

# 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.<sup>1</sup>*

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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.<sup>2</sup> 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<sup>3</sup> 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,<sup>4</sup> 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

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 "The original althusserian endeavor –with politics in the background– attempted to rescue marxism by regenerating its theory; but this commitment brought –as Althusser himself acknowledges– a grievous absence: that of political practice (class struggle). In his self-critical effort, he attempted to reintegrate practice, but relating it –and besides not through a necessary and essential bond– to theory. But, in this case, theory is not a science or knowledge, but a philosophy or a theoretical detachment of ideology. Theory as the sphere of truth remains autonomous and self-sufficient. In spite of his own rectifications and achievements in his hard self-criticism, Althusser has not been able to overcome his theoreticist «deviation». (Sánchez Vázquez 1975, p. 99).

3 After Althusser's death, in 1990, the edition of his unpublished writings was carried out tenaciously by the IMEC, the publishing house Stock and through the effort of many researchers who persisted in compiling, translating and distributing a great amount of his writings.

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.

the category of *overdetermination*, with which Althusser pursues the materialist figure of Marxist dialectics, even in its most "theoreticist" formula: the definition of philosophy as the *Theory of theoretical practice*. 2. That, beyond the cartography Althusser himself traced of his writings, the critical access to the epistemological field, in order to give theoretical shape to Marxist philosophy in relation to the question of science, is required by the proper political determinations of his intervention. Althusser's critique of classical epistemology is directed towards the conceptualization of political practice as a specific practice and political thought as a singular kind of thinking. This question is already posed (in a practical state) in the category of overdetermination, which requires the theoretical distinction between different practices in order to enable the conceptualization of its concrete articulation in a conjuncture.

In short, the revision of the so-called "theoreticism", I propose, aims to emphasize the magnitude of the Althusserian contribution to the development of a critical conception of science and knowledge, remarkable in itself, but also crucial as an opportunity for a *political thinking* in its full right. I will not focus on his recently published correspondence, nor on his unpublished manuscripts or posthumous publications, which would offer a kind of shortcut to read the canonical writings in hindsight, once the problem of the junction of theory and practice has been posed explicitly.<sup>5</sup> I will focus, instead, on the classical texts, in order to read what was already there.

## 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."<sup>6</sup>

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

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 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*.<sup>7</sup> 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.<sup>8</sup>

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.”<sup>9</sup>

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),<sup>10</sup> understanding that the theoretical development of Marxism requires an accurate conceptualization of the singular legality that responds to this *processual topic*.<sup>11</sup> 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”

7 “...condensation is brought about by omission: that is, that the dream is not a faithful translation or a point-for-point projection of the dream-thoughts, but a highly incomplete and fragmentary version of them.” Freud 2010, p. 299

8 “Unconscious thought constitutes a “factory of thoughts” that produces ‘nodal points’ upon which a great number of the dream-thoughts converged, and because they had several meanings...” Id.:p.291

9 Althusser 2005, p. 107

10 “If it is true, as Leninist practice and reflection prove, that the revolutionary situation in Russia was precisely a result of the intense overdetermination of the basic class contradiction, we should perhaps ask what is exceptional about this ‘exceptional situation’, and whether, like all exceptions, this one does not clarify its rule - is not, unbeknown to the rule, the rule itself. For, after all, are we not always in exceptional situations?” Althusser 2005, p. 104

11 Translator’s note: “Topic” is used in this article in the sense of a “topographic representation of the psychic apparatus”, following its psychoanalytic and later Althusserian use, rather than its more colloquial meaning.

within the framework of a theory of history.<sup>12</sup> 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 dissipation of the religious myth of reading.*<sup>13</sup>

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.<sup>14</sup> Because starting with Marxist 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.”<sup>15</sup> 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

12 That is why the whole lineage of critique formulated by diverse generations of the *Cultural Studies* against this Althusserian problem is, from the beginning, poorly based, with the single exception of Stuart Hall, who offers a more complex reading. Cf. Hall 1985, pp.91-114.

