

# On Althusser on Science, Ideology, and the New, or Why We Should Continue to Read *Reading Capital*

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## Abstract:

It is no secret that much of the criticism of Althusser's work during the period within which *Reading Capital* was written centers on his alleged 'theoreticism', or the view that revolutionary practice needs theory (or theoretical practice) if it is to be truly revolutionary and thus theory is primary and autonomous whereas other forms of practice are secondary and must be tied to theory insofar as it is only theory that can liberate practice from its entrapment in ideology (this is of course, in a very general sense, the foundation of the science/ideology split in Althusser's work from this period). As Jacques Rancière has put this criticism in his assessment of *Reading Capital*, "this reading of Marx via Althusser and Lacan does little more than give a new sheen to the thesis Kautsky had already defended: science belongs to the intellectuals and it is up to them to bring it to producers necessarily cut off from knowledge"<sup>1</sup> Criticisms such as Rancière's are what, in part, led Althusser himself to work to clarify his position during what we know as his 'critical period' wherein he argues that theory itself is a form a political intervention. This essay returns to these debates in order to point to the relevance of the central thesis of *Reading Capital* for our time arguing that ultimately, Althusser's project is not one in which theory trumps other forms of practice, but rather one in which Marxist theory (or science in the parlance of *Reading Capital*) is what can help us make sense of those moments in other forms of revolutionary practice that are distinct from the ideological field in which we find ourselves, and hence can aid us in marking the border between ideology and the new, the non-ideological, and the revolutionary.

## Keywords:

Althusser, Sartre, Ideology, Science, Historical Materialism, Dialectical Materialism,

It is no secret that much of the criticism of Althusser's work during the period within which *Reading Capital* was written (along with the essays that appear in *For Marx*) centers on his alleged 'theoreticism.' This is the view that revolutionary practice needs theory (or theoretical practice) if it is to be truly revolutionary and thus, theory is primary and autonomous whereas other forms of practice are secondary and must be tied to

<sup>1</sup> Jacques Rancière, *Althusser's Lesson*, translated by Emiliano Battista (London and New York, Continuum, 2011) p. 47.

theory insofar as it is only theory that can liberate practice from its entrapment in ideology (this is of course, in a very general sense, the foundation of the science/ideology split in Althusser's work from this period). As Jacques Rancière has put his version of this criticism in an assessments of Althusser's work in *Reading Capital*, "this reading of Marx via Althusser and Lacan does little more than give a new sheen to the thesis Kautsky had already defended: science belongs to the intellectuals and it is up to them to bring it to producers necessarily cut off from knowledge"<sup>2</sup> Criticisms such as Rancière's are what, in part, led Althusser himself to work to revise and clarify his position during what we now know as his 'critical period' wherein he moves away from the earlier views about the nature, status, and role of historical materialism as the science invented by Marx and dialectical materialism as the philosophy of that science, and toward a renovated thesis that theory itself is a form a political intervention.<sup>3</sup>

What I want to do in this essay is to return to these early debates—and to the original Althusserian conception of Marxist science—in order to point to the relevance of the central thesis of *Reading Capital* for our time. What I hope to show is that ultimately, Althusser's project is not, as the charge of theoreticism claims, one in which theory necessarily trumps other forms of practice, nor must we believe that it necessarily leads to the view that it is only the intellectual who can bring the revolution to the people, but rather the project is one in which Marxist theory (or science in the parlance of *Reading Capital*) and the theoretician who practices Marxist science can help us make sense of those moments in other forms of revolutionary practice that are distinct from the ideological field in which we find ourselves. So, ultimately, such theory can act so as to aid us in marking the border between ideology and the new, the non-ideological, and the revolutionary.

