

Fidelity that is not Interpellation: Reading Althusser's Misreadings

Agon Hamza

Abstract:

This paper intends to examine the fate and the relevance of the work of Louis Althusser from the perspective of Slavoj Žižek's system. It won't aim at drawing a balance sheet of what is still relevant in Althusser's work, what is applicable to our situation, rather it will endeavour to show the possibilities (or not) of an Althusserian analysis of our predicament and thus pointing out his limits, from a Žižekian perspective.

Keywords:

Althusser, Marx, Žižek, ideology, Hegel

Why celebrate Althusser?

What does it mean to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the publication of *For Marx*, the collective work *Reading Capital*, in the present philosophical, political and ideological conjuncture, which has more or less declared Althusser to be a 'dead dog' and his project to be worthy of nothing? Let us present some provisional theses. In an elementary level, the project of Louis Althusser can be defined as a "return to Marx." This return consists of a philosophical reading of a non-philosophical work, i.e. Marx's *Capital*. But, the question is why return to Althusser at all, in the present era which has effectively done away with the political and ideological struggle which is foreign to Althusser? The main political and ideological terrain in the current conjuncture (at least in Europe) is the struggle against the austerity measures, whereas neoliberalism constitutes our greatest enemy. Employing an elementary Althusserian operation of "drawing lines of demarcation", we come to striking conclusions. Firstly, there is a striking similarity between the liberals and the contemporary leftists: the word *capitalism* has disappeared from our vocabulary. In a Maoist fashion, which was very dear to Althusser himself, the struggle against the austerity measures and neoliberalism are not our principal contradictions. The principal problem of capitalism is not in neoliberalism, or in austerity politics, nor in new forms neither of authoritarian or apartheid regimes, nor in the xenophobia and racism, nor in the West or USA as such. But, it is in the capitalist form itself, that is, in the *value form*. Instead of referring to neoliberalism as the cause for our plights and miseries, we should (at the risk of sounding archaic), bring back the critique and the overcoming of *capital* as the ultimate goal of our thinking and actions. This is what the basic Althusserian lesson would be.

Secondly, as the revival of an interest in Althusser's *Capital* seems to be happening in light of the financial meltdown of 2008 and of various political experiments taking place all around the world, it looks like it is a crucial moment to examine the conditions and grounds onto which

the refoundation of Marx is taking place and the role of Althusser in it. But, let us argue that regardless of the fact that Marx's writings actively constitute the contemporary debates of the Left, nevertheless we are not confronting the big ideological and political issues of our present era: classes and class struggle, party-form of political organisation, Communism, et cetera. In rereading Marx today, in all the attempts to reactualize him and make his work our contemporary, we seem to fail to recognize what the purpose of rereading Marx is: the construction of a proper political vision and program. In this sense, Marx remains a foreigner to us.

But, how should we read *Capital* and Marx in general? Let us state the first preliminary thesis, which is also the fundamental thesis of this paper. Marx's *Capital* occupies a very odd position in the history of the social sciences. It is considered neither a philosophical treaty, nor an economic platform. Certainly, it is not a book which provides a political vision nor a particular program. However, as paradoxical as it might seem, these are the three crucial dimensions through which *Capital* should be read. It is at this point where the problematic opened up by Althusser is revealed, which is to say, a set of questions and problems that preoccupied the philosopher throughout his philosophical project and which remain relevant and timely for our predicament.

The Althusserian problematic

What does the problematic opened up by Althusser consist of? I want to argue that Althusser gave an alternative perspective to the immanent tension between philosophy and politics. The shape that this tension assumes is that of an obstacle. Let us pursue the standard Marxist vocabulary: the relation between Philosophy and Marxism on the one hand, and Politics and Communism on the other (as theory and practice) is a relation of tensions, obstacles and uncertainty. What does this mean?

Throughout his work, from the early theological writings up to his materialism of the encounter, Althusser repeatedly wrote of the singular nature of Marx's project. For Althusser, Marx made a double discovery: he founded the science of history (historical materialism) and discovered a new practice of philosophy (dialectical materialism). Althusser maintained that the discovery of *historical materialism* was the condition for establishing a new practice of philosophy. Let us go with a longer quote from Althusser, which in this case is justified:

This 'epistemological break' concerns conjointly *two distinct theoretical disciplines*. By founding the theory of history (historical materialism), Marx simultaneously broke with his erstwhile ideological philosophy and established a new philosophy (dialectical materialism). I am deliberately using the traditionally accepted terminology (historical materi-

alism, dialectical materialism) to designate this double foundation in a single break. And I should point out two important problems implied by this exceptional circumstance. Of course, if the birth of a new philosophy is simultaneous with the foundation of a new science, and this science is the science of history, a crucial theoretical problem arises: by what necessity of principle should the foundation of the scientific theory of history *ipso facto* imply a theoretical revolution in philosophy? This same circumstance also entails a considerable practical consequence: as the new philosophy was only implicit in the new science it might be tempted to confuse itself with it. *The German Ideology* sanctions this confusion as it reduces philosophy, as we have noted, to a faint shadow of science, if not to the empty generality of positivism. This practical consequence is one of the keys to the remarkable history of Marxist philosophy, from its origins to the present day.¹

Althusser is correct in pointing out the break in Marx's oeuvre, however what he is missing is that the very distinction between science and ideology is, in the last instance, an ideological position par excellence. What Althusser is missing is the very Hegelian-inspired tendency that led to that break. That is to say, Marx's critique of political economy, or more precisely, his *Capital* could only be written after Marx re-read Hegel's *Science of Logic*. In this sense, the 'epistemological break' occurred but for the exact opposite reasons as thought by Althusser himself. That said, the thesis I want to propose can be formulated as follows: yes, there was an 'epistemological break' in Marx's work, but the break that occurred is, in the last instance, a rupture in his path that permitted him to conceptualize his 'critique of political economy'. While Althusser assumed that the concept of "science" that Marx was using in *Capital* came from Darwin and physics, it is, in fact, better understood as the concept of science used by Hegel in *Science of Logic*, which starts with a clear statement that a scientific enquiry is not merely one which does not presuppose anything, no essence and no being, but which examines the presuppositions which come with what is posited, its "ontological commitments." This is precisely what Marx does in *Capital*: he analyzes the presuppositions that are being posited by the logic of Capital itself, rather than mimic a physicist or a biologist who observes impartially the object that he is trying to analyze. The science proper of Marx is the science of letting the commodity tell its own story, and not the science that, beginning with Galileo, requires the planets to be "mute".

Let us proceed further with examining how Althusser employs this concept. As Balibar argues: "it seems to me that in reality it is instead an original concept which Althusser introduced between 1960 and 1965, a concept which, it is true, owes 'something' to Bachelard and

.....
1 Althusser 2005, pp.33-4

which does indeed rest on certain common philosophical presuppositions but which in fact has a quite other object and opens a quite other field of investigations".² In fact, *Capital* is the work "by which Marx has to be judged" and this is the work in which Althusser puts most of his effort: to the "scientific work" of Marx, and especially his *Capital*, with the *philosophical thesis* which would best suit his scientific project. In this enterprise, his task was that of "determining the type of philosophy which best corresponds to what Marx wrote in *Capital*,"³ which would result not in Marxist philosophy, but in philosophy *for* Marxism. Hence his famous statement that it is difficult to be a Marxist in philosophy. As a result, one of the possible ways of constructing the philosophy for Marxism is through the critique of ideology. The logical question to be posed here: what is the function of philosophy for Althusser?

