For Theoreticism: Theoretical Practice and Philosophical Unconscious

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Abstract: The article explores two theses. The first one proposes to revise the purported “theoreticism” of Louis Althusser in order to highlight that his developments on the problem of knowledge and the connection between science and philosophy are not only a necessary step in the pursuit of Marxist theory and its critic of idealist epistemology, but an indispensable condition to enable political thought itself. The second thesis considers the consequences of the processual and strategic Althusserian thinking for materialist philosophy, articulated around the category of overdetermination; a symptomatic reading of a topic and a position taken on a controversial field.

Keywords: Marxist Theory, Althusser, overdetermination, philosophy, science, theoreticism,

I. Introduction

In 1967, in the context of the growing popularity achieved through the publication of those works which doubtlessly would turn out to be his most celebrated ones, Louis Althusser undertook a process of severe self-criticism and correction of some of the thesis he had presented.

If I did lay stress on the vital necessity of theory for revolutionary practice, and therefore denounced all forms of empiricism, I did not discuss the problem of the ‘union of theory and practice’ which has played such a major role in the Marxist-Leninist tradition. No doubt I did speak of the union of theory and practice within ‘theoretical practice’, but I did not enter into the question of the union of theory and practice within political practice. Let us be precise; I did not examine the general form of historical existence of this union: the ‘fusion’ of Marxist theory and the workers’ movement. (…) I did not show what it is, as distinct from science that constitutes philosophy proper: the organic relation between every philosophy, as a theoretical discipline and even within its theoretical forms of existence and exigencies, and politics. I did not point out the nature of this relation, which, in Marxist philosophy, has nothing to do with a pragmatic relation. So I did not show clearly enough what in this respect distinguishes Marxist philosophy from earlier philosophies.”

1 Althusser 2005, p.15
The self-inflicted accusation had a philosophical sense that few of his readers managed to notice and, far from an intentional effect, it worked as a functional argument, which fed back in his posterity, both the incomprehension of his detractors as well as that of many of his disciples and followers. In most cases, promoting allegedly critical readings of his thesis that remained captive by the dominant interpretative tendencies, which, in the name of politicizing theory, would broaden the channel of a general displacement towards forms of theoreticism, empiricism and, in its worst manifestations, plainly relativist positions (not only in their conception of knowledge but also in their political analysis). The last decades of the twentieth century would sanction their paradoxical posterity.

Time has gone by and the captivating power of the accusation of theoreticism has lost some of its efficacy. It is fair to admit that it is not due to the innocent passage of time, but because many of the passions that fueled the controversies that vied for the exegetical key of Marxist theory in the sixties and the seventies have weakened to the extreme. Moreover, it is necessary to point out that the release of a significant amount of Althusser’s unpublished writings, the circulation of lesser known articles and the revitalization of a field of readings through the work of several thinkers that, in some sense, could be considered Althusserian or post-Althusserian, opened up an opportunity to return to certain areas of his work with more resources and less prejudices.

Within this framework, I propose to revisit some of the classical developments of what could be considered the matrix of Althusserian theoreticism, intending to reconstruct its coherence, in order to demonstrate that it says much more than what has been attempted to read in them. I will develop two interrelated conjectures: 1. That the problem of the articulation of political practice and theoretical practice is already inscribed—and enacted—within the early development of

II. Overdetermination: topic and process

The notion of overdetermination is recovered by Althusser from Freud, who develops it within his study on the interpretation of dreams, in order to describe the type of operation proper to the unconscious thought: “Each of the elements of the dream’s content turns out to have been ‘overdetermined’—to have been represented in the dream-thoughts many times over.”

From the Freudian approach to this notion, we are interested in highlighting some features which, as we understand them, survive in the Althusserian employment of the term, and in different ways, will compromise vast regions of his problematic. Firstly, unconscious thinking is a decentered process that produces formations. Secondly, its structure

4 I refer both to his more or less direct disciples, such as Étienne Balibar, Jacques Rancière, Alain Badiou, Michel Pêcheux, and Pierre Macherey, as well as those who have critically recovered some of his problems or categories, such as Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Slavoj Žižek, Ernesto Laclau, Judith Butler, etc.

5 Doubtlessly, in this sense, the Althusserian reading of Machiavelli can contribute to such an undertaking.

6 Freud 2010, p.301
is characterized by a certain disproportion or disadjustment. Thirdly, the figure of disadjustment that the notion of overdetermination supposes is drawn in opposition to the notion of direct transparent representation and presupposes an omission; but omission and disadjustment do not operate on a lack but due to an excess.

The Freudian notion of overdetermination takes the shape of a concept in Althusserian thinking in relation to the search for a kind of apodicticity adequate to the materialist position (which acts in the Marxist theory of history) and consequently responds to the problem of the conditions of intelligibility of a social formation. It is necessary to question—says Althusser—about: "...what is the content, the raison d'être of the overdetermination of Marxist contradiction, and how can the Marxist conception of society be reflected in this overdetermination. This is a crucial question."

In this deep rationality that inhabits psychoanalytic theory, Althusser pursues a solution to the problem of the relationship between structural legality and singularity (which is vital to the materialist theory of history), understanding that the theoretical development of Marxism requires an accurate conceptualization of the singular legality that responds to this processual topic. His texts are seeded with invocations to those aspects of the psychoanalytic problematic that correlatively call for a decentered topology and a complex temporality, neither homogeneous nor contemporary. Thus, it is convenient to clearly establish, in principle, that the appeal to the Freudian notion does not operate as a kind of culturalist (or paralinguistic) reformulation of Marxism, but assumes the extremely complex philosophical problem of reading, which is another way to pose the "problem of knowledge" within the framework of a theory of history. Against this problem of the "religious myth of reading" an "open book", Althusser proposes another conception of reading which, honoring the psychoanalytic genealogy, he calls symptomal, but has precedents in the history of philosophy far beyond Freud. In that sense, Althusser highlights:

The first man ever to have posed the problem of reading, and in consequence, of writing, was Spinoza, and he was also the first man in the world to have proposed both a theory of history and a philosophy of the opacity of the immediate. With him, for the first time ever, a man linked together in this way the essence of reading and the essence of history in a theory of the difference between the imaginary and the true. This explains to us why Marx could not possibly have become Marx except by founding a theory of history and a philosophy of the historical distinction between ideology and science, and why in the last analysis this foundation was consummated in the dissolution of the religious myth of reading.