Before beginning, it might be useful to acknowledge that I am purposefully ignoring the context in which Rancière's criticism is uttered. That is, it is certainly the case that Althusser's reaction to the student movement of 68 and also Althusser's arguing in favor of the view that the French Communist Party should give special consideration to party intellectuals because of the importance of their theoretical enterprise sets the stage for Rancière's concerns. This I will not dispute. Nor will I dispute the fault he finds in Althusser's choices here, rather, what I am only

2 Rancière, 2011 p. 47.

3 See, Althusser, 1976.

interested in, is defending the view that theory holds a special place in Marxist practice but I don't think, as noted above, that one need endorse Althusser's political choices at this particular moment in history in order to endorse his philosophical position. I will return to all of this below but for now, let's back up and briefly recall the main points elaborated by Althusser in *Reading Capital* and *For Marx*.

## I.

As is well known Althusser begins by arguing that Marx, in his mature work, after the break with both his Hegelianism and his Feuerbachianism, founds the science of history known as historical materialism and at the same time the philosophy of this science, Dialectical Materialism. The former (historical materialism) is, as is also well known, the Marxist science of history and the history of social formations while the latter (dialectical materialism, the substance of which is what really interests Althusser) is, as Althusser himself puts it, "the theory of the differential nature of theoretical formations and their history" or in other words, as I have said elsewhere, where historical materialism is the science of history, dialectical materialism is the philosophy within which it becomes possible to understand the science of historical materialism.<sup>4</sup>

Althusser goes on to argue that these two important foundations are related but irreducible to one another. This is significant for both theoretical and political reasons. In making this claim Althusser is marking one of the many differences between his reading of Marx and the readings of Marx given by others in this period. As Alain Badiou shows us in his early review of Althusser's work in *For Marx* and *Reading Capital*, Althusser argues that other forms of Marxism either reduce Marx's philosophy (dialectical materialism) to the science of history (historical materialism) wherein Marx's work becomes, as Badiou puts it, little more than a "dialectical anthropology in which historicity becomes a founding category, rather than a constructed concept," or they "force historical materialism into dialectical materialism" and treat "contradiction as an abstract law applicable to anything."<sup>5</sup>

Among Althusser's examples of the former type of Marxism—that

4 Pfeifer 2015 p. 54.

5 Badiou 2012, pp. 140-141.

of the reduction of dialectical materialism to historical materialism and the turning of Marxism into a dialectical anthropology—is Sartre’s. Sartre argues in the *Critique of Dialectical Reason* that, “matter” and human action—or ‘human undertakings’ as he terms it—are such that, “Each term modifies the other: the passive unity of the object determines material circumstances which the individual or group transcend by their *projects*, that is, *by a real active totalization* aimed at changing the world.”<sup>6</sup>

In order to further understand this, we can begin by pointing out that the material world in which we find ourselves (and its structures, objects, and institutions) is, according to Sartre, one that we have made ourselves insofar as humans are, through their production and projects, intertwined with and involved in the constructing and reconstructing of that world. In this fashioning of the world, we too are fashioned in particular ways via the active appropriation of this material world through our ‘projects’ both individual and collective as well as through the ways in which such fashioning, both past—as in those ways of fashioning which are inherited from past generations—and present—those ways of fashioning that are underway in a given time and place—impinge on our own productive activities, understandings of our world, and possibilities for the types of projects that are available at a given time. We can think here of the types of roles that are available in given times and places- who one is, what one can do, is always structured by one’s historical moment, and this moment, and its material possibilities and impossibilities, is the result of the collective and historical production of the world by humans up to this point. In other words, there is, according to Sartre, a dialectical relation between human and matter such that each acts upon, and implies the existence of the other. This then is the meaning of Sartre’s claim in the quote above that ‘matter’ and ‘human undertakings’ modify each other.

To be sure, as alluded to above, though the ‘matter’ that exists at a given time and place is the result of this dialectic between it and human undertakings, such matter certainly does not always appear to us in this form (as the result of human action or labor). Rather, the material world often appears in the form of an inert, solidified objectivity that seems to act as a limit to our own projects in the form of the given—and limited—set of possible and impossible ways of being or projects that exist at a particular time and place.