The main task of philosophy is to draw lines of demarcation between scientific practice and ideological propositions. Philosophy is defined in its double relation to the sciences and ideologies. In this regard, philosophy is a *dividing activity of thought*. It thinks demarcations, distinctions, divisions, within the realm of thought. Therefore, philosophy has an intervening role by stating *Theses* that contribute to "opening the way to a correct way" of formulating the very problems in which it intervenes. According to Althusser, by stating *Theses* (which should be understood as positions), philosophy produces *philosophical categories*. When he defines philosophy as the "class struggle in theory, in the last instance", Althusser is being very precise: philosophy functions by intervening not in matter, or bodies, nor in the class struggle, but it *intervenes in theory*. This intervention provokes or produces theoretical effects. In other words the "enigma of philosophy is contained in the difference between the reality in which it intervenes (the domain of the *sciences* + theoretical *ideologies* + philosophy) and the result that its intervention produces (the distinction between the *scientific* and the *ideological*)."⁴ The indispensable result is what he calls *philosophy-effect*. In this sense, philosophy does not think, neither in sciences nor in politics. Philosophy's function should "serve sciences, rather than enslave them" and to reiterate this in Badiou's vocabulary, philosophy has the task of articulating and criticizing the effects of the events of the class struggle. Therefore, everything that happens in philosophy has "in the last instance, not only political consequences in theory, but also political consequences *in politics*: in the political class struggle".⁴ Taking all this into account the intervention in the two distinct realities (that of scientific and ideological) is internal and the *philosophy-effects* produce changes within itself. Based on this

2 Balibar 1978, p.208.

3 Althusser 2006, p.258

4 Althusser 1976, p.38.

how are we to re-think Althusser's theory of the critique of ideology? Here I want to argue that in a certain way, his entire theory of the critique of ideology is at the service of this thesis - which in his idea of re-thinking Marxism, is meant as a means for proving it right, supplementing it, and rendering it compatible with his project of re-reading Marxism. The entire Marxist enterprise in philosophy is centered on the possibility of distinguishing between science and ideology, not only in their realities, but also in the reference to the work of Marx himself. This thesis led Althusser to conclude that: "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."⁵ In this respect, I would argue that his philosophical project of reading Marx philosophically is centered on the concept of the 'critique of ideology.'

Žižek as a critic of Althusser

The philosopher who works on the problematic opened up by Althusser is Slavoj Žižek, although his work is grounded on a completely different orientation. As it is well known, this triad of psychoanalysis, Hegelian philosophy, and Marx's critique of political economy, constitute the space of *Žižekian thinking*. Indeed one couldn't ask for a more arduous path to follow with his attempt to not only redeem but reinvent this triad of theories (and practices). They are all discredited and subjected to the harshest critique possible: the predominant Lacanian orientation is politically conservative, the entire history of philosophy for the past two centuries has been defining and shaping itself in opposition to Hegel, and last but not least, no political and ideological enterprise has been more condemned than communism. Žižek's move is already well known: we should be critical of Marx, not at the level of making a compromise with him, but rather with radicalizing Marx himself. This radicalization takes the form of going back from Marx to Hegel. Not supplementing Marx, or reading Marx with... Spinoza, as it is fashionable in our era and as Althusser conceptualised and read Marx. But rather, the only way to radicalize Marx is to uncompromisingly subject him to Hegel's system.

Slavoj Žižek's engagement with the work of Althusser has a long history. Since his first book in English, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* until his latest *Absolute Recoil: Towards a New Foundation of Dialectical Materialism*, Žižek continuously returns to Althusser's work and critiques him from many perspectives. Although Žižek recognizes the extraordinary importance of Althusser's work, nonetheless his position is that Althusser fails to realize what he promises to do. In what follows, I will schematically theorize the advantages of Žižek (via Hegel and vice versa)

5 Althusser & Balibar 2009, p.17

over Althusser.

Let us consider his *The Sublime Object of Ideology*. In a certain level, this book should be understood and read as Žižek's endeavor to overcome the limits of Althusser's project in general, and his theory of ideology in particular.⁶ In the beginning of the introduction to *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, he engages immediately with Althusser. Žižek accepts the break inaugurated by Althusser, "by his insistence on the fact that a certain cleft, a certain fissure, misrecognition, characterizes the human condition as such: by the thesis that the idea of possible end of ideology is an ideological idea *par excellence*."⁷ Althusser relies on Spinoza, in order to formulate his theory of the critique of ideology. On the other hand, Žižek constructs his method and the critique of ideology based on Hegel and Lacan. The difference between Althusser and Žižek is, bluntly and schematically put, the difference between the *symptomatic reading* and the *ideological fantasy*. The implications from this are far more complicated than they may appear. Althusser's critique of ideology is based on the distinction between the real object and the object of knowledge.

In his famous text *Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses*, Althusser theorizes the famous concept of *ideological interpellation*, which is central to any functioning of the ideology:

I might add: what thus seems to take place outside ideology (to be precise, in the street), in reality takes place in ideology. What really takes place in ideology seems therefore to take place outside it. That is why those who are in ideology believe themselves by definition outside ideology: one of the effects of ideology is the practical *denegation* of the ideological character of ideology by ideology: ideology never says, 'I am ideological'. It is necessary to be outside ideology, i.e. in scientific knowledge, to be able to say: I am in ideology (a quite exceptional case) or (the general case): I was in ideology. As is well known, the accusation of being in ideology only applies to others, never to oneself (unless one is really a Spinozist or a Marxist, which, in this matter, is to be exactly the same thing). Which amounts to saying that ideology *has no outside* (for itself), but at the same time *that it is nothing but outside* (for science and reality).⁸

This constitutes the center of the Althusserian problematic, or the contradictions that constitute the terrain on which the Althusserian problematic is founded upon. The central concept in Althusser's venture

.....
6 We should note that in 1989, when *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, Althusser's work on the materialism of the encounter has not been published yet, and it was very likely that Žižek didn't know of them. However, we should note that in his later books, Žižek elaborates on that period. Cf. Žižek 2014.

7 Žižek 1989, p.2.

8 Althusser 2001, pp.118-119

in rethinking Marxism is the idea of an *epistemological break*. What is the epistemological break? It is the philosophical (epistemological) operation which defines what Marxist philosophy is. In Althusser's conceptualization, the epistemological break is the wager through which we can determine the extent to which Marx (and Marxist thought in general) has liberated itself from the philosophical ideology, i.e. Hegel. And through this operation, Althusser is able to determine what Marxist philosophy is. The epistemological break, according to Althusser, is located in 1845 with *The German Ideology* and *Theses on Feuerbach*, which permitted Marx to become Marxist. That is to say, by breaking away from Hegelianism, humanism and anthropology, Marx was able to establish the science of history (historical materialism) and a new philosophy (dialectical materialism).⁹ This is how the famous Althusserian dichotomy of science *versus* ideology can be understood at this level of the analysis. This is the typical Althusserian operation: the struggle which Althusser sought to locate, the scientificity, or what is scientific, in Marx's *Capital*, and thus provide philosophical concepts that would be used by science, by the means of distinguishing it from the ideologies.

From Žižek's perspective, and here we can pursue his reading method of *ideological fantasy*, we can say that the very distinction between science and ideology is ideological in itself. Therefore, from the same perspective, we can propose the following thesis: Althusser's oeuvre, as a classic critique of ideology and rethinking of Marxism, is ideological from the standpoint of Žižek's project.