This reading is not the reading of a manifest discourse, the pursuit of a voice, but a reading of readings, the pursuit of symptoms and disadjustments: it is the reading of a topic. Because starting with Marxian theory, the text of history is not a text where a voice speaks (the Logos), it is instead the "inaudible and illegible notation of the effects of a structure of structures." What the Marxist theory of history mobilizes is an internal differentiation of the concept of history, an increase of the complexity that turns useless the dyads that organize classic epistemological thought (subject-object, theory-praxis). And it does this to the extent that it forces to pose the problem of the historicity of theory itself, in order to turn thinkable that of its object and, therefore, requires the effort of reconsidering the notion of time.

As a result, it is clear that, if the problem that the category of overdetermination means to conceive is posed by Althusser in the...
language of the Marxist problem of determination, it is however not
referred to a mere question of the (direct or indirect) relations or
interdependence between regions of social life, but to the historical and
philosophical problem of forms as formations.

...it is sufficient to retain from him what should be called the
accumulation of effective determinations (deriving from the
superstructures and from special national and international
circumstances) on the determination in the last instance by
the economic. It seems to me that this clarifies the expression
overdetermined contradiction, which I have put forward (...). This
overdetermination is inevitable and thinkable as soon as the real
existence of the forms of the superstructure and of the national
and international conjuncture has been recognized - an existence
largely specific and autonomous, and therefore irreducible to a pure
phenomenon.16

The main question, as this fragment raises, the dialectic. And the
formula Althusser pursues is that of an impure dialectic. Or, broadly,
the question about the problematic articulation between conceptuality
and history, related to the question about the complex structure of
temporality. Overdetermination, considered as a concept, deals with a
dilemma we will attempt to develop. This dilemma is that of a concept
which, as a concept, is not the unification of multiplicity but the indication
of its impossibility. Overdetermination is proposed by Althusser as a
name for the impossible task of conceptualizing the limits of the concept,
that is, the relationships between itself and what is not itself. This is a
capital question in order to understand the complex kind of articulation
established between philosophy and science.

Althusser arrived to this Freudian notion in the search of a formula
of the Marxist dialectic capable of expressing the rationality that inhabits
Marxist theoretical practices, those that enable the premises of Capital.
This dialectic is not only conceived by Althusser in a completely different
light than that of Hegel,17 but it is defined by its difference. This search
leads to conceive the materialist condition of the Marxist contradiction
in the terms of overdetermination.18 However, to the extent that the
consistency of this concept rests on the Leninist (and later Maoist)
reading of a given historical formation and its structural relationships
in the key of conjuncture (that is to say, as a question about the concrete
conditions of political practice), it already opens the philosophical space
for problems that overrun the question of knowledge and that advance
toward other zones of thought.19

It is important to underline that Althusser searches for the
materialist definition of dialectics in a double movement: in Marx’s
theoretical work and in the experience of concrete revolutionary struggle
(as recovered from the thought of Lenin, Mao, etc.). It is the very
articulation of these heterogeneous practices what sets the complex
space for materialist thinking.

So, we are lead to consider that it is the conjunction with Marxists’
political thinking what furnishes the materialist nature of Marxist
theoretical apodicticity.

We can find, here, the clues to a singular articulation between
philosophy and history that lays down the thick – but not always visible
– threads of what I understand as the Althussian problematic.

Overdetermination aims to a question about the theoretical thinking that
is answered (since 1962, the date the first version of “Contradiction and
overdetermination” was published) in a detour through political thinking.
It involves a philosophical position that requires an open structure for
theory because it attributes history the constitutive and permanent
condition of an exception to the laws. The category of overdetermination
displays its particular condition of being an axis around which the most
classical Althusserian developments on science are organized, and a
point of ambiguity that allows to overflow its space, opening up its depths
to new questions. This ambiguity stems from, on one side, the formulas
to which Althusser arrives in his search for the materialist formulation of the
theoretical necessity; but on the other, it is itself an answer that places
the problem of the political in the same field of the question of knowledge,
producing a continuous adjustment.

16 Althusser 2005, p. 113

17 Thus, Althusser demonstrates the relationship between the concentric topic of conscious-

ness which the Phenomenology of Spirit prescribes and the conception of history as a teleological

process: “A circle of circles, consciousness has only one centre, which solely determines it; it would

need circles with another centre than itself - decentered circles- for it to be affected at its centre by

their effectivity, in short for its essence to be over-determined by them. But this is not the case. This

truth emerges even more clearly from the Philosophy of History.” According to which: “the simplicity

of Hegelian contradiction is never more than a reflection of the simplicity of this internal principle of a

people, that is, not its material reality but its most abstract ideology.” Althusser 2005, p. 102-103.

18 “If the Marxist dialectic is 'in principle' the opposite of the Hegelian dialectic, if it is ratio-
nal and not mystical-mystified-mystificatory, this radical distinction must be manifest in its essence,
that is, in its characteristic determinations and structures. (...) these structural differences can be
demonstrated, described, determined and thought”. Ibid., p. 93-94.

19 “Lenin gave this metaphor above all a practical meaning. A chain is as strong as its weak-
est link. (...) So far there is no revelation here for readers of Machiavelli.” Ibid, p.94
III. Which theoreticism? Philosophy as the Theory of theoretical practice

The notion of overdetermination, coming from another tradition, constitutes Althusser’s first attempt to positively theorize the specific materialism that furnishes the philosophical position of Marxist theory. The field for the Althusserian problematic is the field of philosophy (and not social theory, nor historiography, nor cultural analysis).