13 Althusser 1970, p. 16

14 “Such is Marx’s second reading: a reading which might well be called ‘symptomatic’ (symptomale), insofar as it divulges the undivulged event in the text it reads, and in the same movement relates it to a different text, present as a necessary absence in the first. (...) Marx’s second reading presupposes the existence of two texts, and the measurement of the first against the second (...) the second text is articulated with the lapses in the first text.” Althusser 1970, p. 28.

15 Althusser 1970, p. 17

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.<sup>16</sup>*

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,<sup>17</sup> but it is defined by its difference. This search

16 Althusser 2005, p. 113

17 Thus, Althusser demonstrates the relationship between the concentric topic of consciousness 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.

leads to conceive the materialist condition of the Marxist contradiction in the terms of overdetermination.<sup>18</sup> 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.<sup>19</sup>

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 Althusserian 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 disadjustment.

18 "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. (...) 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 weakest 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.<sup>20</sup>*

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.<sup>21</sup> 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 *historicity* and of *time*.<sup>22</sup> Not only of them, 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

20 Althusser 1990, p. 59

21 One could even think, as Balibar seems to suggest (2004) that the history of Althusserian thought coincides with the movement of self-criticism. In that sense, in addition to the later prologue to the second edition of *Pour Marx* we have already mentioned, his *Éléments d'autocritique* (1972), *Lénine et la philosophie* (1968), *Marx dans ses limites* (1977), among many others could be mentioned, including, doubtlessly, his posthumously published last writings on aleatory materialism.

22 As the suggestive essay "Notes sur un théâtre matérialiste" reveals, originally published in 1962 and later included in Althusser 2005, pp. 129-151

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.<sup>23</sup>*

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*.<sup>24</sup>

Only by assuming the problematic magnitude of this thought can the series of theoretical developments that present a first 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

23 Badiou 2005, p. 65. It may be suitable to open up a discussion about the total coincidence of overdetermination and politics that would lead us to establish some qualms with regards to thinking the key of a political ontology from an Althusserian perspective, in the sense that is proposed in the current framework of the so-called postfoundational thought.

24 This effort is, not fortuitously, what connects Althusser's philosophical intervention to Lacan's psychoanalytic stake, who, on another order of problems, seems to develop a similar process: "In the course of his teaching, he explored different ways *jouissance* is captured by the signifier. Starting with the phallus, also designated as the signifier of *jouissance*, Lacan inaugurates an extraordinary series of terms that replace one another (...) In fact, each of these terms may be considered a «loose piece», to use Jacques-Alain Miller's formulation, an element of the real which, through the operation of signification is elevated to the dignity of the signifier, acting as a signifier, in order to stitch together what does not remain together." Šumic 2011, p. 49. The translation is our own).

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.<sup>25</sup> 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 politicality 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.*<sup>26</sup>

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 conjuncture – 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 “theoreticist deviation”, far from constructing a pantheoreticism 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

25 Balibar 2004, p. 57

26 Althusser 1971, p. 38

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.<sup>27</sup> Only this way can the notion of rupture be kept – only vaguely because of the Bachelardian encumberment that Althusser would later berate himself for and which Balibar rigorously defines<sup>28</sup> – 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 *demarkation* 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.”<sup>29</sup> 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.

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

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.<sup>30</sup>

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..."<sup>31</sup> The formulation of the materialist philosophy that takes consistency in this 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*

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A labor of research would be needed here, aimed at establishing the difference between the "union" employed by Althusser and the unity that could be derived from the hegelian idealist dialectic, in order to specify to which extent a *dialectic* can be still spoken of. That is not something we may develop here, but we cannot refrain from indicating the necessity of this task.

31 Althusser 1970, p. 53

*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.*<sup>32</sup>

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.*<sup>33</sup>

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'".<sup>34</sup> 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

32 .....  
Althusser in D'Hondt 1973, p. 119. My translation

33 Althusser 1970, p. 42

34 Ibídem

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.<sup>35</sup>

The specific feature of knowledge rests on its capacity to indicate its own place among the many other social practices,<sup>36</sup> 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 relegates 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]."<sup>37</sup> 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".<sup>38</sup> 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:

*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.*<sup>39</sup>

It is the concept of (overdetermined) *process* which indicates the historicity of the production of knowledge and therefore, also, its

.....  
35       Ibid.