Althusser's Spinoza and Hegel

Pierre Macherey's arguably most important book is called *Hegel or Spinoza*. Its recent translation into English¹⁰ sparked yet another debate on the tension between Spinoza and Hegel. Due to the structure and the limits of this paper, I will limit myself to presenting the main argument of this book: according to Macherey, Hegel wasn't fully capable of understanding Spinoza's system and at the same time, the latter serves as a critic *avant la lettre* of the former. Similarly to this, the recent translation of Frédéric Lordon's *Willing Slaves of Capital: Spinoza and Marx on Desire* argues that it is through Spinoza that we can comprehend the structures of capitalism. In this regard, Lordon argues that: "the temporal paradox is that, although Marx comes after Spinoza, it is Spinoza who can now help us fill the gaps in Marx."¹¹ Lordon points out a very important aspect of

.....
9 Althusser 2005 p.33

10 Macherey 2011.

11 Lordon 2014, p. x.

Marx's work, which holds true for Althusser's work as well: Marx's work, and especially the critique of political economy, can be understood only if it is positioned to, or read from a philosophical perspective. Balibar rightly argued that "whatever might have been thought in the past, *there is no Marxist philosophy and there will never be*; on the other hand, *Marx is more important for philosophy than ever before.*"¹² As explained earlier, Althusser's abandonment of Hegel has to be understood in terms of a refutation of French Hegelianism. How should we understand this? The first thesis concerns the philosophical and political conjuncture in post-war France. According to Althusser, "the fact that, for the last two decades, Hegel has had his place in French bourgeois philosophy is not a matter to be treated lightly."¹³ The philosophical conjuncture in France, or, the "extraordinary philosophical chauvinism," as Althusser characterized it, was dominated by phenomenologists, *Lebensphilosophie* and bourgeois appropriation of Hegel. The return to Hegel, in the post-war period, took a specific form:

Great Return to Hegel is simply a desperate attempt to combat Marx, cast in the specific form that revisionism takes in imperialism's final crisis: *a revisionism of a fascist type.*¹⁴

Politically, the post-war reaction was at its highest. Philosophical chauvinism was accompanied by political provincialism, or revisionism. The systematic political critique was alienated in the usual moralistic blackmailing terms. In fact, the political revisionism was centered on the category of *fear*, as developed by the central figures of post-war writings, Camus, Malraux, Marcel, and others. By employing the notion of fear to analyze the political situation in France, they became Fukuyama-ists *avant la lettre*.

Against all these currents, in which the philosophical categories were used as a warrant for the most reactionary elements in the post-war situation, Althusser sought refuge in the philosophy of Spinoza. In the post-war predicament, in which philosophical currents were dominated by bourgeois appropriation of Hegel and phenomenologists (Marxists or not), Spinozism was indeed perceived as a liberator from that reactionary conjuncture, and being a Spinozist in philosophy was perceived as a liberating experience. We should remember that one of his main enemies, both philosophically and politically, was Maurice Merleau-Ponty, the author of a *Phenomenology of Perception*, as well as Jean-Paul Sartre's *Being and Nothingness*. Nevertheless, before arriving at this point, Althusser

12 Balibar 2007, p.1.

13 Althusser 2014, p.177

14 Ibid 189

was a Hegelian and this can be seen in his Thesis and other essays from that period. In other words, it was Althusser who has his own theoretical life divided into a humanist and a scientific-Spinozist period, and not necessarily Marx himself! Taking all this into account, what characterizes Althusser's early period is:

A full identification with Christianity and an attempt to create an alliance between Roman-Catholicism and Marxism

An underlying Hegelian framework, albeit a humanist Hegel, is present in his work, culminating in his Master Thesis and *The Return to Hegel*

A constant attempt to dissolve his theoretical alliances and build a new philosophical framework for his philosophical project, which culminates with abandonment of Christianity and Hegel

The shift in Althusser's position is evident: from identifying with Christianity and referring to himself as a Christian ("we Christians..."), he switches to dismissing religion as a "practical ideology."¹⁵ On another level, he switches from an interesting defense of Hegel against the fascist revisionism, to dismissing Hegel as the philosophical rationalization of the existing state of things. In the midst of these conceptual shifts, he is continuously faced with the perplexing question: how to begin with a Critique? In the whole of his oeuvre, we can distinguish between its Christian and scientific perspective. Differently put, Althusser's critique is grounded first on Christian universality, or more precisely, based on his mastery of attempting to ground the critique in its Universalist Catholic fashion, Althusser opens up the space for two decisive moves in his philosophical and political life: a) paradoxically (or not so much), it was Christianity that enabled him to reject/abandon the Roman-Catholic Church, and b) it enables him to rethink Marxism in universal terms.

This has to be complicated further. In the section *On Spinoza* in his *Essays of Self-Criticism*, Althusser makes a long remark that is worth quoting:

Hegel *begins* with Logic, "God before the creation of the world". But as Logic is alienated in Nature, which is alienated in the Spirit, which reaches its end in Logic, there is a circle which turns within itself, without end and without beginning. The first words of the beginning of the *Logic* tell us: Being is Nothingness. The posited beginning is negated: there is no beginning, therefore no origin. Spinoza for his part begins with God, but in order to deny Him as a Being (Subject) in the universality of His *only* infinite power (*Deus = Natura*). Thus Spinoza, like Hegel, rejects every thesis of Origin, Transcendence or an Unknowable World, even disguised within the absolute interiority of the Essence. But with

15 See also Ibid., p.194-197

this difference (for the Spinozist negation is not the Hegelian negation), that within the void of the Hegelian Being there exists, through the negation of the negation, the contemplation of the dialectic of a *Telos* (Telos = Goal), a dialectic which reaches its Goals in history: those of the Spirit, subjective, objective and absolute, Absolute Presence in transparency. But Spinoza, because he “begins with God”, never gets involved with any Goal, which, even when it “makes its way forward” in immanence, is still figure and thesis of transcendence. The detour *via* Spinoza thus allowed us to make out, by contrast, a radical quality lacking in Hegel. In the negation of the negation, in the *Aufhebung* (= transcendence which conserves what it transcends), it allowed us to discover the Goal: the special form and site of the “mystification” of the Hegelian dialectic.¹⁶

In other words, according to Althusser, Spinoza rejected the notion of the Goal and by doing so he rejected every theory of teleology. In Althusser’s view, Spinoza was *the* critic of ideology of his time, which in that time had the form of religion. He refused to see ideology as an error or ignorance, but placed it in the level of the *imaginary* (First Level of Knowledge). In his radical criticism of

the central category of imaginary illusion, *the Subject*, it reached into the very heart of bourgeois philosophy, which since the fourteenth century had been built on the foundation of the legal ideology of the Subject. Spinoza’s resolute anti-Cartesianism consciously directs itself to this point, and the famous “critical” tradition made no mistake here. On this point too Spinoza anticipated Hegel, but he went further.¹⁷

In this regard, according to Althusser, the problem of Hegel is that he could not find a place for subjectivity without a subject:

For Hegel, who criticized all theses of subjectivity, nevertheless found a place for the Subject, not only in the form of the “becoming-Subject of Substance” (by which he “reproaches” Spinoza for “wrongly” taking things no further than Substance), but in the *interiority* of the *Telos* of the process without a subject, which by virtue of the negation of the negation, realizes the designs and destiny of the Idea.¹⁸

Here we encounter the basis upon which Althusser could put forward two of his important theses: 1) History is a process without a subject, and 2) the ‘materialism of the encounter’ is centered on the notions of void, limit, lack of the center, and contingency, etc. These two theses render visible the Althusserian paradox: the coexistence of one of the most radical anti-ontological positions (thesis 1) in an ontological framework. Indeed, this is the real kernel of the problem in Althusser’s project.