*It is the existence of Marxist philosophy ‘in the practical state’ in Capital that authorizes us to ‘derive’ the Marxist conception of philosophy from Capital. (...) This work is a real theoretical work: not merely a work of simple extraction, abstraction in the empiricist sense, but a work of elaboration, transformation and production, which requires considerable effort.*

The philosophical reading of Marx is organized by Althusser, in his first systematic attempt, as the question about *philosophy conceived as Theory of theoretical practice* and, even if this already exhibits an *aporia* (theory-practice) and a torsion (Theory of theory), it supposes some limitations that Althusser would point out sooner rather than later. However, it is the growth of the premises that take shape in this field, which is assumed as the challenge of thinking materialist philosophy in its relationship with history. This produces a permanent widening of the problematic field driven by the encounter and the tension between theory and politics.

Resorting to overdetermination to conceive the specificity of materialist dialectics constructs, in the same inaugural gesture, the direction of the philosophical process. From then on, the materialist position in philosophy involves always, from the Althusserian perspective, reflecting about its relationship to history, or better yet, its own place in history. The concept of overdetermination itself is committed from the start to a singular conception not only of history, but of the reach and the conditions of their intelligibility. And, in this sense, it unveils that the problem of historical complexity is itself the problem of the relationship between theory and non-theory which is subtended from the beginning in the materialist question of theory, opening up its space towards a point of irreducible excess to itself: the political practice. Something has emerged in Badiou’s recent writings, when translating the problem of overdetermination in its (internal) tension with economic determination in the terms of the relationship between objectivity and politics:

*Overdetermination puts the possible on the agenda, whereas the economic place (objectivity) is that of well-ordered stability (...) Overdetermination is in truth the political space.*

It is within this scheme that overdetermination points toward a space of *articulation and difference* between objectivity and the political, signalled by the red thread of what could be called the “Althusserian problematic”. And enables to encompass the relationship (twisted by the torsion) that is established between two problematic dimensions that have been read separately: theoretical practices and political practices. Even more so, if a specifically Althusserian problematic can be spoken of (rather than a more generally Marxist or structuralist one), it is due to this perseverance in thinking jointly that which by definition may not be joined. Overdetermination is, in this sense, the equation of a process of thought featured by a *contradictory effort of unification-differentiation*.

Only by assuming the problematic magnitude of this thought can the series of theoretical developments that present a new approach to philosophy be considered; starting with the question of theoretical practice, formulated within the framework of a program that may give shape to a theory of science immanent to the Marxist theory of history. This is a zone of the Althusserian production that coincides with the formulation of some problems related to the concept of *conjuncture*. As I have said, the philosophical question of *theory* finds there its inconsistent consistency and, therefore, its concept and that of its torsion. In this sense, I understand that it is possible to contour the place...
of this axis in the general space of the Althusserian problematic, in the terms of the pair theoretical practice-conjuncture, in order to pursue this deconstructive operation that makes the problem of the political to appear “from within” the problem of theory, as its excess. The movement of that process results, as Balibar points out, in the effect of a non-null trace that may only be noticed in the framework of a philosophical reading. This allows us, as Balibar has stated, grant Althusser’s texts something more than is usually searched within them, the non-null effect of a path that annuls his own thesis. In our understanding, the thickest stroke in this void strike that produces a “non-void effect” is noticed in the movement through which, at the core of this philosophical question of the theoretical, a distance is placed where the problem of the political appears. This absent-presence of the political is the mark of historicity on theory; and from then on it is possible to assume that the politicity of philosophy is the place for its commitment to the real, as Althusser would develop in the following years.

All that can be truly philosophical in this operation of a null drawing is its displacement, but that is relative to the history of the scientific practices and of the sciences. (...) Hence there is a history in philosophy rather than a history of philosophy: a history of the displacement of the indefinite repetition of a null trace whose effects are real.

The analytical deployment of the notion of overdetermination and of its theoretical consequences enables us to approach the problem of conjuncture – or of structure as conjunct – that is organized around the question of theory in the key of the intelligibility of history. The theoretical zone that grants consistency to the interrogation of the materialist philosophical problematic is the key of its scientificity. Althusser’s so-called “theoretician deviation”, far from constructing a pantheisticism or an hypertrophied formalism, allows to point out the limits of theory and, consequently, opens up the road to the possibility of thinking a materialist philosophy in its full right; that means, one that attempts to make history thinkable without subsuming it to its own logic. We place the nerve of this movement in the concept of overdetermination which, by being proposed as a key to the intellection of a conjuncture, lays down the limits to the intelligible in the conjunctural.

History leaves its mark on theory in the shape of a rupture which is, at the same time, an historical event and a movement within the theoretical: a folding of theory upon itself. The rupture that Althusser identifies in Marxist theory with regards to its own Hegelian genealogy is not only historical or only theoretical. It is, rather, the distance, the twisted space that opens up between the historical and the theoretical, where the paradox of a unity in disjunction is at work. Only this way can the notion of rupture be kept – only vaguely because of the Bachelardian encumbrment that Althusser would later berate himself for and which Balibar rigorously defines – if any degree of precision needs to be established.

Marx’s rupture with Hegel does not simply consist of a “cut”, in the sense of a demarcation of theoretical formations with regards to its non-theoretical (ideological) predecessors; but rather, it is that and also the index of an endless process which turns the Althusserian position into a (re)commencement of the Marxist position: its reading, its transformation and its struggle for existence. Its life and its crisis.

