“In the Beginning was the Thought”. This first line let me weigh completely. Lest my impatient pen proceed too fleetly. Is it the Thought which works, creates, indeed? “In the Beginning was the Power,” I read. Yet, as I write, a warning is suggested. That I the sense may not have fairly tested. The Spirit aids me: now I see the light! In the Beginning was the Act,” I write. (Faust, J.W.von Goethe)

Abstract
Far from disregarding it, Althusserian “theoreticism” is a long detour through the problem of thinking politics. This Chapter focuses on some traces laying on the surface of Lire le Capital, through the references to a few phrases of Goethe’s Faust and its echoes within a Marxist heritage. Signs that indicate on the surface of the writing, the mode in which Althusserian though exceeds the epistemological ground to enhance, through the tension between Theory and Practice, a problematic regarding time, that opens spaces for political thought.

Keywords: Althusser, theoreticism, political practice, theoretical practice, Faust

I. Theoreticism among its limits

In the last page of “Les défauts de l’économie classique. Esquisse du concept de temps historique” in Lire le Capital, Althusser ironically recalls the famous vindication of the greenness of life in opposition to the greyness of theory, in Goethe’s Faust. This elliptical reference introduced by Althusser, reminds us of a large genealogy of philosophical readings (Hegel, Marx, and Lenin, among many others) that suggest a connection between the development of the “theoreticist deviation” and the very possibility of political thought.

Several readers have considered that the political issue in Althusser’s thought is either a kind of belated emergence, or rather a sort of underground project. In discussion with these arguments, I propose the thesis that, if it is possible to speak of an Althusserian problematic, it

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1 “[sous] la condition également idéologique de penser cette distance [entre le concrète empirique et la théorie] comme une distance elle-même empirique, donc comme appartenant au concret lui-même qu’on peut alors se donner le privilège (c’est-à-dire la banalité) de définir comme ce qui est ‘toujours-plus-riche-plus-vivan-que-la –theorie’…” Althusser, 1996, p. 308

will be through the becoming intelligible of how the question of politics (and the problem of political thought) constitutes a paradoxical unit with the so-called “theoretician deviation”. Thus, I understand that under the heavy burden of that name (which, after May 68, not only alludes to a certain theoretical perspective but also involves a political accusation) the central question of the critique of the theory/practice dichotomy is neglected. That is, the critique not only as a condition for the development of more accurate questions about theory, but as a political intervention in the philosophical field as well, through identifying the “proper” Marxist theory of what exceeds the theoretical field itself. Henceforward, Althusser will not get tired of underlining that the singularity of Marxism lies in the complex conjunction between theory and politics. And this is deeply related to the way he conceives the crisis of Marxism: neither a theoretical crisis nor a political one, but the crisis of its complex combination.

The Althusserian bet consists in the paradoxical movement of displacing thought on the liminal space in which theory and politics become united and separated, making their disjointed-unity the structure of his problematic and its improper condition.

The philosophical value of the concept of “detour” has been already pointed out by Althusser himself and by other readers; it includes different movements such as long postponements, brief nods, and exogenous issues placed at the center of more or less homogeneous volumes. Among this diversity of possibilities, the resource to the dramaturgical metaphor offers a detour to explore the scope of materialist dialectics. Whatever dialectical materialism is for Althusser, it will result in a detour in which the theoretical question is overwhelmed by the political problematic which involves subject and time.

It could be said that the invocation of theater pursues the deconstructive effect of making thinkable what the theoretical field tends to leave unthinkable. In this sense, the “theatrical practice” of Brecht responds to a certain materialistic homology with Marx’s theory. Brecht becomes the name of a process of transformation occurring in the theater; a revolution intended neither to eliminate the theater nor to produce any anti-theater. A movement performing on its structure a similar displacement to the one Marxist theory effectively produced in philosophical kampfplatz. Far from seeking the removal of the philosophical or theatrical representations, the materialist position is nothing but walking through the fields of Theatre or Philosophy, assuming that present absence that, behind them, determines their form: politics. The critical movement that connects Brecht “theatrical practice” to Marx’s “theoretical practice” lays in the work of identifying knots of overabundance in the contentious fields of Theor or Philosophy to demonstrate how both of them “exist to suppress politics to which they owe their existence”.6