16 Althusser 1976, p.135.

17 Ibid, p.136

18 Ibid.

In fact, the future of Althusser depends on the work that is yet to be done on this paradoxical position. The first consequence to draw is, thus, that the two above-mentioned theses *inform* his philosophical project but also make it *inconsistent*. In a sense, “process without a subject” opens up a double space: a) for rethinking the theory of the subject in Marxist philosophy, and b) rethinking the relation between Marx and Hegel, in a non-teleological fashion. However, at the same time, Althusser abruptly closes up this possibility by qualifying the subject as an idealist concept. It is worth noting that his thesis on the process without a subject, which is intended to elaborate an anti-Hegelian position, comes as close as possible to the very Hegelian conception of the subject *qua* substance. Slavoj Žižek is the first one to elaborate on the Hegelian content of this thesis:

Louis Althusser was wrong when he opposed the Hegelian Subject Substance, as a “teleological” process-with-a-subject, to the materialist-dialectical ‘process without a subject.’ The Hegelian dialectical process is in fact the most radical version of a ‘process without a subject;’ in the sense of an agent controlling and directing it – be it God or humanity, or a class as a collective subject.¹⁹

For Hegel, Substance doesn’t exist; it is only a retroactive presupposition of the Subject. Substance comes into existence only as a result of the Subject, and it is for this conceptual reason that it is enunciated as a predecessor of the Subject. In this regard, the idea that the Substance is an organic whole is an illusion, precisely because when the Subject presupposes the Substance, it presupposes it as split, a cut. If the Substance would ontologically precede the Subject, then we would have a Substance which has Spinozist attributes, but not a Subject. However, can we keep this line of argumentation *à propos* the Althusserian concept of the process without a subject? If we hold this position, then we’re in the pre-Kantian universe. The Hegelian approach assumes that this understanding of Substance is dogmatic religious metaphysics, because being/Substance is posited as a totality, as indivisible One. This totality can be accounted for, as such, only in the fantasy (i.e. Kantian antinomies of Reason). In this regard, for Hegel, it is impossible to think of the Substance that will become a Subject, because it is always-already a Subject (“*not only* as a Substance, but *also* as a Subject”): it exists only with/in the Subject and without the former Substance, is simply a nothing. In this instance, we have to be precise: when Hegel talks about Substance and Subject, he is practically talking about the Absolute: it is the Absolute which is not *only* a Substance, but *also* a Subject. And the “absolute is essentially its

19 Žižek 2012, p.405.

result.”²⁰ As Hegel himself put it in his critique of Spinoza, with him the “substance is not determined as self-differentiating”, which is to say: not as a subject.²¹ The hypothesis that I want to put forward is, that, if for Althusser there is no revolutionary subject, but only agents of the revolution (and therefore ‘history is a process without a subject’), then the proletariat can be read from the perspective of the Hegelian thesis. The proletariat here should not be understood in a Lukácsian sense, but it is rather something which renders meaningful Althusser’s concept that ‘history has no subject.’²² This leads to the conclusion that the ‘agent of the revolution’ (proletariat), and ‘history has no subject’ is, indeed, the name for the Hegelian subject. Although in the first read it might resemble Lukács, we need to bear in mind that the very fact that the proletariat *lacks being* (there is no subject), is what makes it capable of *being the agent of its own coming to be*. The passage from non-being to being, through a historical process, is indeed very much Hegel’s subject. To make the link between the Substance as something split and the Subject, let’s go back to Žižek:

It is not enough to emphasize that the subject is not a positively existing self-identical entity, that it stands for the incompleteness of substance, for its inner antagonism and movement, for the Nothingness which thwarts the substance from within... This notion of the subject still presupposes the substantial One as a starting point, even if this One is always already distorted, split, and so on. And it is this very presupposition that should be abandoned: at the beginning (even if it is a mythical one), there is no substantial One, but Nothingness itself; every One comes second, emerges through the self-relating of this Nothingness.²³

This enables us to propose the crucial thesis regarding Althusser’s Spinoza *versus* Hegel. We have to accept that Althusser is a Spinozist in a sense, but the fact that he has a theory of subjectivity, whereas Spinoza has none, allows us to ask, like Hegel before – “but, what are the conditions of possibility for ideological interpellation?” That is, yes, ‘being is infinite substance, but how then does the appearance of finite subjectivity come forth?’ - and the ontology that answers this is *not* the Spinozist one. This is the turning point, and the deadlock in Althusser: he supposed Spinozism as a way to critique the weak theory of negativity of the French Hegelians, a theory which gave rise to an unthought ideological concept of subject, but the ontology he needed, when he fully developed his critique, was not the one which allowed him to start his critique. If we complicate this further, we need to state that the “process without a

20 Hegel 1969, p.537

21 Ibid., p.373

22 Hegel writes that “substance lacks the principle of *personality*”, *ibid.*

23 Žižek 2012, p.378

subject” is an epistemological position, that is to say, it is not a matter of saying there are no agents, but that there is no ontological transcendental structure of agency. It is a process without a tie to the ideological substructure of the situation (without presupposing that the agents are “subjected” to the historically determined idea of the subject of the situation they are breaking away from). In this regard, Spinoza becomes his reference, because he is the ontological backbone of this position – he has an ontology of substance to go with an epistemology of the ideological subject. So, in order to show that Althusser breaks with Spinoza’s substance, we need to show that the ‘process without a subject’ (which is indeed very close to Hegel’s theory of becoming-true through processes) in fact has *no* ontological presuppositions. That is to say, the ontological commitments of Althusser’s epistemological positions *are different*, or *critical*, of the ontology he thought he was agreeing with, because, what Hegel calls a subject, is clearly more present (in Althusser’s formulation) in the word “process” than in the word “subject”. In his *Science of Logic*, in the chapter on the Absolute, when writing on the defects of Spinoza’s philosophy, Hegel argues that “*the substance of this system is one substance, one indivisible totality.*”²⁴ When Althusser proposes a ‘process without a subject’, as an anti-Hegelian/teleological thesis/conception of history, isn’t he effectively fighting Spinoza’s conception of the substance? Therefore, in his attempt to provide an anti-Hegelian thesis, Althusser effectively provided one of the best anti-Spinozist critiques of Substance. Therefore, “process without a subject” gains its complete meaning *only* if it is posited, and read, from the Hegelian Substance-Subject: “the living Substance is being which is in truth *Subject*, or, what is the same, is in truth actual only in so far as it is the movement of positing itself.”²⁵

To proceed further, like with all theorists of the subject as ideological, Althusser, too, was also perplexed with the following: yes, the subject is ideologically formed, *but why does it ‘stick’?* What needs to be presupposed within “substance” in order to explain how ideology can “capture” something? It is the subject as ontological condition. That is to say, with Robert Pfaller’s thesis,²⁶ this requires us to presuppose a failure in substance, which is why the failure of interpellation can be a success.

Correlative to this, is Althusser’s reconstruction of materialism. Althusser’s aleatory materialism is devoid of First Cause, Sense, and

24 Hegel 1969, p.536.

25 Hegel 1977 p.10.

26 Pfaller 1998, p. 240-1. Here lies the difference with Žižek’s understanding of interpellation, according to his reformulation, or rather his reversal, of Althusser’s understanding of ideological interpellation. According to Žižek, ideology doesn’t interpellate individuals into subjects, but rather it interpellates subjects into their symbolic identities. In Žižek’s understanding, the subject is no longer an ideological construction, and this becomes a hole in the symbolic structure that ideology tries to intricate.

Logos – in short, a materialism with no teleology. According to him, “to talk about ‘materialism’ is to broach one of the most sensitive subjects in philosophy.”²⁷ Following this, he argues that “materialism is not a philosophy which must be elaborated in the form of a system in order to deserve the name ‘philosophy’”, but what is decisive in Marxism is that this materialism should “present a *position* in philosophy.”²⁸ According to Althusser,

in the philosophical tradition, the evocation of materialism is the index of an exigency, a sign that idealism has to be rejected - yet without breaking free, without being able to break free, of the specular pair idealism/materialism; hence it is an index, but, at the same time, a trap, because one does not break free of idealism by simply negating it, stating the opposite of idealism, or 'standing it on its head'. We must therefore treat the term 'materialism' with suspicion: the word does not give us the thing, and, on closer inspection, most materialisms turn out to be inverted idealisms.²⁹

In this regard, we can elaborate further on the idea of philosophy as an activity of drawing lines of demarcations between different positions. Let's divide these positions as follows: scientific, political and philosophical. I want to add, also: religious lines of demarcations.