The Althusserian enterprise to produce a materialist philosophy by searching for it in Marx’s theoretical production describes the form of a displacement that results in an aporia: the immanent philosophy of Marxist theoretical practices is, as such, its interior criterion. But it is not immanent only to Marx’s theory, it is immanent also to the political practices of the workers’ movement, as it stands out in a barely superficial reading of the classical texts: “...So we shall start by considering practices in which the Marxist dialectic as such is in action: Marxist theoretical practice and Marxist political practice.” The aporia is, then, that philosophy can only be thought of in its internal condition to a determinate science, if it is assumed also as the reading of that which results exterior to itself, because it is immanent to non-scientific practices. We have then that philosophy is internal to science and overflows it at the same time. This is the materialist philosophical position that will be built –not as a discourse but as an acting philosophy– in the process of theoretical work that encompasses almost three decades of writing.

25 Balibar 2004, p. 57
26 Althusser 1971, p. 38
27 Althusser puts this figure forth to account for the complexity of the Marxist problematic: “This attitude may be paradoxical, but Marx insists on it in categorical terms as the absolute condition of possibility of his theory of history; it reveals the existence of two problems, distinct in their disjoint unity. There is a theoretical problem which must be posed and resolved in order to explain the mechanism by which history has produced as its result the contemporary capitalist mode of production. But at the same time there is another absolutely distinct problem which must be posed and resolved, in order to understand that this result is indeed a social mode of production, that this result is precisely a form of social existence and not just any form of existence”, Althusser 1970, p. 65
28 Balibar 2004, pp.9-48
29 Althusser 2005, p. 173

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If, as we said above, the Althusserian problematic consists of dealing with the *disjointed union* of the theoretical and the political, Althusser turns this aporetic solution into the materialist formula for the problem that Marx’s “discovery” puts in tension: the impossible encounter of philosophy and history is reinscribed as a contradictory union between theory and politics. This underscores the need for a critique of the philosophical tradition that identifies knowledge with political action, and of the emphasis on the rupture of the Marxist operation with the humanist tendencies, which Althusser defines as the *Philosophies of Conscience* in a clear nod towards psychoanalysis and its counter-epistemological potency. On this line, Althusser will hold that the Marxist problematic takes shape as an operation of rupture within the very field of that hegemonic cypher (the Subject) that identifies knowledge with history. This operates not only as a matrix of philosophical thought, but also of common sense. “All of modern Western philosophy [is] dominated by the ‘problem of knowledge’”, says Althusser, and then clarifies: dominated by the ideological solution, imposed and anticipated to the formulation of the right question; imposed by “practical, religious, ethical and political interests” foreign to the reality of the knowledge...” The formulation of the materialist philosophy that takes consistency in the Marxist operation of rupture is only possible on the basis of producing a non-humanist conception of the process of knowledge; that is to say, one that does not require the figure of the knowing Subject as a mirrored construction – at once form and norm – of the empirical knowing subjects. This critique of epistemology itself coincides with the practice of the new problematic of overdetermination, as the formula for the comprehension of a processual topic:

*I will note in passing that the concept of process without a subject upholds the work of Freud. But speaking of a process without a subject implies that the notion of subject is ideologic. If this double thesis is taken seriously: 1. the concept of process is scientific; 2. the notion of subject is ideologic; two distinct consequences follow: 1. the revolution of the sciences, the science of history becomes formally possible, 2. a revolution in philosophy: since all of classical philosophy rests on the categories of subject + object (object = mirrored reflection of the subject). But this positive inheritance is still formal. The question posed is then: which are the conditions of the process of history? Marx owes nothing to Hegel there: he contributes on the decisive point something unprecedented: There is process only under relationships.*

This means that, if science has itself a history, we need to accept that even if the “human individuals are its agents”, knowledge may not be understood as the faculty of a subject, neither transcendental, nor empirical, nor psychological. Rather, thought develops as a *process under relationships*, this means, inscribed in the concrete framework of a historical complexity. The *processual* condition of knowledge is its *historical* condition. The ontological strength of this phrase may not be tamed in a few paragraphs. In order to comprehend it, a long *detour* I may not traverse is required here; but I may, nonetheless, extract some of its consequences. The first one is that the historical is part of the definition of the theoretical itself. Now, this strange “consequence” we extract from Althusser’s intervention in the seminar dictated by Jean Hyppolite at the beginning of the seventies, and which can therefore be conceived of as part of an operation of “rectification”, was already drafted in *Lire le Capital*, where Althusser does not refrain from insisting on the necessity of conceiving knowledge as a

(...*) historically constituted system of an apparatus of thought, founded on and articulated to natural and social reality. It is defined by the system of real conditions which make it, if I dare use the phrase, a *determinate mode of production of knowledges.*

This system of theoretical production is articulated in a conjuncture: its practices are articulated with concrete economical, political and ideological practices; that is their *determined existence*. This is what defines and assigns functions to the thought of singular individuals “who can only ‘think’ the ‘problems’ already actually or potentially posed; hence it is also what sets to work their ‘thought power’”. This way, it stops being conceived of within the scheme of a dichotomy that opposes a conscience to the material world without a remainder (and which therefore reflects it mirror-like). And, in exchange, it results in a “peculiar
real system, established on and articulated to the real world of a given historical society; a specific system of articulated practices, defined by the conditions of its existence, with a structure of its own.\textsuperscript{35}

The specific feature of knowledge rests on its capacity to indicate its own place among the many other social practices,\textsuperscript{36} and that it is therefore capable of indicating its own historical conditions, because it can also indicate the place and the historical conditions of the ideology it transforms and relates to its own prehistory. That is, the perspective of a process of production of knowledge as a material production process, that is to say, starting from the conception of a “labour of transformation [Verarbeitung] of intuition [Anschauung] and the representation [Vorstellung] in concepts [in Begriffe].”\textsuperscript{37} In this conception, the “raw material” of the institutions and representations is not thought of in the sense of a sensitive intuition or a pure representation, but consists always-already of complex articulations, which combine in turn “sensuous, technical and ideological elements”.\textsuperscript{38} There never is a pure object, identical to the real object, as the starting point in the process of knowledge. There is an ideological raw material that is transformed in the process of knowledge which produces, as a result, knowledges.