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"

37       Althusser 1970, p. 22. Recovering thus Marx's well-known expression in his *Zur Kritik der politischen Ökonomie*

38       Ibid., p. 43

39       Althusser 1990, p. 51

*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,<sup>40</sup> 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:

*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.* <sup>41</sup>

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

.....  
40       As can be read on the prologue to the second edition of *Pour Marx* we already mentioned.

41       Althusser 2005, p. 173

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*<sup>42</sup>

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”<sup>43</sup>.

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

42 Althusser 1970, p. 45

43 Althusser 1970, p. 46

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.”<sup>44</sup> 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.”<sup>45</sup>

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.*<sup>46</sup>

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.<sup>47</sup> This circle

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.<sup>48</sup>

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.<sup>49</sup>*

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

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.

49 Althusser 1960: 28. My translation

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.”<sup>50</sup> 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.<sup>51</sup>*

As Badiou deduced 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.”<sup>52</sup>*

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

50 Althusser 2005, p. 169

51 Althusser 2005, p. 167

52 Badiou 1967: 35

of the real world”<sup>53</sup> 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 cognoscitive 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”<sup>54</sup> 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).<sup>55</sup>*

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

.....  
53 Althusser 1970: 54

54 Althusser 1970: 54

55 Althusser 1970: 55

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.”<sup>56</sup> 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 cognoscitive 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.<sup>57</sup>*

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”

.....  
56 Badiou 1967

57 Althusser 1970, p. 27

establishes that *scientificity* 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.*<sup>58</sup>

Althusser proposes his notions of theoretical problematic and symptomal 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.<sup>59</sup>

The symptomal 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.”<sup>60</sup> That is to say that reading, in order to be symptomal, 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.”<sup>61</sup> 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:

58 Balibar, 2004: 15 footnote 8. My translation

59 Badiou 1967

60 Althusser 1970, p. 30

61 Ibid.

*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.*<sup>62</sup>

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

62 Althusser 1976, 185: -186.

tendencies. (...) “They 'intervene' on two fronts, to trace, in Lenin's excellent expression, a 'line of demarcation' between Marxist theory on the one hand, and ideological tendencies.”<sup>63</sup>

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.”<sup>64</sup>

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”,<sup>65</sup> summons a structural causality that supposes a “system of instances between which the philosophical unconscious figures.”<sup>66</sup>

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, but it is also a category on the *limits of logic*, as Jacques-Alain Miller repeatedly insists.<sup>67</sup> In this sense, as a concept, that overdetermination is placed at the limits of the conceptual; or to put it more controversially, it is the limit-concept of the bond between the conceptual and the non-conceptual.

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 history *thinkable*, 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”

63 Altussher 2005, p. 12

64 Althusser 1997, p. 333

65 Ibid. 336

66 Ibid 337

67 Miller 2007

(...) any more than the Freudian cure would consist of suppressing the unconscious.”<sup>68</sup>

As a specific principle of the materialist dialectic, overdetermination takes shape in the question of the *necessity that operates as scientific rationality* and enables to account for the complex 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 “problematic” – as a disjointed union. It is therefore not capricious for Althusser to search for the operationality of the overdetermination principle in both fields –theoretical 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, the notion of overdetermination takes shape in Lenin's *political* strategy, in the thought of practical experience, in the field of its experience itself, which borders on the contemporaneity of the conjuncture.

*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 la cure freudienne, de supprimer l'inconscient”. Althusser 1997, p. 340. My translation

*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.*<sup>69</sup>

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."<sup>70</sup>

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*<sup>71</sup>

Translated by: Ignacio Rial Schies

69 Althusser 2005, p. 179

70 Ibidem

71 Balibar 1993, p. 2

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