It is with regard to the conditions that philosophy realizes its function, as an activity of drawing lines of demarcations. It intervenes when, and where, the figure of consciousness has grown old, which is structured in a double level: temporal versus structural. In this level, we have the conception of philosophy that intervenes theoretically in existing conjunctures, as well as the other conception, of a philosopher as a night-time warden. Another level is that of philosophical intervention within the philosophical terrain as such, which is to say, between different philosophical orientations. The conclusion we can draw here is, that philosophy's conditions divide philosophy; that is to say that the novelities of a certain time change philosophy, which in turn, intervenes on the fields which condition it. The question that has to be asked now, after all these detours and reading of Althusser's theses, is the following: why is it that Althusser ended up betraying his own Spinozism? The most appropriate answer to this is, that he couldn't operate within a Spinozist horizon because he was a Christian. We shall come back to this in the subsequent section. But, let us briefly and schematically explore the concept of causality as elaborated by Althusser.

27 Althusser 2006, p.272

28 Ibid., p.256

29 Ibid.

Structural causality

According to many of Althusser's students, this concept was central during their period of *Cahiers pour l'Analyse*. Structural causality is Althusser's most important endeavor to overcome Hegelian dialectics. But, the question is whether he really succeeded in doing so? Through the concept of structural causality, Althusser opposed the conventional conceptions of causality (linear and expressive). Some of Althusser's commentators (such as Ted Benton³⁰) argued that when he theorizes structural causality, he fails to really grasp the specific causal relations in the totality of the society, and therefore it fails to be an important and useful political concept. What is structural causality? Althusser employs this concept in order to mark (or, designate) Marx's specific understanding of social totality, dialectics and contradictions. The starting point is the famous sentence from the afterword of the second edition of Marx's *Capital*, where he argues that “the mystification which dialectic suffers in Hegel's hands, by no means prevents him from being the first to present its general form of working in a comprehensive and conscious manner. With him it is standing on its head. It must be turned right side up again, if you would discover the rational kernel within the mystical shell”.³¹ Departing from this, Althusser's claim is that Hegelian dialectics cannot be separated from his philosophical system, which is idealist. The radical difference between Marx's and Hegel's dialectics, according to him, “must be manifest in its essence, that is, in its *characteristic determinations and structures*”.³² To summarize this, one needs to say that “*basic structures of the Hegelian dialectic such as negation, the negation of the negation, the identity of opposites, 'supersession', the transformation of quantity into quality, contradiction, etc., have for Marx (in so far as he takes them over, and he takes over by no means all of them) a structure different from the structure they have for Hegel*”.³³

Departing from the distinction between Hegel's and Marx's dialectics, Althusser elaborates further on the relations between the structure and its elements. For Althusser, the linear causality is associated with Descartes, whereas the expressive one is adopted and employed by Hegel. Therefore, he introduces the concept of structural causality as a concept that analyses the effect of the whole on the parts. Althusser argues that through this concept we can understand that this concept is in fact “premised on the absolute condition that the whole is not conceived as a structure.” In this regard, the concept of structural causality over-

30 Benton 1984

31 Marx 1975, p.

32 Althusser 2005, p.93. See also *ibid*, pp.161-218.

33 *Ibid.*, pp.93-4.

comes the limits of the other two concepts. Analyzed from the perspective of *structural causality*, elements of the social whole are not extrinsic to the structural whole, nor does it exist as a manifestation of the immanent basis of the structure. The relation between the elements and the structure is complementary in the sense that the latter determines the elements of the whole. Let us proceed with a quote by Althusser, which indeed renders more meaningful the relationship between the totality and its elements:

In every case, the ordinary distinctions between outside and inside disappear, along with the 'intimate' links within the phenomena as opposed to their visible disorder: we find a different image, a new quasi-concept, definitely freed from the empiricist antinomies of phenomenal subjectivity and essential interiority; we find an objective system governed in its most concrete determinations by laws of its *erection* (montage) and *machinery*, by the specifications of its concept. Now we can recall that highly symptomatic term "*Darstellung*," compare it with this 'machinery' and take it literally, as the very existence of this machinery in its effects: the mode of existence of the stage direction (*mise en scène*) on the theatre which is simultaneously its own stage, its own script, its own actors, the theatre whose spectators can, on occasion, be spectators only because they are first of all forced to be its actors, caught by constraints of a script and parts whose authors they cannot be, since it is in essence an *authorless theatre*.³⁴

In other words, Althusser maintains that the whole and the parts that constitute the whole are integral, that is to say they are indivisible. This concept caused many opposing positions, from different philosophical camps. In an interview with Peter Hallward, Jacques Rancière argues that the structural causality

allowed for a kind of double attitude. First one could say, here we are presenting theory, as far as can be from any thought of engagement, of lived experience; this theory refutes false ideas, idealist ideas about the relation between theory and practice. But one could also hope that theoretical practice itself might open up other fields for new ways of thinking about political practice... In fact it didn't open any such fields³⁵

Indeed Rancière doesn't have to provide 'reasons', since he is stating a historical fact: "It didn't open up such fields" – but nonetheless, one can and should criticize the fact that it *could* have opened up the field,

34 Althusser & Balibar 2009, p.213

35 Hallward & Peden 2012, p.269

but something was missing. However, today we're in a better position to explore it and draw all the consequences from it.

According to Ed Pluth, "the concept of structural causality itself will never have much to say about the specifics of any model, time, space, or structure to which it is applied – such as, most notably, the capitalist mode of production, its origins, its conditions, its future."³⁶ But, yet he insists that philosophically, it continues to be a more important concept than it might appear, or than the way it has been presented. In his elaboration of Marx's "theoretical revolution", Althusser asks how would it be possible to define the concept of structural causality:

Very schematically, we can say that classical philosophy (the existing Theoretical) had two and only two systems of concepts with which to think effectivity. The mechanistic system, Cartesian in origin, which reduced causality to a *transitive* and analytical effectivity: it could not be made to think the effectivity of a whole on its elements, except at the cost of extra-ordinary distortions (such as those in Descartes' 'psychology' and biology). But a second system was available, one conceived precisely in order to deal with the effectivity of a whole on its elements: the Leibnizian concept of *expression*. This is the model that dominates all Hegel's thought.