Thus considered, knowledge:

\textit{does not fall from the sky or from the 'human spirit'; it is the product of a process of theoretical labour, it is subject to a material history, and includes among its determinant conditions and elements non-theoretical practices (economic, political and ideological) and their results. But, once produced and constituted, the formal-theoretical objects can and must serve as the object of a theoretical labour in the strong sense, must be analysed, thought in their necessity, their internal relations, and developed in order to draw from them all the consequences - that is, all their wealth.}\textsuperscript{39}

It is the concept of (overdetermined) process which indicates the historicity of the production of knowledge and therefore, also, its articulation with non-theoretical practices. If in the course of his self-criticism Althusser berates himself for not having fully contemplated the political dimension of the notion of rupture,\textsuperscript{40} and derives from there a certain “deviation” that could result in a reading of the science/ideology demarcation in the idealistic key of error/falsehood, it is necessary to underline that its very definition as a theoretical practice, developed in “On materialist dialectics” contains already the crucial elements to avoid such confusion:

\textit{theory is a specific practice which acts on its own object and ends in its own product: a knowledge. (…) The knowledge of the process of this theoretical practice in its generality, that is, as the specified form or real difference of the practice, itself a specified form of the general process of transformation, of the 'development of things', constitutes a first theoretical elaboration of Theory, that is, of the materialist dialectic.}\textsuperscript{41}

I hold that the concept of theoretical practice, which acts at the center of his conception of knowledge, forces us to consider the relationship (and demarcation) between science and ideology—in the framework of a philosophy of the historical distinction between scientific and ideological practices, correlative to a materialist theory of historical formations. This means, within the overdetermined causality. This is understood as the name of the condition at once specific to and differentiated from the general and theoretical practice or inscribed in the general process of transformation. What this enigmatic reference deploys is nothing but the emphasis on the strict practical condition of theoretical production and therefore points out the place where its specificity should be considered—that place is the thinking of an articulated complexity, or rather, of an overdetermined causality. This in turn allows us to think the difference and the articulation of theoretical practice with those that are not identical to itself: the ideological practices; but this way, it opens up the possibility (and the necessity) of thinking its difference and its articulation with other practices, economic, political...

It is therefore to the same extent that the inscription of the problem of knowledge is produced in the decentered topic of overdetermination (and this occurs at the same instant that theory is thought of as praxis) that the science/ideology difference occupies the site of the idealist truth/falsehood dyad and places, in its stead, a criterion that introduces the historical condition of the concrete and singular to the terrain of

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\textsuperscript{35} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{36} As opposed to ideology, which erases its own conditions of production and offers itself with the strength of a tautological evidence, whose most accomplished form is still that of the discourse of the religious Subject “I am he who is”
\textsuperscript{37} Althusser 1970, p. 22. Recovering thus Marx’s well-known expression in his \textit{Zur Kritik der politischen Ökonomie}
\textsuperscript{38} Ibid., p. 43
\textsuperscript{39} Althusser 1990, p. 51
\textsuperscript{40} As can be read on the prologue to the second edition of \textit{Pour Marx} we already mentioned.
\textsuperscript{41} Althusser 2005, p. 173
\end{flushright}
Epistemology. Against what Althusser may suggest in his self-criticism, this critical movement is less indebted to the Bachelardian notion of epistemological rupture, than to the concept of theoretical practice, and to the materialist problematic as a thought of the differential articulation of practices. It is the notion of overdetermination which produces the entry of history into philosophy, with regards to the “problem of knowledge”. And it does so additionally with the virtue of not leading to any kind of relativism, to the extent that it is solidary with the premise according to which scientificity is con-formed as an immanent system of effective theoretical practices; this means, following a criterion of radical interiority of scientific practices, because the definition of theoretical practices in their specificity rests on the possibility of conceptualizing their relative difference with regards to other kinds of practices.

If Althusser berates himself for not having given an adequate theoretical form to this idea, that does not authorize us to suppose that it is not already practically in action in his classical texts. This way, reflecting on ideology, a new materialist philosophy is produced as a displacement, taking the stead of the “problem of knowledge”, historically occupied (constituted) by modern philosophy:

since in this work of investigation and conceptualization we have to learn not to make use of this distinction in a way that restores the ideology of the philosophy of the Enlightenment, but on the contrary, to treat the ideology which constitutes the prehistory of a science, for example, as a real history with its own laws and as the real prehistory whose real confrontation with other technical practices and other ideological or scientific acquisitions was capable, in a specific theoretical conjuncture, of producing the arrival of a science, not as its goal, but as its surprise.

And so much so that Althusser recalls Macherey’s expression to hold that every science, in their relationship with ideology, can only be conceived as a “science of ideology”; assuming at the same time that “the object of knowledge, which can only exist in the form of ideology at the moment of constitution of the science”.

This issue is developed by Badiou under the idea that the pair science/ideology exists before each of its terms separately and this presupposes accepting that it is not a distributive opposition that could allow to allocate the different practices and discourses, let alone to value them abstractly. Their difference may not be apprehended as a simple contradiction but as a process: science is a process of transformation-differentiation and ideology is a process of repetition-unification. Saying that science is “science of ideology” implies that “science produces the knowledge of an object of which a determinate region of ideology indicates the existence.” But, additionally, science is the science of ideology because, reciprocally, ideology is always ideology for a science: “The only discourses that are known as ideological are such in the retrospection of a science.”

We return like this to the idea of “rupture” and somehow begin to glimpse, in the form of its relationship to ideology, the topological character of the weave that makes up the Althusserian problem of knowledge (in its processual and complex condition). The topological figures announce the relationship between the “problem of knowledge” and the notions of conjuncture and overdetermination.