Hence, Theater should be read not by the virtue of what it says, but seeking that which it makes visible without seeing it itself. This is the way that the elliptical reference to Faust in Lire le Capital, and the broad sequence of philosophical and political evocations that this reference brings with it, should be read. It is inevitable to find there a critical dialogue with the Preface of Philosophy of Right, where Hegel invokes Goethe, referring to absolute knowledge, to assert the primacy of philosophy over religion and art: “When Philosophy paints its grey in grey, one form of life has become old, and by means of grey it cannot be rejuvenated but only known. The owl of Minerva takes its flight only when the shades of night are gathering.” The question at stake is nothing less than the place of Philosophy itself. But, for Althusser, the problem is not resolved with a simple rejection of Hegelian Idealism. It requires action on two fronts, against the omnipotence of the Concept (or Theory) and the assertion of Life (or Praxis), to demonstrate the deep connection between them. Althusserian thought does not, however, proceed through mere denial, but through taking the inherent aporia of a discourse to its extremes. Althusserian theoretical practice works on philosophical discursive matter producing the simultaneous critique of abstract oppositions: “No doubt this proclamation of the exalted status of the super-abundance of ‘life’ and ‘concreteness’, of the superiority of the world’s imagination and the green leaves of action over the poverty of grey theory, contains a serious lesson in intellectual modesty, healthy for the right (presumptuous and dogmatic) ears. But we are also aware of the fact that the concrete and life may be the pretext for facile chatter which serves to mask either apologetic ends (a god, whatever his plumage, is always linear).”

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3 Cfr. Althusser, 2014, p.45; Montag, 2013, pp.5:46
4 That’s the case with “The Piccolo Teatro” Bertolazzi and Brecht. Notes on a materialist theatre located at the center of Pour Marx, which introduces the dramaturgical metaphor in the purist search for a dialectical materialism, opening the path to a conception of non-contemporary time. There, the resource to the materialist theatre introduces, at the same time, the question of political action as a question of the action in history and the status of events. Cfr. Morfino, 2011.
5 Cf. Derrida, 1994
6 “J’ai dit tout a l’heure que dans la philosophie et dans le théâtre, c’est la politique qui parle, mais que sa voix est en générale recouvert.” Althusser, 1997,[1968 ms.], p.549
7 Hegel, 1996, p.xxx
ing his nest with the feathers of the superabundance, i.e. ‘transcendence’ of the ‘concrete’ and ‘life’) or mere intellectual laziness.”

This fragment ironizes against the celebration of practice, understood as immediately grafted into the "concrete life", and as an affirmation of the percipio over the cogito. The phenomenological "inversion" leaves intact the essence of Idealism: the religious complicity between Logos and Being. Althusser identifies it as the core procedure of idealistic Epistemology, the myth of religious reading, intended as an immediate and transparent access throughout things.

The vague reference to Faust gives, nevertheless, a new light to this Althusserian critique of empiricism, in so far as the problem of practice exceeds the theoretical field, and therefore, it warns against the risk of an ideological conception of political practice figured as the specular inversion of the Concept.

In this sense, the development of the Althusserian problematic through several decades can be conceived in terms of a persistent effort to disjoint every form of identification between the “Problem of Knowledge” and the question about politics, recalled in the different disappearances of the religious myth of the state of nature. If this effort has been frequently misunderstood, it is not due to a lack of this topic in Althusser’s work. Instead, it is because of the practical way in which he actually conceives the critical operation of the symptomatic reading, which requires taking position in a field that is already occupied. Hence, it should be said that these "misunderstandings" are not an aberra-


10 Althusser knew this very well, and he was led to considering the formula of the “curvature of the stick” or through irony regarding the “vicissitudes of the comprehension”. Cf. Althusser, 1983

11 “… (a “thought of the outside,” as Foucault put it) in opposition to reflexive, foundational, ontological, or apophatic styles of philosophy.” Balibar, 2003, p.5.

12 Althusser, 1970 [1968] “… si nous pensions ce champ dans la lettre de la métaphore spatiale, comme un espace limité par un autre espace au dehors de lui. Cet autre espace est aussi dans le premier espace, qui le contient comme sa propre dénégation : cet autre espace est le premier espace en personne, qui ne se définit que par la dénégation de ce qu’il exclut en ses propres limites.”
Faust’s references allow us to acknowledge that the concept of philosophy that would be stated by Althusser years later, is already working, in same practical sense, among the pages of *Lire le Capital: that philosophical theories, idealist or materialist, bring in their own adversary.* This idea gathers the most powerful Hegelian heritage against itself, insofar as it conceives materialist dialectics as an activity of thought capable of making visible the contradictory character of the Philosophical terrain. Thus, it is a practice of thinking that, by means of exposing its own tensions, achieves its main thesis: that philosophy has an outside which compromises it as an immanent externality.

At the first part of *Lire le Capital* the substantial reflection on reading, indicates this way towards the outside under the concept of *décalage.* This concept leads the theoretical field to its limits. And in this sense, the elliptical references to Goethe’s *Faust* have a beautiful meaning; they reveal a disadjustment, but not any disadjustment. They exhibit the disadjustment of what it could be conceived as the greatest ideological operation of unification at Modern Age. An operation that is encrypted as humanist epistemology, and consolidates a strategic alliance between the two idealistic forms of Theory and Politics: one characterized by the illusion of cognitive immediacy, and the other by the divine image of free and creative action. Both of them concern the myth of the state of nature as the religious myth of reading. The state of nature is analyzed by Althusser in *Initiation à la philosophie pour les non-philosophes,* a text that has remained unpublished until recently. The myth of Eden is supported by the idea of a fundamental identity between perception, intelligence, and language; a space in which the truth of things, present in the things themselves, could be pulled out by a straight gaze. According to Althusser, Christian Paradise is thus, the typical image of empirism, where the abstract and the concrete match perfectly and without excess. It is the myth of completely satisfied human being, a placed where no working is needed: neither for a living, nor to know. Therefore, Edenic relationships between men are as transparent as those that they build with nature. Conceived as an immediate union of body and soul, human being is guided, following the movement of nature. There is neither conflict nor crime, in Paradise; therefore, there is no need for Right or for Politics.