Against these two modes of causality, the structural one is supposed to allow us to think the structure as a whole; or more precisely, it is supposed to permit us to think the whole as a structure, the relation between the cause(s) and its effect(s). In other words, as Pluth notes, Althusser developed this concept in order to be able to explain capitalism as a distinct mode of production in different situations. In this regard, "a structural cause may be seen to dominate and determine its situation, although it never functions as a TOTAL cause for all the effects/events in a situation. In this way it differs from an expressive cause, which, on the (bad) Hegelian model, is one that does permeate the whole; and it differs from a mechanical cause, the conditions for which are universally applicable to the situation in which it occurs."³⁷ How are we to understand this? Another quote from Althusser can illuminate the path:

If the whole is posed as *structured*, i.e., as possessing a type of unity quite different from the type of unity of the spiritual³⁸ whole, this is no longer the case: not only does it become impossible to think the determination of the elements by the structure in the categories of ana-

36 Pluth 2014, p.340.

37 Ibid, p. 345.

38 Cited from Montag 2014, p.74.

lytical and transitive causality, *it also becomes impossible to think it in the category of the global expressive causality of a universal inner essence immanent in its phenomenon.* The proposal to think the determination of the elements of a whole by the structure of the whole posed an absolutely new problem in the most theoretically embarrassing circumstances, for there were no philosophical concepts available for its resolution.³⁹

In a letter to Althusser, after reviewing the manuscript of *Reading Capital*, Macherey protested against the concept of the *structured whole*, calling it a “spiritualist conception of structure.” In his response, Althusser writes that “I agree with what you say about the totality as an ideological conception of structure... But I must say, provisionally at least, that it seems difficult to go further.”⁴⁰ However, the theory of causality, or the question of causality as such is important for any theory of history. Although in employing this concept, Althusser criticized and tried to overcome the Hegelian model of expressive totality, more importantly he criticized the thesis of economy (as economic base), which determines superstructure (ideology, politics, culture, et cetera). In opposition to this, he developed what is now known as the causality of the “decentred centre”, by which the economic determination of base -> superstructure is now replaced by the ‘double determination,’ which involved another (additional) condition of instances in the social structures. In this regard, the overdetermined causality works in various ways, thus forming very complex interrelated instances of the social structure: politics, economy, religion, ideology, law, et cetera. It should be understood as following: every capitalist society is, “in the last instance”, determined by the economic base (or instance); however, this very structural relation is then ‘overdetermined’ by yet another instance. The concept of determination and overdetermination are inspired by the writings of the Chinese revolutionary Mao Tse Tung. In his famous essay *On Contradiction*, Mao argues that “contradiction is present in the process of development of all things; it permeates the process of development of each thing from beginning to end”.⁴¹ This is what Mao calls “the universality and absoluteness of contradiction.” However, the type of the contradiction that is of interest for Althusser is another one. Mao distinguishes between the principal contradiction and the principal aspect of a contradiction. The distinction between the two can be rendered as follows: in capitalist society the two forces in contradiction, the proletariat and the bourgeoisie, form the principal contradiction. The other contradictions, such as those between the remnant feudal class and the bourgeoisie, between the peasant petty

39 Althusser & Balibar 2009, p. 207.

40 Ibid.

41 Mao 2009, p.58

bourgeoisie and the bourgeoisie, between the proletariat and the peasant petty bourgeoisie [...].⁴² The concept of casual contradiction should be read together with overdetermination. Althusser rejects the thesis that ‘something is caused by the other thing.’ Instead, he maintains on the theory of domination and subordination within the social whole. In his *On the Materialist Dialectic*, Althusser writes that domination is not just an indifferent *fact*, it is a *fact essential* to the complexity itself. That is why complexity implies domination as one of its essentials: it is inscribed in its structure. So to claim that this unity is not and cannot be the unity of a simple, original and universal essence is not, as those who dream of that ideological concept foreign to Marxism, ‘monism’, think, to sacrifice unity on the altar of ‘pluralism’ – it is to claim something quite different: that the unity discussed by Marxism is *the unity of the complexity itself*, that the mode of organization and articulation of the complexity is precisely what constitutes its unity. It is to claim that *the complex whole has the unity of a structure articulated in dominance.*⁴³

Here we can see the influence of Mao on Althusser, as it is here that he articulates the relations of domination between contradiction and its aspects.

Being an Althusserian in philosophy means that one is a Spinozist. In this sense, in the predominant readings of Althusser, he is a mere vanishing mediator between Marx and Spinoza. Taking into account the debates and the question of the relation between Marx and Hegel (or, materialism and dialectics) back to the sixties in France, Althusser maintained that “the true ancestor of Marx’s naturalistic treatment of society and history was not Hegel’s dialectical method, plagued with metaphysical idealism and a teleological view of nature and society, but Spinoza’s version of naturalistic monism.”⁴⁴ What are the consequences of the path chosen by Althusser? Althusser sought to challenge and overcome Hegel and especially his conception of totality by the whole structured in dominance. The latter, Althusser argued, can be found in Marx and thus comes his superiority to Hegel. But, this is Spinozist Marx. In the chapter of *Reading Capital*, entitled *Marx’s Immense Theoretical Revolution*, Althusser writes:

If the whole is posed as *structured*, i.e., as possessing a type of unity quite different from the type of unity of the spiritual whole, this is no longer the case: not only does it become impossible to think the determination of the elements by the structure in the categories of analytical and

42 Ibid., p.74.

43 Althusser, 2005 , pp.202-2

44 Longuenesse 2007, p.xiii

transitive causality, *it also becomes impossible to think it in the category of the global expressive causality of a universal inner essence immanent in its phenomenon*. The proposal to think the determination of the elements of a whole by the structure of the whole posed an absolutely new problem in the most theoretically embarrassing circumstances, for there were no philosophical concepts available for its resolution. The only theoretician who had had the unprecedented daring to pose this problem and outline a first solution to it was Spinoza. But, as we know, history had buried him in impenetrable darkness. Only through Marx, who, however, had little knowledge of him, do we even begin to guess at the features of that trampled face.⁴⁵

This is a fundamental problem, which Althusser calls a *dramatic problem*. But, isn't Althusser's reading just as dramatic as the problem itself? In his understanding, it is the concept of overdetermination which marks the crucial point of opposition between Marx and Hegel. According to Althusser, the move from contradiction to totality in the Hegelian system would take place under a transcendently-guaranteed unity, a teleological passage from contingency to necessity which would hide the class dominance which operated and structured this passage to begin with—the structured whole is “a” totality, a totality constituted “in dominance.” His proposal was that Marx's theory of history included the “unification-in-dominance” as part of the structure that was thereby constituted, rather than as a teleological and naturalized principle, so that the class character of structures could appear. The Althusserian triad of expressive, linear, and structural causality perfectly corresponds to Hegel's own triad of formal, real, and complete grounds. Hegel's complete ground is exactly the complex structure in which every determining instance is defined in relation to all other determinations. In this sense, Althusser fails in challenging and overcoming Hegel's conceptualization of Ground. Critiquing Althusser's triad, Žižek argues that “Hegel outlined in advance the contours of the Althusserian critique of (what Althusser presents as) “Hegelianism”; moreover he developed the element that is missing in Althusser and prevents him from thinking out the notion of overdetermination -- the element of subjectivity which cannot be reduced to imaginary (mis)recognition qua effect of interpellation, that is to say, the subject as \$, the “empty,” barred subject.”⁴⁶ Or, as Longuenesse (from whom Žižek draws on this elaboration) says, Althusser's critique is

flawed because of the conception these authors have of totality. While Hegel's totality is defined as the Idea, a single principle positing its

45 Althusser 2009, p.207

46 Žižek 1993, p.140.

own differences by self-generation, the totality whose efficacy Marx tries to define is a complex totality of different structures, in which one structured whole of determinations (e.g. the totality of economic determinations, or “infrastructure”) may play a dominant role in the constitution of all other structural components of the complex whole.⁴⁷

We should unequivocally argue that Hegel's notion of ground, exactly in understanding it as the totality of relations, is far more radical than Althusser's attribution of totality as a teleological move. The logical question thus is, why even bother to mention and let alone read Althusser, if his opposition to Hegel through Marx produced only misunderstandings?