It is not exaggerated to say that DM is at its highest point in this problem: How to think the articulation of science onto that which it is not, all the while preserving the impure radicality of the difference? How to think the non-relation of that which is doubly related? From this point of view, we can define DM as the formal theory of breaks. Our problem thus takes place in a much vaster conceptual context, which concerns all forms of articulation and rupture between and among instances of a social formation.

It is not about thinking the process of knowledge under the philosophical guise of a theater conceived as the closed and mirrored relationship of the protagonists of the epistemic bond; but about thinking it in the topological key of a problematic understood as a combination or articulation of elements resulting from a (theoretical and non-theoretical) conjuncture.

The ideological weave of classic philosophy –says Althusser– may be identified in the figure of the circle of guarantee, because it is the question about the guarantee of knowledge that places us in the ideological terrain of the philosophy that goes from the “Cartesian circle” up to the circle of Hegelian or Husserlian teleology. This circle

42 Althusser 1970, p. 45
43 Althusser 1970, p. 46
44 Badiou 1967
45 Ibid.
46 Badiou 1967: 20
47 Althusser, 1970, p. 53
explodes (and its explosion turns “visible”) in the materialist premise that distinguishes, in order to never join again, the real object and the object of knowledge. Althusser finds in Marx that other relationship of knowledge, understood now as a relationship of appropriation. That is where science turns out to be a specific (different) form from the several human forms of appropriating the world, politics, morals, aesthetics and religion itself.48

Understanding the cognoscitive relationship as a form of appropriation, philosophy (as a “theory of practice”) takes care of it, but not only of it; because in order to think about it, philosophy must be able to think about its difference; that is to say, its differential relationships to the other forms of appropriation that distinguish different practices. Every practice, as an activity of appropriation, presupposes two conditions; one is its processual and therefore incomplete, misconstrued character; the other, the always improper condition both of its object and of its result.

The “primacy of being over thought” may, in this framework, be translated in the sense of a primacy of practices (activity of conformation) with regards to the discourse of philosophy (having already become a form). A primacy which, therefore, is in no way a “foundation”. In this framework, philosophy becomes:

"a discipline of this world, as a discipline that has this world as an object in the effective forms of its apprehension (of “its appropriation” said Marx): forms of perception, of action, of social and political practice, of the theoretical practice of the sciences, of art, of religion, etc. That autonomy of philosophy is express to us through the rejection of any “positivism”, any “empiricism”, any “psychologism”, any “pragmatism”. Because if the “truth” is this content, this thing or this formula of science, if truth is this “given” or this “object”, in its opacity or in its transparency in fact, we do not know what can be done with philosophy. It suffices with “studying reality” (...) philosophy will meet its natural death: it will be buried within existing sciences."49

The Marxist notion of appropriation sets the problem of knowledge in the real terrain of practices in history and, consequently, also contaminates the philosophy that takes care of this problem with history. This is the sense in which a certain ambiguity or interchangeability that operates in the texts of the seventies should be understood, where the theory of theoretical practice is also “theory of practice in general – the materialist dialectic.”50 It is not a mere rhetorical displacement, but a deep idea: a theory of theoretical practice is already in itself a philosophy of the complex articulation of differentiated practices, a theory of a “social practice” that does not exist other than as a complexity of practices, that means, as an inconsistent generality:

Thus, ‘social practice’, the complex unity of the practices existing in a determinate society, contains a large number of distinct practices. (...) is taken seriously even more rarely: but this prior condition is indispensable to an understanding of what theory itself, and its relation to ‘social practice’ are for Marxism.51

As Badiou deducted earlier, the “systematic organization” of the elemental notions of historical materialism through dialectic materialism produces the general concept of practice as an effect, understood as the process of transforming a given raw material. However:

To say that the concept of practice is the most general concept of DM (its first regulated combination of notions) amounts to saying that in the “social whole” there exist only practices. (...) This also means that the generality of this concept does not belong to HM, but only to DM. The practice does not exist: “there is no practice in general, but only distinct practices.”52

History, as it is thought by historical materialism, only admits concrete, determined, multiple practices. It would seem that the radicality and potency of this thesis, which enable to place both ideological and theoretical practices (but also political practices) on the same terrain, have been insufficiently considered. And nevertheless, it is an altogether disruptive movement with regards to the traditionally described interplay of the pair history and philosophy.

Within this framework, Althusser’s affirmation that “knowledge is concerned with the real world through its specific mode of appropriation

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48 Althusser 2008, p. 55. The original edition of this texts corresponds to the article published by Althusser Revue de l’enseignement philosophique XIII, 5 (June-July 1963) as a response to an enquiry published by the journal regarding the relationship between philosophy and human sciences.


50 Althusser 2005, p. 169

51 Althusser 2005, p. 167

52 Badiou 1967: 35
of the real world” should be considered. The question of knowledge will then be the question of the structure of that specific (and determined) mode of appropriation/transformation, in which the theoretical practices consist in their difference (and therefore in their relationship) with regards to other practices.

This does not constitute a problem exclusive to the history of science, but engages philosophy itself, not only the region called “Philosophy of Science” but all of Philosophy (this means, a certain philosophical formation, of course not any, but the one that claims the name of the Philosophy) that develops from the standpoint of the question of knowledge and constitutes its function as the operator of a cognoscente guarantee.

The materialist position disregards the question of an a priori guarantee of knowledge, it dissolves the philosophical (ideological) figure of the “epistemic drama” and because of that, “staging the characters indispensable to this scenario (…) posing scientific consciousness the question of the conditions of possibility of its knowledge relation to its object” loses its function. This confusion responds to the form in which philosophy has imagined the epistemic bond:

...a relation of interiority and contemporaneity between a mythical Subject and Object, required to take in charge, if need be by falsifying them, the real conditions, i.e., the real mechanism of the history of the production of knowledges, in order to subject them to religious, ethical and political ends (the preservation of the ‘faith’, of ‘morality’ or of ‘freedom’, i.e., social values).