The reasons for this are two-fold. First, materiality is not simply

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6 Sartre 2004, p.182.

the result of the individualized work of one’s own undertakings and projects. It is rather the collective product of a human community both in meaning and in form- so ‘matter’ does not belong to any one person, but rather to a community (and the dialectical effect on, and production of, individuals in the relation that exists between a given material and the human, is also felt by the community as a whole). Second, as noted above, Sartre argues that such material is historical- it is always at least partially the product of the endeavors of individuals and communities that come before. It is then, for these two reasons that matter confronts one, at least initially, as alien, separate, and as a ‘negation’ or limit to one’s power as a human. Think here for example, of the materiality of law: it is a human creation, but it is the result of a long (and ongoing) historical process that is far removed from the lives of many individuals. As such, law often confronts individuals as an inert, solidified object whose structures form a limit to action, and in relation to which such individuals appear mostly powerless.

As Sartre also notes, however, humanity’s power quickly returns insofar as individuals and communities are able to, through their own projects in their own times, act to negate the negation of their actions caused by the material world that confronts them. Here is Sartre echoing much of what we said above and also turning to a discussion of the power inherent in humanity in its relation to matter:

In this sense, the materiality of things and institutions is the radical negation of invention or creation; but this negation comes to Being through the project’s negation of previous negations. Within the ‘matter-undertaking’ couple, man causes himself to be negated by matter. By putting his meanings (that is to say the pure totalizing transcendence of previous Being) into matter, man allows himself to lend his negative power, which impregnates materiality and transforms itself into a destructive power.<sup>7</sup>

The central motor of this process of creation and negation then, on Sartre’s account of it, is human action. In humanity’s relation to (both as cause and as effect), and revision of, material objects, structures, and institutions (both in the past and in the present) that exist in the world, we find the driving force of materialist history and a materialist conception of historical change. For Sartre, Marxism really is a dialectical anthropology that looks to history (or historicity) in order to make sense of this process. So here, we can see the way that historical materialism swal-

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7 Ibid., p. 183.

lows dialectical materialism for Sartre insofar as, the dialectical process simply becomes the historical process itself within which humans are confronted by, appropriate, and recreate their material worlds (and themselves in this process).

In critiquing this reductionist view—recall here that this view is reductionist in the sense that it reduces Marx’s thought to such a historical method—, Althusser points out that, “...A second underhanded reduction can be introduced, by treating the relations of production as mere human relations.”<sup>8</sup> We can see this operative in what we have described above insofar as Sartre argues that ultimately the dialectical relations between matter and the human are founded on and by the actions of humans in their ongoing, collective modes of production, reproduction, and transformation of the material world, and also in his portrayal of the influence this process has on humanity itself. Althusser continues:

This second reduction depends on something ‘obvious’: is not history a human phenomenon through and through, and did not Marx, quoting Vico, declare that men can know it since they have ‘made’ all of it? But this ‘obviousness’ depends on a remarkable presupposition: that the ‘actors’ of history are the authors of its text, the subjects of its production.<sup>9</sup>

It is, of course, Althusser’s reading of Marx that is opposed to this kind of view, but before we say more about why, we should see what further conclusions he draws out of this kind of reading of Marx.

By putting the human back at the center of both the production and reproduction of the matter/human dialectic, theoretical views like those that Sartre offers also, as we have begun to see, make Marxism about reading the history of humanity and its influence on itself via the dialectical relation between constructed matter as determining human subjectivity in its historical foundations and human subjectivity’s overcoming of that determination via its laboring to change that matter through its projects in the present. Thus, Marxism becomes a philosophy that seeks understanding of the history of humanity’s construction and reconstruction of its own nature. Or, in other words, Marxism becomes nothing more than the history of humanity’s role in the construction of human nature itself. Here again, is Althusser:

History then, becomes the transformation of a human nature, which remains the real subject of the history which transforms it. As a

8 Althusser and Balibar 2009, p. 155.

9 Ibid.

result, history has been introduced into human nature, making men the contemporaries of the historical effects whose subjects they are, but—and this is absolutely decisive—the relations of production, political and ideological social relations, have been reduced to historicized ‘human relations’ i.e.- to inter-human, intersubjective relations.<sup>10</sup>

I will say more below about the distinction Althusser draws here between ‘actors’ and ‘authors, but for now we can say that the project of *Reading Capital* is, in part, an attempt to show that such a reduction misses the complexity that is involved in the relation between the relations of production and the means of production. Though Althusser agrees in part with the claim that the relations of production are social relations between humans, it is not the case that he thinks this is the exhaustive definition of Marx’s understanding of the relations of production.

According to Althusser, what this reading of Marx misses (or at least de-emphasizes) is the role played by the existing means of production and their necessary limit on, and determination of, the role and ability of humanity at a given time and place. For Althusser (and for Althusser’s Marx), the means of production have a kind of autonomy and determinative power over the relations of production that readings like those offered by Sartre miss insofar as they are too focused on, and overemphasize, the role humans play in the dialectical processes at work in the relation between the material and the human projects. So for Althusser, the kind of separation between the relations of production and the means of production at work in the Sartrean reading is simply impossible:

The social relations of production are on no account reducible to mere relations between men, to relations which only involve men, and therefore to variations in a universal matrix, to intersubjectivity (recognition, prestige, struggle, master-slave relationship, etc.). For Marx, the social relations of production do not bring men alone onto the stage, but the *agents* of the production process and the *material conditions* of the production process, in specific combinations...relations of production necessarily imply the relation between men and things, such that relations between men and men are defined by the precise relations between men and the material elements of the production process.<sup>11</sup>

Ultimately then, on Althusser’s reading of Marx, because one cannot separate the relations between the relations of production and the

10 Ibid

11 Ibid, 192

means of production as the means of production are themselves part and parcel of the relations of production (and as such, have their own causal efficacy in determining the ways in which human to human relations exist at a given time), we always need a proper conception of a given conjuncture and its specific combination of material conditions within which humans exist and produce if we are to gain the kind of understanding of that conjuncture's conditions Sartre wants. But this requires more than Sartre thinks it does- it requires a close and careful analysis of the determinative power of 'things' in a given moment.

Further, when Althusser drives a wedge, as we have seen him do in a couple of places quoted above, between 'actors' and 'authors', and 'agents' and 'men', what he is alluding to is precisely this: objects, things, and material conditions (practices, institutions, etc) have all—and in many cases, more— of the determining power of 'authors' and 'agents' in the same way that humans themselves can come to have such power. Though we won't go into it here, it is useful to mention at this point that this view, of course foreshadows the conception of the determining power of ideological apparatuses that Althusser will give us in his 1969 essay exploring such institutions.<sup>12</sup> Further, we can, I think, now see the importance of holding apart what Althusser sees as Marx's method (historical materialism) and his philosophy (dialectical Materialism), subjugating the latter to the former causes one to miss the complex nature of the kinds of relations between the various parts of Marx's system that we have been discussing and in doing that, one can misunderstand Marx's project as a whole.

## II.

Returning now to the earlier discussion of the two mistaken types of reductionist Marxism that Althusser is opposed to, an example of the latter type of Marxism that Althusser's view rejects—the type which seeks to reduce historical materialism to dialectical materialism—we can think of the Stalinist Marxism that infected the French Communist Party (PCF) beginning in the late 1940s wherein every portion of the social structure was subjected to the analysis afforded by a universalized contraction between classes. As is well known, around this time the PCF adopted a version of Andrei Zhdanov's 'socialist realism' which argued

<sup>12</sup> See Althusser 1971.