Symptomatic reading vs ideological fantasy

The first chapter of *Reading Capital* has a very significant title: From *Capital* to Marx's Philosophy. This title presents Althusser's philosophical operation in its goals and orientations. Althusser's reading and understanding of Marx is based on a *symptomatic reading*. In the beginning of that chapter, he writes that “there is no such thing as an innocent reading, we must say what reading we are guilty of.”⁴⁸ He and his students subjected Marx's *Capital* to a philosophical reading. This is opposed to three other readings: economic, historical and philological readings. I shall come back to this later. But, what does *symptomatic reading* mean? According to him, Marx was an astonishing reader. He distinguishes between some forms of reading, but the most important one is the symptomatic reading. The basic understanding of it is that through the method of symptomatic reading we can get the repressed essence of the text, or differently put, what is latent in a text, becomes apparent through that form of a reading. In other words, through a symptomatic reading we can problematize and construct the unconscious of the text. The epistemological break in Marx can be tracked only through this reading. In Marx's work, the ‘true’ philosophy is not to be founded on his “early period”, nor does it exist explicitly in his “mature period”. They are implicit, and they function only to the extent to which it permits Marx's scientific work to take place (i.e. historical materialism). Through a symptomatic reading, these concepts and his philosophy can be rendered explicit and can “establish the indispensable minimum for the consistent existence of Marxist philosophy.”⁴⁹ In Althusser's understanding, this is dialectical materialism, or Marxist philosophy. So, the symptomatic reading is a reading which

47 Longuenesse 2007, p.100.

48 Althusser 2009, p.14

49 Althusser 2009, p.35

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. Like his first reading, Marx's second reading presupposes the existence of *two texts*, and the measurement of the first against the second. But what distinguishes this new reading from the old one is the fact that in the new one the *second text* is articulated with the lapses in the first text. Here again, at least in the way peculiar to theoretical texts (the only ones whose analysis is at issue here), we find the necessity and possibility of one reading on two bearings simultaneously.⁵⁰

Althusser then tells us that

In the papers you are about to *read*, and which do not escape the law I have pronounced – assuming that they have some claim to be treated, for the time being at least, as discourses with a theoretical meaning – we have simply tried to apply to Marx's reading the '*symptomatic*' *reading* with which Marx managed to read the illegible in Smith, by measuring the problematic initially visible in his writings against the invisible problematic contained in the paradox of *an answer which does not correspond to any question posed*.⁵¹

Through this method of approaching Marx's texts (that is, a method inspired by Spinoza, Lacan's Freud and Marx himself), Althusser argued that we can provide answers for the questions which Marx never posed and give names to the concept he produced, such as *the concept of the efficiency of a structure on its elements*.⁵² But, is this method still operative? We should remember the specificity of Althusser's project. His conception of philosophy was that of the theoretical intervention within a certain ideological and political conjuncture. As he put it himself in one of his seminars at *École Normale Supérieure*

The person who is addressing you is, like all the rest of us, merely a particular structural effect of this conjuncture, and effect that, like each and every one of us as a proper name. The theoretical conjuncture that dominates us has produced an Althusser-effect.⁵³

In this sense, it is a certain political and ideological structure that produced one of the most important philosophical projects in Marxism in the previous century, which at the same time enabled its "effect" to

50 Ibid., p.29

51 Ibid.

52 Ibid., p.30

53 Althusser 2003 p.17.

intervene in itself. I will come back to this at the end of this paper. Earlier I argued that the difference between Althusser and Žižek lies on the fundamental difference between the *symptomatic reading* and the *ideological fantasy*. Žižek articulates his critique of Althusser's interpretative method in *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, which runs as following: our era is marked by cynicism and this is an ideological form. Or better still, cynicism is the dominant mode of the function of ideology. From this position, it is clear that confronted with such cynical reason, the traditional critique of ideology no longer works. We can no longer subject the ideological text to 'symptomatic reading', confronting it with its blank spots, with what it must repress to organize itself, to preserve its consistency - cynical reason takes this distance into account in advance.⁵⁴

How should we understand the difference? The *symptomatic reading* permits us to identify and render visible the Other in a certain ideological relation (or, the relation of the relation) which is the interpellative instance or authority. Žižek writes:

If our concept of ideology remains the classic one in which the illusion is located in knowledge, then today's society must appear post-ideological: the prevailing ideology is that of cynicism; people no longer believe in ideological truth; they do not take ideological propositions seriously. The fundamental level of ideology, however, is not that of an illusion masking the real state of things but that of an (unconscious) fantasy structuring our social reality itself. And at this level, we are of course far from being a post-ideological society. Cynical distance is just one way - one of many ways - to blind ourselves to the structuring power of ideological fantasy: even if we do not take things seriously, even if we keep an ironical distance, *we are still doing them*.⁵⁵

In other words, contrary to Althusser's method, the *ideological fantasy*, is concerned with the very construction of the Other, which masks the inconsistency and impossibility of the interpellative power. In psychoanalytic terms, while Althusser is concerned with revealing the symptom out of a given relation or text, Žižek's *ideological fantasy* method is, in the first place, concerned with questioning the very status of the authority which in a certain practice gives force to interpellation.

The most important critique of Althusser's concept of interpellation in contemporary philosophy comes from the so-called *Ljubljana School of Psychoanalysis* and from other Lacanian theorists. The main reproach towards Althusser and his theory of ideology is located on the

54 Žižek 1989, p.30

55 Ibid., p.33

concept of interpellation, the subject and its limits. In short, according to Lacanians, these are the main limits of Althusser and his philosophical project as a whole. Referring to Mladen Dolar's analysis of Althusser,⁵⁶ Alenka Zupančič has provided the most succinct position which marks the difference between Althusser and them:

the difference between the subject of structuralism (in this case Althusser's subject) and the subject of psychoanalysis. The latter is not an interpellated subject or individual who, after being summoned in an act of interpellation, becomes wholly subject (subject to and of the Ideological State Apparatus that summons it). On the contrary, the subject of psychoanalysis is that which remains after the operation of interpellation. The (psychoanalytic) subject is nothing but the failure to become an (Althusserian) subject.⁵⁷

In this regard, according to Lacanian philosophers, Althusser "linked ideology, by conceptualizing it as a process of interpellation, to the sphere of mere imaginary subjectivity."⁵⁸ In his *Absolute Recoil*, Žižek argues that the Althusserian theory of ideology is fully capable of grasping the gap that "separates our ideological sense-experience from the external material apparatuses and practices" that sustains it:

The theory distinguishes two levels of the ideological process: external (following the ritual, ideology as material practice) and internal (recognizing oneself in interpellation, believing). Although Althusser refers to Pascal to account for the passage between them—follow the external rituals and inner belief will come—the two dimensions remain external to each other; their relationship is that of the parallax: we observe ideological practice either from the outside, in bodily gestures, or from the inside, as beliefs, and there is no intermediate space or passage between the two.⁵⁹

In other words, Žižek's critique with respect to Althusser's theory of ideology does not rely only on the "gap that separates knowledge from belief." In order to render visible the gap that eludes Althusser's theory of the Ideological State Apparatuses, Žižek refers to the inverted formula of fetishist disavowal "I know very well... but...":

56 Dolar 1993, p. 78.

57 Zupančič 2000, pp. 41-2

58 Pfaller 1998, p.229.

59 Žižek 2014, p.51.

Belief thus supplements a gap, an immanent split, within knowledge itself, hence we are not dealing here just with a gap between knowledge and belief. The same goes for our stance towards the threat of ecological catastrophe: it is not a simple "I know all about the ecological threat, but I don't really believe in it." It is rather "I know all about ... and I nonetheless believe in it," because I do not really assume my knowledge.⁶⁰

The thesis to which Žižek refers is indeed very condensed and is open to various interpretations. In a sense, Žižek's critique is fully justified. Moreover, drawing from Dolar, Žižek argues that "the emergence of the subject cannot be conceived as a direct effect of the individual's recognizing him or herself in ideological interpellation: the subject emerges as correlative to some traumatic objectal remainder, to some excess which, precisely, cannot be 'subjectivized', integrated into the symbolic space."⁶¹ To sum up this critique, the difference between the Lacanians and Althusser resides in the fact that Althusser conceived the subject in the imaginary level, the imaginary misrecognition.