Even if there still is a long road ahead before being able to speak about a fully materialist formulation of the problem of knowledge, the task of materialist philosophy with regards to this problem is indeed clear: to reflect on knowledge questioning its materials, without prefixing the answer with the “titles and rights” of other levels of social life (other concrete practices), morality, religion, etc. Such is the double struggle supposed by formulating the problem of knowledge in materialist terms; that is to say, in an immanent relationship to concrete and determined theoretical practices, where their specificity lies: without subordinating them to the religious requisite of reading; but, then, without subordinating history to their purpose either.

The extent to which the intervention on the “squares” occupied by the Philosophy of Knowledge constitutes a political strategy to deploy the new bond between philosophy and history is remarkable. Surpassing this “turn of imagination” –which rests on the identification of Logos and History as the foundation of the “religious myth of reading”– demands placing the lens on the relationship proposed by Marx in terms of an “appropriation”. This forbids resorting to the ideological solution which summons the characters Subject and Object in their mirrored structure of mutual recognition.

“Ideology is a process of redoubling, intrinsically (…) tied to the specular structure of fantasy (…). If science is a process of transformation, ideology—insofar as the unconscious comes to constitute itself therein—is a process of repetition.” There, it is resorting to the practices—as modes of differential appropriation—what allows to reformulate the relationship between science and ideology in the terms of a process.

And precisely because it is a process of transformation, the cognoscente relationship of appropriation is not configured around any kind of operator of warranties; it does not consist of a movement of closure, it supposes a singular and specific structure: a paradoxical structure of aperture:

...the paradox of the theoretical field is that it is an infinite because definite space, i.e., it has no limits, no external frontiers separating it from nothing, precisely because it is defined and limited within itself, carrying in itself the finitude of its definition, which, by excluding what it is not, makes it what it is. Its definition (a scientific operation par excellence), then, is what makes it both infinite in its kind, and marked inside itself, in all its determinations, by what is excluded from it in it by its very definition.

This paradoxical condition of a space at once open and differentiated rests on what Althusser calls the “criterion of radical interiority” of knowledge in scientific practices. The structure of the theoretical field responds to the paradoxical form that supposes the coexistence of two premises, the interior condition of its definition and its openness, its lack of limits. In the aspects related to the problem of knowledge, the “criterion of radical interiority of the practices”

53 Althusser 1970: 54
54 Althusser 1970: 54
55 Althusser 1970: 55
56 Badiou 1967
57 Althusser 1970, p. 27
establishes that scientificty is immanent to the theoretical practices, instead of constructing an a priori rationality or a prescriptive formula. But this is not all. The singularity of immanent causality, such as it is developed in the Althusserian problematic, is placed on the bond between the rationality of a formation and its limits; in that difficult to locate space where a productive mechanism is not merely re-productive.

That is the relationship between a formation and its limits because, in the case of theory, the “criterion of interiority” may not be uncoupled from the open condition of every science. As Étienne Balibar points out:

Althusser, on his part, never stopped holding that the “criterion of practice” for knowledge is internal to the theoretical practice of every science. Under the condition of remembering that, by definition, science is not a circle of closed ideas, but a practice open to other practices and to its own development.58

Althusser proposes his notions of theoretical problematic and symptomatic reading in the framework of a rejection of the philosophical thesis which, by identifying truth with discourse, formulates the problem of knowledge as a problem about its guarantee, in a circular scheme tied to the specular structure of fantasy.59

The symptomatic reading is based on the consideration of a theoretical discourse that stems from “everything in it that ‘sounds hollow’ to an attentive ear, despite its fullness.”60 That is to say that reading, in order to be symptomatic, must concentrate its attention on those zones where some imaginary formulas unavoidably weave into the theoretical texture, procuring to invest the spaces of impasse. And this is because it is there, in those extremely fragile spaces, where a science lives: a theory “depends less for its life on what it knows than on what it does not know.”61 It is those spaces alluded by the presence of ideological elements which indicate the limits of the theoretical discourse and constitute, for that same reason, its more vital points. That is why Althusser underlined the paradoxical movement he proposes as the matrix of theory: science is the science of ideology.

On other occasions, Althusser alluded to this thesis by evoking the spinozian expression according to which:

It is just because (enim) we possess (habemus) a true idea that... that we can also say: “Verum index sui et falsi”; what is true is the sign both of itself and of what is false, and the recognition of error (and of partial truths) depends on starting from what is true.62

Truth is always uncovered in a process of secondary order, it is a retroactive reading of what was already there. But it may not be said that reading is itself what locates truth, each and every time it has the theoretical discourse she reads as a condition. Philosophical reading draws itself therefore as a transition between the gesture that reads and uncovers that what was already there without being uncovered. It is a process without Subject, Origin or End where truth is not an attribute to be found, but the effect of a disadjustment.

IV. Unconscious sive politics: words to (re)commence
The action of demarcation, profoundly bound to the problem of reading – and therefore of knowledge –, places philosophy in a liminal space. The question we may ask, from then on, is whether a formula capable of defining diagonal-philosophy in the field of the materialist premise of immanence, which the development of the problem of knowledge deploys under the condition of the criterion of radical interiority of practices, may be thought of. We return, finally and on another road, which is in its ultimate determination the same, to the problem of the excess. And with it, to the relationship between philosophy and topic.

The effort of Althusserian thinking to avoid closing the circle of complexity by attributing a supra-historical dimension to philosophy, even in the terms of a “practice” (mother-practice, practice of practices) is encountered repeatedly. On the contrary, with regards to the bond between philosophy and practices (always concrete, determined), Althusser insists on conceiving philosophical materiality as the reading of a topic that is an intervention. A sort of abstract theoretical knowledge that is nonetheless heterogeneous to itself, which operates as a political intervention every time it assumes its own internal politicity.