that in the realm of cultural production (art, literature, etc.) there were two fundamental kinds of such works, bourgeois and proletarian and, in addition to this, PCF also had come down in favor of the Lysenkoist view of scientific production as having the same fundamental division.<sup>13</sup> So here you have a Marxism which applies the concept of the contradiction between classes, in advance, to many parts of a given society in order to sort and explain them. The problem with this from the perspective of the Althusserian reading of Marx, is that, as Badiou puts it in the same review cited above, "under these conditions, the procedures for the constitution of the specific object of historical materialism end up being suppressed and Marx's "results" incorporated into a global synthesis that could never transgress the rule."<sup>14</sup>

This is the inverse (but related) problem to that described in relation to Sartre. In universalizing the concept of the contradiction between the bourgeois and the proletariat, this strategy is, like Sartre, unable to think the specificity of given historical situations and social formations. But here, this inability is the result of an inability to come down from the universality that conditions this version of Marxism's social structure: the structure is applied, as noted above, in the analysis *prior to* the analysis itself but is so without the recognition of this imposition and with a rigidity and inflexibility that dis-allows for any real critical thought about the nature of the conjuncture that is being analyzed. That is, this version of reductionist Marxism is only able to use the lens of the one universalized contradiction (bourgeois vs. proletariat) and cannot look to the specific elements that might be determinative of a given historical situation but exist outside of this one universal contradiction (or this universal conception of contradiction itself). Althusser argues that this one contradiction is itself often overdetermined by other contradictions that exist in a given place and time, and in order to fully comprehend a given conjuncture, one needs to understand the role that contradictions other than this one play. Furthermore and most importantly, this requires that one *not* begin by an *a priori* application of such a universalized concept in one's investigation.

So, as we have seen so far, Althusser's view attempts not to reduce historical materialism to dialectical materialism (or vice versa), but rather seeks to hold them apart, and to show the importance of both as being related, but also as forming distinct modes of investigation, which

<sup>13</sup> For more on this see, Pfeifer 2015, Lewis 2005, Elliott, 2006, Adereth, 1984.

<sup>14</sup> Badiou 2012, p. 141



in their relation, inform one another. Again, I think Badiou is helpful here. He refers to Althusser's conception as that of an "analogical Marxism" which "establishes between historical materialism and dialectical materialism a relation of correspondence juxtaposing the two terms, with the Marxist philosophy at every moment being the structural double of a given state of social formation."<sup>15</sup> This is to say that, again, as Althusser sees it, Historical Materialism and Dialectical Materialism are co-constitutive: in the founding of the theory of historical materialism, Marx also founds the philosophy of dialectical materialism which allows for, as noted above, the recognition and understanding of the theory of history as such.

### III.

This history and this understanding are of a very particular nature for Althusser: they are both epistemological- that is, as we will see below, they both have to do with the production of knowledge out of social and material relations and those sets of relations' particular historical arrangement in particular times and particular places in history. This knowledge is also and importantly, itself a result of the particular arrangement of social *practices* that exist at a given time.

This of course is the theory of the primacy of practice that Althusser elaborates and that was alluded to above. We should pause here for a moment and say a bit more about Althusser's conception of practice. A practice as Althusser understands it is:

...Any process of transformation of a determinate given raw material into a determinate product, a transformation effected by a determinate human labor using a determinate means (of production). In any practice thus conceived, the determinant moment (or element) is neither raw material, nor the product but the practice in the narrow sense: the moment of the labor of transformation itself, which sets to work, in a specific structure, men, means, and a technical method of utilizing the means.<sup>16</sup>

Practices are, in this way, a part of the means of production. Recall our discussion above of the role that such means play at the intersection between humans and matter wherein such means (or material conditions inside of which production takes place) are determinative of both matter

15 Ibid., p. 142.

16 Althusser 2005, p. 166

and human relations as such. The practice then, is a 'work' in the sense that it is the 'actor' or the 'agent' of transformation itself, that exists between the raw material, the human, and the product. In other words, though practices engage humans and human capacities/activities, they are material insofar as they exist outside of individual humans and make up the foundation of the ways humans come to understand themselves.