The limits of Althusser

On many occasions, Althusser serves as a point of reference for Žižek. But, almost each time, Žižek reckons the insufficiency and incompleteness of Althusser's project. In what remains, I will proceed with a few schematic theses which will point out the insufficiency of Althusser and the primacy of Žižek's project over it.

The first thesis is that Althusser's project, in its totality, fails to do what it promises to do, including his *aleatory materialism* period. It is not able to address and it is not up to date with political, scientific and epistemological developments and challenges of our situation. The best example is his late period known as aleatory materialism, in which Althusser maintained that nominalism is the only position that is consistent in materialism. For him, "the world consists exclusively of singular, unique objects, each with its own specific name and singular properties. 'Here and now', which, ultimately, cannot be named, but only pointed to, because words themselves are abstractions - we would have to be able to speak without words, that is, to show. This indicates the primacy of the gesture over the word, of the material trace over the sign."⁶² In the famous interview *Philosophy and Marxism*, when asked if nominalism is the ante-chamber of materialism, he answers: "I would say that it is not merely the

60 Ibid., p.52.

61 Žižek 2000, p.115.

62 Althusser 2006, p.265

antechamber of materialism, but materialism itself.”⁶³ In (an unpublished) Seminar XVIII from 1971, Lacan critiques Althusser from the standpoint of dialectical materialism:

If it is clear that if there is something that I am, it is not a nominalist, I mean that I do not start from the fact that the name is something that is stuck like that onto the real. And you have to choose; if one is a nominalist, one must completely renounce dialectical materialism, so that in short the nominalist tradition, which is properly speaking the only danger of idealism that can be put forward here in a discourse like mine, is very obviously rejected. It is not a matter of being realist in the sense that people were in the Middle Ages, the realism of universals. But it is a matter of designating, of highlighting the fact that our discourse, our scientific discourse, only discovers the real because of the fact that it depends on the function of the semblance.⁶⁴

This is where the main difference between Lacan’s dialectical materialism and Althusser’s aleatory materialism lies. Although Lacan agrees with Althusser’s materialist nominalism of exceptions, “what nominalism does not see is the Real of a certain impossibility or antagonism which is the virtual cause generating multiple realities.”⁶⁵ From a Hegelian-Lacanian standpoint, there is always something more than mere “singular, unique objects”, and that is “the virtual Real which always supplements reality, “more than nothing, but less than something.”⁶⁶ The Žižekian proper thinking thus begins when we know that the ‘abstraction’ is an inherent part of reality itself: and this is the anti-nominalist philosophical position.⁶⁷ This holds also for Marx’s critique of political economy regarding the abstraction of value and the commodity form.

After all this, why do we all still read Louis Althusser and especially his *Reading Capital* and *For Marx*? First, we need to argue that although Althusser sought to overcome his preceding periods, he nevertheless doesn’t succeed in that. His critique of dialectical materialism should be applied to his *materialism of the encounter*. Althusser became and is Althusserian *only* with his *Reading Capital* and *For Marx*. When we go back to reading Althusser, we should go back to the problematic of those two books. But, the question that demands a much longer study is: should we repeat Althusser, and is Althusser as such repeatable? When

63 Ibid.

64 Jacques Lacan, *Seminar XVIII: On a discourse that might not be a semblance* (unpublished manuscript).

65 Žižek 2012, p.781.

66 Ibid., p.97.

67 For an elaboration of Žižek’s dialectical materialism, see Hamza 2015, pp.163-176.

we repeat Althusser, what remains out of his work which is worth reconsidering in our conjuncture? Thus, to repeat and read Althusser today should take the form of repetition that Žižek did to Lenin. This should be so especially because it means that repeating Althusser is not merely repeating a philosopher, but a militant who *also* did philosophy. It means not giving up on the idea that theory and philosophy must always keep in mind the sort of identifications it will allow for in the positioning of the political militant. The preliminary answer will take the form of the conclusion to this paper. Althusser is the name of the failure of every philosopher to rethink Marx and therefore Marxism and Communism without Hegel.

Bibliography:

- Althusser, Louis, 1976, *Essays on Self-Criticism*, London: New Left Books.
- , 2001, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses," in *Lenin and Philosophy and other essays*, New York: Monthly Review Press
- , 2003, *Three Notes on the Theory of Discourses*, in *The Humanist Controversy and other writings*, London: Verso, 2003
- , 2005, *For Marx*, London: Verso.
- , 2006, *Marxism and Philosophy: Interviews with Fernanda Navarro, 1984-7*, in *Philosophy of the Encounter: Later Writings, 1978-87*, London: Verso.
- , 2014, *The Spectre of Hegel: Early Writings*, London: Verso.
- Althusser, Louis & Balibar, Étienne, 2009, *Reading Capital*, London: Verso,
- Balibar, Étienne, 1978, *From Bachelard to Althusser: the concept of 'epistemological break'*, *Economy and Society*, vol.7, no.3 August.
- , 2007, *The Philosophy of Marx*, London: Verso.
- Benton, Ted 1984. *The Rise and Fall of Structural Marxism*, New York: St. Martin's Press.
- Dolar, Mladen, 1993 'Beyond Interpellation', *Qui parle*, vol. 6, no. 2, Berkeley, CA
- Hamza, Agon, 2015, *Going to One's Ground: Žižek's Dialectical Materialism*, in *Slavoj Žižek and Dialectical Materialism*, ed. A.Hamza & F.Ruda, Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan.
- Hallward, Peter, & Peden, Knox, 2012, *Concept and Form: Volume Two: Interviews and Essays on the Cahiers pour l'analyse*, London: Verso.
- Hegel, G.W.F., 1969, *Science of Logic*, New York: Humanity Books.
- , 1977, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Lacan, Jacques, *Seminar XVIII: On a discourse that might not be a semblance* (unpublished manuscript).

- London, Frédéric, 2014 *Willing Slaves of Capital: Spinoza and Marx on Desire*, London: Verso.
- Longuenesse, Béatrice, 2007, *Hegel's Critique of Metaphysics*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Macherey, Pierre, 2011, *Hegel or Spinoza*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Marx, Karl, 1975, *Capital*, vol. 1, Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Montag, Warren, 2014, *Althusser and His Contemporaries: Philosophy's Perpetual War*, Durham: Duke University Press.
- Pfaller, Robert, 1998, *Negation and its Reliabilities: An Empty Subject for Ideology*, in Slavoj Žižek (ed) *Cogito and the Unconscious*, Durham: Duke University Press.
- Pluth, Ed, 2014, *Freeing Althusser from Spinoza: A Reconsideration of Structural Causality*, *Crisis and Critique*, 1:3.
- Zedong, Mao, 2009, *Collected Writings of Chairman Mao*, vol.3, El Paso: El Paso Norte Press.
- Žižek, Slavoj, 1989, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, London: Verso.
- , 1993, *Tarrying with the Negative: Kant, Hegel and the Critique of Ideology*, Durham, Duke University Press.
- , 2000, *Class Struggle or Postmodernism? Yes, please*, in Žižek, Slavoj, Laclau, Ernesto, & Butler, Judith, *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality: Contemporary Dialogues on the Left*, London: Verso.
- , 2012, *Less Than Nothing: Hegel and the Shadow of Dialectical Materialism*, London: Verso.
- , 2014, *Absolute Recoil: Towards a New Foundation of Dialectical Materialism*, London, Verso.
- Zupančič, Alenka, 2000, *Ethics of the Real: Kant, Lacan*, London: Verso.