, *Historical Materialism*, 23:2 (2015), 157–75
- , ‘A New Practice of Philosophy: Reading Notes on Louis Althusser’s *Être Marxiste en philosophie*’, 2015
<http://www.academia.edu/12635359/A_new_practice_of_philosophy_Reading_notes_on_Louis_Althusser_s_Etre_marxiste_en_philosophie>
- , ‘Althusserianism and Value-Form Theory: Rancière, Althusser and the Question of Fetishism’, *Crisis and Critique*, 2:2 (2015), 167–93
- , ‘The Laboratory of Philosophy. Gramsci and Althusser on Philosophy’, *Décalages*, 2:1 (2016), 1–29 <<http://scholar.oxy.edu/decalages/vol2/iss1/4/>>
- Spector, Céline, ‘La Lecture Althussérienne de Montesquieu’, *La Pensée*, 382 (2015), 85–97
- Speer, Ross, ‘The Dice Man’, *International Socialism*, 2, 137 (2013), 220–22
- , ‘The Machiavellian Marxism of Althusser and Gramsci’, *Décalages*, 2:1 (2016), 1–15
<<http://scholar.oxy.edu/decalages/vol2/iss1/7/>>
- Spinoza, Benedictus de, *The Collected Works of Spinoza*, ed. & trans. by Edwin Curley (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), I
- , *The Collected Works of Spinoza*, ed. & trans. by Edwin Curley (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), II
- Sprinker, Michael, *Imaginary Relations: Aesthetics and Ideology in the Theory of Historical Materialism* (London: Verso, 1987)
- , ‘The Legacies of Althusser’, *Yale French Studies*, 88, 1995, 201–25
- Sprinker, Michael, and E. Ann Kaplan, eds., *The Althusserian Legacy* (London: Verso, 1993)
- Srnicek, Nick, and Alex Williams, ‘#Accelerate: Manifesto for an Accelerationist Politics’, in *#Accelerate: The Accelerationist Reader*, ed. by Robin Mackay and Armen Avanessian (Falmouth: Urbanomic, 2014), 347–62
- , *Inventing the Future: Postcapitalism and a World Without Work* (London: Verso, 2015)
- Stanley, John, ‘The Marxism of Marx’s Doctoral Dissertation’, *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, 33:1 (1995), 133–58
- Stedman Jones, Gareth, and Robin Blackburn, ‘Louis Althusser and the Struggle for Marxism’, in *The Unknown Dimension: European Marxism since Lenin*, ed. by Dick Howard and Karl E. Klare (New York: Basic Books, 1972), 365–87
- Stedman-Jones, Gareth, ‘Introduction’, in *The Communist Manifesto*, by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels (London: Penguin, 2002), 3–187
- Stolze, Ted, ‘Deleuze and Althusser: Flirting with Structuralism’, *Rethinking Marxism*, 10:3

- (1998), 51–63
- , ‘Althusser and the Problem of Historical Individuality’, *Crisis and Critique*, 2:2 (2015), 195–215
- , ‘What Is a Philosophical Tendency?’, *Historical Materialism*, 23:4 (2015), 3–38
- Strawbridge, Sheelagh, ‘From “Overdetermination” to “Structural Causality”: Some Unresolved Problems in Althusser’s [sic] Treatment of Causality’, *Radical Philosophy*, 38 (1984), 9–16
- Sturrock, John, ‘The Paris Strangler’, *London Review of Books*, 14:24 (1992), 6–7
- , ‘Le Pauvre Sokal’, *London Review of Books*, 20:14 (1998), 8–9
- , *Structuralism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003)
- Suchting, Wal, ‘On Materialism’, *Radical Philosophy*, 31 (1982), 1–9
- , *Marx and Philosophy: Three Studies* (Houndmills: Macmillan, 1986)
- , ‘Althusser’s Late Thinking About Materialism’, *Historical Materialism*, 12:1 (2004), 3–70
- de Sutter, Laurent, ed., *Althusser and Law* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2013)
- Szeman, Imre, ‘On Ideology in Althusser’s *On the Reproduction of Capitalism*’, *Mediations*, 30:2 (2017), 83–88
- Taleb, Nassim Nicholas, *The Black Swan* (London: Penguin, 2008)
- Tassone, Giuseppe, and Peter Thomas, ‘Editorial Introduction to Vittorio Morfino’, *Historical Materialism*, 16:1 (2008), 3–8
- Taylor, Charles, *Hegel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975)
- Terray, Emmanuel, *Marxism and ‘Primitive’ Societies: Two Studies*, trans. by Mary Klopffer (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1972)
- The Editors, ‘Editors’ Introduction’, *Rethinking Marxism*, 29:2 (2017), 229–32
- Therborn, Göran, *Science, Class and Society* (London: New Left Books, 1976)
- , *From Marxism to Post-Marxism?* (London: Verso, 2008)
- Thévenin, Nicole-Édith, ‘Althusser et l’insu de la psychanalyse’, *La Pensée*, 382 (2015), 113–24
- Thomas, Paul, *Marxism and Scientific Socialism: From Engels to Althusser* (London: Routledge, 2008)
- Thomas, Peter, ‘Philosophical Strategies: Althusser and Spinoza’, *Historical Materialism*, 10:3 (2002), 71–113
- , *The Gramscian Moment: Philosophy, Hegemony and Marxism* (Leiden: Brill, 2009)
- , ‘The Plural Temporalities of Hegemony’, *Rethinking Marxism*, 29:2 (2017), 281–302
- Thompson, E. P., ‘The Politics of Theory’, in *People’s History and Socialist Theory*, ed. by Raphael Samuel (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981), 396–408
- , *The Poverty of Theory: Or an Orrery of Errors* (London: Merlin Press, 1995)