This general definition of practice, furthermore, allows for the identification of, as Althusser argues, "different levels of human practice (economic practice, political practice, ideological practice, scientific practice) in their characteristic articulations, based on the specific articulations of the unity of human society."<sup>17</sup> We should be careful here to point out that though it is the case that we are given a general definition of practice by Althusser, this general definition, in its particular expression, is different for each of the different types of practices in general. As Norman Geras has pointed out:

Economic practice involves putting to work labor power and means of material production to transform natural or already worked up materials into socially useful products, theoretical or scientific practice brings together "thought power" and means of theoretical labor (the concepts of a theory and its method) to produce from concepts, representations, intuitions, a specific product: knowledges. Political practice works on its own type of raw materials, given social relations, to produce its own type of product, new social relations. Ideological practice transforms the forms of representation and perception in which agents of a social formation 'live' their relations with their world.<sup>18</sup>

Though I think that Geras' definition of the different modes of transformation via the work of practice is helpful, I want to make one small correction. Where Geras speaks of scientific practice as a form of theoretical practice he does not apply the term theoretical practice to ideological practice but rather seems to reserve it for scientific practice only. Althusser does not do this: he takes it to be the case that both scientific practice and ideological practice are in fact forms of theoretical practice.<sup>19</sup> This is a crucial point and I now want to turn our attention to the split between scientific practice and ideological practice as it is this that is most important for our purposes in the remainder of this paper.

17 Ibid., 229

18 Geras 1972, p. 62.

19 See for instance Althusser 2009, p. 49.

#### IV.

Recall again the claim just made about the 'work' of theoretical practice: it brings together 'thought power' and the other means of theoretical labor (concepts and a method). The raw material that is worked on in theoretical practice and transformed into the object of knowledge, is precisely not the real object itself (the object that exists outside of and prior to thought). Rather, it is the object as already appropriated by thought (or the concepts and methods through which one understands her or his world). So here we see the distinction between thought and reality as such, or as Althusser puts it, here we come upon the fact that:

The real is one thing, along with its different aspects: the real-concrete, the process of the real, the real totality, etc. thought about the real is another, along with its different aspects: the thought process, the thought-totality, the thought concrete, etc.<sup>20</sup>

Althusser continues, outlining the materialism inherent in this:

This principle distinction implies two essential theses: 1. The materialist thesis of the primacy of the real over thought about the real presupposes the existence of the real independence of that thought (the real survives in its independence, after, as before, outside the head –grun- drisse 22) 2. The materialist thesis of the specificity of thought and the thought process, with respect to the real and the real process.<sup>21</sup>

So here, theoretical practice is not the practice of transforming the real object into the object of knowledge but rather a working of thought on the object of knowledge itself as that which is also given in thought. Though this is the case, namely that in theoretical practice, we remain within the confines of thought/concepts/theoretical methods and never reach the real that is outside of thought, Althusser claims that there is a very important relation between the object of knowledge that is worked on in theoretical practice and the real object. Here he points out that theoretical practice remains tied to the real object insofar as the object of knowledge is always an object which attempts to approximate the real object, that is, it is only through our conceptual 'work' that we approach the real object (in theoretical practice anyway).

We should pause for a moment here and talk briefly about the Althusserian concept of a 'problematic' as this will further help make

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20 Ibid., 87

21 Althusser and Balibar. 2005, p. 87.

sense of this complex point. A problematic as Althusser understands it is a given historical set or framework of concepts which exist together as a means through which thought grasps its world. These complexes or frameworks of concepts shift and change over time as new modes of theoretical practice arise and old modes drop off (through the theoretical work of transformation). The problematic then, has a kind of independent existence in the same way that practices do and also in the same way that the materiality of the means of production do (as we discussed above): thought pre-exists any given individual's use of its framework in relating to the world and is rather that into which individuals are inserted as it is the given problematic that is handed down to individuals as the mode through which one comes to comprehend one's world. In other words, thought (as material), in its historical specificity and given historical conceptual arraignment, is determinative of one's understand of oneself and one's world. This gets us back to the distinction between ideological and scientific practice.