This is how Althusser would explain, early on in his well-known prologue to the second edition of Pour Marx, the philosophical condition of his texts: “they are philosophical essays, with theoretical investigations as their objects, and as their aim an intervention in the present theoretico-ideological conjuncture in reaction to its dangerous

58 Balibar, 2004: 15 footnote 8. My translation
59 Badiou 1967
60 Althusser 1970, p. 30
61 Ibid.
tendencies. (...) “They ‘intervene’ on two fronts, to trace, in Lenin’s
elegant expression, a ‘line of demarcation’ between Marxist theory on
the one hand, and ideological tendencies.”

That double condition, of being both a philosophical text and an
intervention would be translated years later into the paradoxical figure of the
eternity of philosophy. “I will anticipate a tripe thesis: philosophy has
no history = philosophy is “eternal” = nothing happens in philosophy.”

The “theory of the philosophy-effect” that consists of a repetition,
of a nothingness which insists, and feeds back into an “eternal” causality,
“in the sense in which Freud holds that the analytic unconscious is
‘eternal’”, summons a structural causality that supposes a “system of
instances between which the philosophical unconscious figures.”

We arrive thus at the place of the (paradoxical) relationship
between the limit and the necessity of overdetermination in the
Althusserian problematic. This concept aims at an immanent, concrete
and decentered rationality that assumes the paradoxical bond of logics to
the singular. Paradoxical, because singularity is itself a category of logic,
and decentered condition of the Marxist historical totality. In this sense,
overdetermination is proposed as a principle of intelligibility, a cypher of
rationality. And yet—and this is essential to the question—in its logical
development, it resorts to the detour and to exceptionality in order to
think the materialist commitment to necessity in existence. In other terms,
in order to place the singularity of the concrete in history and the real and
processual condition of its transformations, or the efficacy of political
practice.

Conceptualizing overdetermination may be an impossible task or
a paradoxical ambition, but it is precisely for that reason that we may
affirm that it signals the (re)beginning of materialism in Althusserian
philosophy.

Philosophy is in itself always a repetition (or better yet, an
iteration): a game of positions without development toward any single
place — but with real effects. The introduction of this all but new term is
the position of a difference within the philosophical field, and that is why
its beginning is always a (re)beginning. Because of that, it is also more
convenient to speak of a “materialist position in philosophy” rather than a
“materialist philosophy”.

An overdetermined weave may be accessed at any point (from the
theoretical perspective) but not at any point (from a political perspective).
This dual disposition (theoretical and political) is not a duplicity of
thought, it is rather the effort to hold a space between both problematic
planes and to turn that space consistent as a “paradoxical” — as a
disjointed union. It is therefore not capricious for Althusser to search
for the operationality of the overdetermination principle in both fields
— theoretics and political — simultaneously. On one side, the materialist
dialectic is read as an immanent rationality of Marx’s theoretical
practices and as such, overdetermination is “torn away” from its practical
performance, in Marx’s scientific production. But that is not everything,
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practice.

Thus, overdetermination is an attempt to answer —perhaps an
answer that still has not found its question, or that has not managed to
formulate it in adequate terms — the problem of the necessity in history,
a necessity that does not only coexist but organizes itself working as a
limit. It is not only about making historythinkable, but about taking on the
commitment to think about the historically concrete and singular while
situated in its midst (without thereby, as we have said, reducing it to a
mere relativistic historization of thought). This sort of dialectic—if the
term is still even fitting — is found in action — and more or less “visible”
— in the structure of aperture acknowledged by Althusserian thought to a
theoretical Gliederung. And it advances producing a trench, a profound
contradiction within philosophical discursivity itself, from which there
is however no escape: “It is not a matter of “suppressing philosophy”

(...) any more than the Freudian cure would consist of suppressing the
unconscious.”

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63 Althusser 2005, p. 12
64 Althusser 1997, p. 333
65 Ibid. 336
66 Ibid 337
67 Miller 2007

This is what is irreplaceable in Lenin’s texts: the analysis of the

68 “Il n’est pas question de supprimer la philosophie (...) pas plus qu’il n’est question, dans
structure of a conjuncture, the displacements and condensations of its contradictions and their paradoxical unity, all of which are the very existence of that ‘current situation’ which political action was to transform, in the strongest sense of the word, between February and October, 1917.69

Irreplaceable, Lenin’s thought is a political thought, a thought that develops in the matter of politics. It is not the thought of a theoretician “who necessarily reflects on necessity’s fait accompli” but the thought of political action, “on the necessity to be achieved.”70

Of course, it is not about finding Marx’s “theory” in Lenin’s “praxis”; nor about adding some theoretical practices to other political practices. It is about, on the contrary, thinking that a materialist problematic takes its consistency between theoretical practices and political practices and between scientific and political forms of thought: therein lies the singularity of the materialist position in philosophy that the Althusserian enterprise procures.

It would be excessive to hurry onto conjectures regarding the multiple factors that assisted to the brutal silencing and mocking of Althusserian thought. We cannot, however, refrain from remembering the disquieting suggestion Étienne Balibar launched on friends and foes alike, at the end of the eighties:

For almost twenty years, Althusser was, the controversial Marxist in France (...) Wiping out the role of Althusser in this period is a typical aspect of a more general censorship, which has a very precise meaning: it means denying that Marxism in the postwar period (especially in the 60’s and 70’s) was not a simple repetition of dogmas (...) Marxist intellectuals and especially communist intellectuals must be portrayed as either passive victims or impostors, the mere victims of a gigantic conspiracy. They should not have been able to think by themselves.71

Translated by: Ignacio Rial Schies

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69 Althusser 2005, p. 179
70 Ibidem
71 Balibar 1993, p. 2