- Tiles, Mary, 'Epistemological History: The Legacy of Bachelard and Canguilhem', in *Contemporary French Philosophy*, ed. by A. Phillips Griffiths (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 141–56
- Timpanaro, Sebastiano, *On Materialism*, trans. by Lawrence Garner (London: New Left Books, 1975)
- Toscano, Alberto, 'The Detour of Abstraction', *Diacritics*, 43:2 (2015), 68–90
- Tosel, André, 'De la théorie structurale à la conjoncture aléatoire', *La Pensée*, 382 (2015), 31–45
- Tully, James, 'The Pen Is a Mighty Sword: Quentin Skinner's Analysis of Politics', in *Meaning and Context*, ed. by James Tully (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), 7–25
- Turchetto, Maria, 'Althusser and Monod: A "New Alliance"?', trans. by Peter Thomas, *Historical Materialism*, 17:3 (2009), 61–79
- Valente, Joe, 'Lacan's Marxism, Marxism's Lacan (from Žižek to Althusser)', in *The Cambridge Companion to Lacan*, ed. by Jean-Michel Rabaté (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 153–72
- Vargas, Yves, 'L'Horreur dialectique (description d'un itinéraire)', in *Althusser : une lecture de Marx*, ed. by Jean-Claude Bourdin (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2008), 147–92
- , 'Lecture de Rousseau', *La Pensée*, 382 (2015), 99–112
- Vatter, Miguel, 'Machiavelli After Marx: The Self-Overcoming of Marxism in the Late Althusser', *Theory & Event*, 7:4 (2005) <muse.jhu.edu/article/244122>
- Verikukis, Hristos, 'Knowledge versus "Knowledge": Louis Althusser on the Autonomy of Science and Philosophy from Ideology – A Reply to William S. Lewis', *Rethinking Marxism*, 21:1 (2009), 67–84
- Vernes, Jean-René, *Critique de la raison aléatoire* (Paris: Aubier-Montaigne, 1982)
- Viljanen, Valtteri, 'Spinoza's Ontology', in *The Cambridge Companion to Spinoza's Ethics*, ed. by Olli Koistinen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 56–78
- Vincent, Jean-Marie, ed., *Lire Althusser aujourd'hui* (Paris: Éditions L'Harmattan, 1997)
- Viparelli, Irene, 'Althusser. La nécessité du "tournant" ontologique', trans. by Irene Pinto Pardelha, *Cahiers du GRM*, 8 (2015), 1–14 <<http://grm.revues.org/702>>
- , 'Reflecting on the Limits of Marxian Topography with Althusser and Negri', trans. by Katherine M. Clifton, *Décalages*, 2:1 (2016), 1–23 <<http://scholar.oxy.edu/decalages/vol2/iss1/26>>
- Vogel, Steven, 'New Science, New Nature: The Habermas-Marcuse Debate Revisited', in *Technology and the Politics of Knowledge*, ed. by Andrew Feenberg and Alastair Hannay (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), 23–42
- Warminski, Andrzej, 'Hegel/Marx: Consciousness and Life', *Yale French Studies*, 88, 1995, 118–41
- Wartenberg, Thomas E., 'Hegel's Idealism: The Logic of Conceptuality', in *The Cambridge Companion to Hegel*, ed. by Frederick Beiser (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 102–29
- Wegner, Phillip E., 'On Althusser's Not Un-Usefulness (Notes Toward an Investigation)',