Returning once more to Badiou with what I have said so far in mind, in characterizing this distinction in Althusser, he writes (and this will act as a frame for what I have to say for the rest of this essay) that if for Althusser, "science is a process of transformation, ideology—insofar as the unconscious comes to constitute itself therein—is a process of repetition"<sup>22</sup> In other words, in ideological theoretical practice, there is, ultimately no work of transformation. The concepts and methods that one uses are those that are 'found' to be in existence. This is to say that in ideology, one never leaves the realm of the existing problematic through which one first comprehends one's world. In ideological practice, one simply and endlessly repeats the use of the concepts one finds in existence in one's relating to the world. There is no 'work' going on here, no transformation, no deepening of the relation between the object of knowledge and the real object. Alternatively, in scientific practice, one interrogates the object of knowledge and (and thereby also the problematic itself) as it has been handed down to one and attempts, through theoretical labor, to transform that object of knowledge (with the goal of deepening the relation between that object and the real object). It is in this act of theoretical transformation that the new becomes possible- in the work of theoretical transformation of the problematic, a new object of knowledge is forged and the old is left behind. It is then, in this way that historical materialism and dialectical materialism are bound together:

.....  
22 Badiou 2012 p. 147.

where historical materialism, in its analysis of the history of social formations, gives us the tools to understand a given problematic (along with the given set of other types of practice), dialectical materialism gives us the tools for marking the distinction between ideological and scientific practice (repetition and transformation) insofar as it allows a window into the specificity of a given conjuncture. In other words, in the founding of the possibility of science as science—or, dialectical materialism—we also have the founding of ideology as ideology. The two are inextricably linked. Here once more is Badiou:

From the definition of DM [Dialectical Materialism] (discipline in which the scientificity of HM [Historical Materialism] is pronounced) we immediately derive that the determining concept of its field is that of science. DM would not be able to exhibit the identity of science in an undecomposable 'seeing': Thus, what comes first is the differential *couple* science-ideology. The object proper to dialectical materialism is the system of pertinent differences that both and at the same time disjoins and joins science and ideology.<sup>23</sup>

Understood this way, what Marxist science as Althusser describes it does is first and foremost, mark the difference between the scientific and the ideological, thereby identifying the ideological as such (and at the same time, the scientific as the scientific), which then in turn, constructs what is determined as ideological to be so for that particular science. Bruno Bosteels, in commenting on this, puts the point this way, "not only is every science dependent on the ideology that serves merely to designate its possible existence, but there is also no discourse known as ideological except through the retroaction of science."<sup>24</sup>

What now of the concerns raised at the beginning of this essay? What can we now say about the worry about the elevation of the role of the intellectual and the claim made by Ranciere that all that Althusser's theory does is privilege the role of theoretical practice at the expense of other forms of practice? Well, in one sense he is correct. It is truly the case (if we are to buy Althusser's conception anyway) that it is theory that can mark the difference between the ideological and the new, but this is by no means leads to the claim that only theory can do this- it can offer a guide, or means through which to examine other forms of practice in order to root out the ways in which those forms are simply bound to

23 Badiou, 2012. p.146.

24 Bosteels, 2011, p. 54.

the problematic in which they arise (and hence ideological). It can also, however, serve to mark those elements of other practices that are not ideological in this way and that instead push toward the work of transformation, both theoretically and practically. It is certainly in this, that theory is as relevant as ever for those who wish to find and/or produce moments wherein social and theoretical transformation is possible.



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