

# Introduction

With this issue of *Crisis and Critique*, we want to celebrate the fiftieth birthday of the publication of Louis Althusser's *Reading Capital* and *For Marx*. The publication of these books marked something close to what one may call an event, both within the French philosophical scene, as well as Marxist thought, or more specifically in Marxist philosophy in general. Setting new standards for the very reading of Marx, they established, maybe for the first time in Europe, what one may call a Marxist philosophy that marked a break with the past (as much with former orthodox ways of reading Marx as well as with the traditional Marxist orthodoxy). Opening up entirely new horizons of how to think and, materially speaking, of how to read Marx's work, by inventing an entirely new way reading, Althusser's project and with it the 1960's in France can legitimately be given the name of an epoch, maybe that of the *Althusserian years* in Marxism, in philosophy and in the thought of emancipatory politics.

This ambitious project embodied both in *Reading Capital* and *For Marx* had a decisive as well as divisive effect in and on the history of political thinking because it proposed one single answer to what appeared to be two separate problems, one being of a political and the other of a philosophical nature. The political problem concerned communist militant practice and its two deviations, sectarianism and dogmatism - the philosophical problem was linked to the theoretico-philosophical stagnation of Marxism, equally entrenched in existential subjectivism on the one hand and a methodological reapplications of a worn down objectivist matrix onto new contents that at the same time had no influence on this very matrix, on the other. In order to simultaneously deal with these two issues, and in bringing together a renewal of the theory of ideology, able to conceive of the limitations of any practice that relies on identifications (of the subject of revolutionary change, for example), and a new presentation of Marx's dialectics as the first theory of history (that remained fundamentally determined by contingency), Althusser and his students did not simply attempt to offer yet another reading of *Capital*, but placed their very own access to this work under the conditions of the historically specific impasses of political agendas, parties and movements and of the philosophical and scientific novelties of their time. The philosophical, political and scientific conjuncture in France, which determined the publication of these two books is profoundly complicated to oversee. Post-War French philosophy was dominated by phenomenology, reactionary appropriations of Hegel, humanism, yet also by rationalist epistemology, the emergence of Lacanian psychoanalysis, and so on. Politically, it was a decade of great and profound political experiments, revolutions,

riots, national-liberation-movements and anti-colonial struggles, partially inspired by the spirit of Maoism. It is under these conditions that *Reading Capital* and *For Marx* emerged and must be situated. Furthermore, his project precisely therefore presented an on-going struggle between philosophy and its conditions, that at the same time made this very philosophical thinking possible - it constantly and paradoxically struggled with its own conditions of possibility (that thereby were also its conditions of impossibility).

Clearly, the philosophical, political and scientific conjuncture today changed drastically after Althusser, one may just think of all the revolutionary attempts and experiments that led to failures or, at least, have become saturated. So, why do we still read *Reading Capital*? Why might one nonetheless claim that there is a persistent actuality to this book such that it seems to persist in the contemporary debates in philosophy, politics, economy, etcetera, transcending the immediate philosophical and political conjunctures in which it was unfolded and by which it was determined?

*Reading Capital* is the first truly collective enterprise in the history of philosophy (of course there have been author couples before and after, famously Marx and Engels, Deleuze and Guattari, Adorno and Horkheimer, and others). Yet, the structure of this very book gives a clear idea of what one may call the Althusserian methodology (that may not be limited to the historico-socio-politico-scientific circumstances in which it emerged). This is why there may be fundamental (and good) reasons for remaining faithful to this very methodology, and thereby maybe even to Althusser himself, working continuously on and elaborating further the philosophical horizon rendered possible by his books. And is this not how Althusser himself understood Marx? Not as a finished stable project, hindering all alteration, a canon to which we dogmatically stick and which only enables us to mechanically repeat his theses. For Althusser, on the contrary, being a Marxist in philosopher equals advancing further the "continent opened up by Marx." The future of Althusser and his legacy depends on the work that remains to be done on this continent of thought. Althusser's philosophical project will live on only if this continent will also include an "Althusserian field or country" rather than an orthodox and scientific, philological department of "Althusserian studies". Having said this, we should bear in mind that there was never such a thing as an "Althusserian school," and most likely there will never be one. This is where, for example, his difference with Lacan resides: Lacan was very interested in formalizing his thought such that it could constitute and immanently

sustain an institutional framework (a society, a school and the field). With Althusser, given the very nature of his project and intervention (intervening philosophically and politically in particular philosophical and political conjunctures), formalization looks almost impossible. Also an institutional framework of "Althusserian Studies" or "Althusserian Society" is equally unimaginable – one only has to think of 'overdetermination' and such a school would immediately be dissolved. Here we encounter the second *invariant of his project*: as a communist, he was an inventor of a new methodology of philosophical thinking, as probably the literally first (in both senses of the term) collective philosopher. This methodology, no matter how naïve and simplistic it may sound at certain points, is nonetheless properly and practically communist.

Having all this in mind, every attempt which proposed to return to *Reading Capital* and *For Marx* today, fifty years after, implies, first of all, that we answer the very Althusserian questions anew from the proper historical and conjunctural perspective of the contemporary situation: what are the political and scientific impasses and novelties conditioning our return (to emancipatory thinking and thus - ultimately - to Marx)? And, finally, in the face of such novelties, what remains new in Marx's magnum opus today? The present issue of *Crisis and Critique* gathers philosophers who work on the "Althusserian Field", in the "Althusserian country" of thought – his students, co-authors of *Reading Capital*, thinkers and scholars who work through and with Althusser's work. The aim is to think of the legacy and contemporary importance of his two monumental books. We are very proud to have these authors in the present issue. Although every philosopher has a different take on the relevance and legacy of his work, they all agree on one fundamental point: on the contemporaneity of Althusser's opus. And that the question of how to determine his contemporaneity may create further divisions, ultimately proves his actuality even further.

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