- Mediations*, 30:2 (2017), 89–98
- White, Stuart, 'Needs, Labour, and Marx's Conception of Justice', *Political Studies*, 44:1 (1996), 88–101
- Wickham, Chris, ed., *Marxist History-Writing for the Twenty-First Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007)
- Widerquist, Karl, and Grant S. McCall, *Prehistoric Myths in Modern Political Philosophy* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017)
- Wiley, James, *Theory and Practice in the Philosophy of David Hume* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012)
- Williams, Caroline, *Contemporary French Philosophy: Modernity and the Persistence of the Subject* (London: Athlone Press, 2001)
- , 'Baruch de Spinoza', in *Palgrave Advances in Continental Political Thought*, ed. by Terrell Carver and James Martin (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 17–31
- , 'Thinking the Political in the Wake of Spinoza: Power, Affect and Imagination in the Ethics', *Contemporary Political Theory*, 6:3 (2007), 349–69
- , 'Politics and Ethics', in *The Continuum Companion to Continental Philosophy*, ed. by John Mullarkey and Beth Lord (London: Continuum, 2009), 109–26
- , 'Affective Processes Without a Subject: Rethinking the Relation between Subjectivity and Affect with Spinoza', *Subjectivity*, 3:3 (2010), 245–62
- , "'Subjectivity Without the Subject": Thinking Beyond the Subject with/through Spinoza', in *Spinoza Beyond Philosophy*, ed. by Beth Lord (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012), 11–27
- , 'Structure and Subject', in *The Edinburgh Companion to Poststructuralism*, ed. by Benoît Dillet, Iain MacKenzie, and Robert Porter (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013), 189–206
- , 'Reimagining the Subject: Althusser and Spinoza', *Los Angeles Review of Books*, 2016 <<http://lareviewofbooks.org/article/reimagining-subject-althusser-spinoza>> [accessed 23 July 2018]
- Williams, Caroline, and David McInerney, 'Althusser and the Persistence of the Subject: Caroline Williams Speaks with David McInerney', *Borderlands*, 4:2 (2005) <http://www.borderlands.net.au/vol4no2_2005/williams_interview.htm>
- Williams, James, *Understanding Poststructuralism* (Chesham: Acumen, 2005)
- Williams, Leonard, 'Althusser on Ideology: A Reassessment', *New Political Science*, 14:1 (1993), 47–66
- Williams, Raymond, *Culture and Materialism* (London: Verso, 2005)
- Wolf, Frieder Otto, 'The "Limits of Dialectical Presentation" as a Key Category of Marx's Theoretical Self-Reflection', *Capitalism, Nature, Socialism*, 15:3 (2004), 79–85
- , 'A Report on Althusser's "June Theses"' <<http://www.after1968.org/app/webroot/uploads/wolf-junetheses.pdf>> [accessed 8 August 2018]
- Wolff, Richard, 'A Note on Althusser's Importance for Marxism Today', *Rethinking Marxism*, 10:3 (1998), 90–92

- Wood, Allen, 'Hegel and Marxism', in *The Cambridge Companion to Hegel*, ed. by Frederick Beiser (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 414–44
- , *Karl Marx* (New York: Routledge, 2004)
- Wood, Ellen Meiksins, 'The Politics of Theory and the Concept of Class: E. P. Thompson and His Critics', *Studies in Political Economy*, 9:1 (1982), 45–75
- , 'Marxism Without Class Struggle?', *Socialist Register*, 20 (1983), 239–71
- , 'Marxism and the Course of History', *New Left Review*, I, 147 (1984), 95–107
- , 'Rational Choice Marxism: Is the Game Worth the Candle?', *New Left Review*, I, 177 (1989), 41–88
- , 'Explaining Everything or Nothing?', *New Left Review*, I, 184 (1990), 116–28
- , 'A Chronology of the New Left and Its Successors, Or: Who's Old-Fashioned Now?', *Socialist Register*, 31 (1995), 22–49
- , *Democracy Against Capitalism: Renewing Historical Materialism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995)
- , *The Retreat from Class: A New 'True' Socialism* (London: Verso, 1998)
- , *The Origin of Capitalism* (London: Verso, 2002)
- , *Citizens to Lords: A Social History of Western Political Thought from Antiquity to the Middle Ages* (London: Verso, 2008)
- , 'Why It Matters', *London Review of Books*, 30:18 (2008), 3–6
- , *Liberty and Property: A Social History of Western Political Thought from Renaissance to Enlightenment* (London: Verso, 2012)
- , *The Pristine Culture of Capitalism* (London: Verso, 2015)
- Wood, Ellen Meiksins, and John Bellamy Foster, eds., *In Defense of History: Marxism and the Postmodern Agenda* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1997)
- Wood, Neal, 'The Social History of Political Theory', *Political Theory*, 6:3 (1978), 345–67
- Woolf, Virginia, 'The Leaning Tower', in *The Essays of Virginia Woolf: 1933–1941*, ed. by Stuart N. Clarke (London: The Hogarth Press, 2011), VI, 259–83
- Woolhouse, Roger, *The Empiricists* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988)
- , 'Locke's Theory of Knowledge', in *The Cambridge Companion to Locke*, ed. by Vere Chappell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 146–71
- , *Starting with Leibniz* (London: Continuum, 2010)
- Wright, Erik Olin, *Class, Crisis and the State* (London: Verso, 1978)
- , *Classes* (London: Verso, 1985)
- , 'Reply to Burawoy', in *The Debate on Classes*, ed. by Erik Olin Wright (London: Verso, 1989), 100–104
- Wright, Erik Olin, Andrew Levine, and Elliott Sober, *Reconstructing Marxism: Essays on Explanation and the Theory of History* (London: Verso, 1992)
- Yibing, Zhang, *Althusser Revisited*, trans. by Yang Liu, Zhan Chongyang, Yi Diandian, and Wang Yan (Istanbul: Canut International Publishers, 2003)

Žižek, Slavoj, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 1989)

———, *Absolute Recoil: Towards A New Foundation of Dialectical Materialism* (London: Verso, 2014)