It is here, at this point, that the symptomatic reading discovers the outside of idealistic modern philosophies, as echoes of the religious myth of the state of nature in which the idealistic discourse invests in a “deep materialist truth”. Althusser points out in the Edenic scene, the recourse to prohibition as the symptom of divine omnipotence, where it finds – paradoxically—its own limits.

Warren Montag has demonstrated how deeply Althusser seeks the hidden excess of the theological siege to philosophy, to discover the symptom of its forbidden surplus: “…interventions were nothing less than acts of theologico-philosophical sabotage, their strange and troubling formulas, the sabots thrown into the machine that produces the cover over the part of the present that we call the future, halting its operation and in doing so breaking the ties that bound us to destiny”. A long battle for the future is fought at the ground of philosophy. It is always a double conflict against theology and positivism. Assuming the emplacement of philosophy in real history, Althusserian problematic stands for its right to exist. Therefore, it can’t consist in suppressing completely the religious memory placed deeply at the history of philosophy. Materialism is a position, not an abstract notion posed against other abstract philosophical concepts. It is the result of an actual activity of identifying the forms of ideological unification in the historically configured philosophical field. This is the sense in which Althusser reads the religious genealogy of idealistic philosophies – from Locke and Rousseau to Kant – supported in the several forms of the state of nature. These idealistic discourses refer, in a displaced form, to the opacity of real existence; this is implied in their persistent effort to restore the imaginary immediacy of social relations. This reading allows us to understand why, when the ascendant bourgeoisie needs to reach masses to constitute its own ideological unification, it produces a mythical discourse that as-

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13 Althusser, 2014, p.95.
14 Published in French in 2014 by the Presses Universitaires de France, thanks to G.M. Goshgarian, with a preface of G. Silbertin Blanc.
15 Prohibition to take the “fruits of the tree of the Good and Evil” whose danger God knows well, but is unable to avoid.
16 In a paper entitled “Althusser and the problem of Eschatology” Montag identifies the religious genealogy of the famous phrase about the last instance, “Ni au premier, ni au dernier instant, l’heure solitaire de la “dernière instance” ne sonne jamais” and shows how the symptomatic reading works in it deconstruction: “In opposition to what Althusser himself called the theological model of expressive causality that dominated Marxist notions of base and superstructure, Althusser’s Economy is an absent cause, a cause nowhere present but in its effects. Before and after, first and last, beginning and end do not apply to the God who exists only in his decrees, who acts by not acting and who arrives by not arriving. It is the occasion of his non-arrival that must be marked and celebrated, the end that does not come, the last that is not last, as if the true end, the end which God is, is not the end, just as the first is not the first. Althusser has played theology against theology, God against God, end against end, heightening the internal contradictions of a field in which both theology and philosophy are detained to produce new effects.” Montag, 2015. My translation.
sumes a polemical form, a controversial texture (to the extent that it is compelled to take account of masses existence, their practical experience and material conditions).

Philosophical discourse is engraved with the mark of a siege: every philosophical theory is beset by its opposite because it reproduces, on its surface, the conflict in which it is externally committed. This “inner externality” - which might be considered close to the lacanian concept of extiracy - concerns political thought itself, and reveals the enrollment of the philosophy in history. Philosophical abstraction becomes active insofar as it is divided within itself; and therefore, philosophical thesis can only be asserted under the paradoxical condition of taking into account its own denial.  

Symptomatical reading implies recognizing this condition as the very rationality of the philosophical abstraction itself, and if this thesis first appears in a “practical state” in Lire le Capital, Althusser will later make it the guiding principle of the materialistic position. It is neither the content of a positive discourse nor a prescriptive regulation over philosophical thinking. It merely aims, instead, to take statement of a fact: the (im)proper condition of philosophical discourse, that deals with a former conflict that is, nevertheless, always present. Althusser does not furnish a prescriptive theory of the power of this sort of ambivalence of concepts, but this inhabits, in a practical sense, his theory of reading which hasn’t stopped of bearing its fruits.

II. Faust reading Althusser

It is well worth remembering that while reading Capital, Althusser identifies the “historicist misunderstanding”, where many philosophical genealogies seem to be tied up, as the primordial strategic location.  And that this quarrel with Historicism swirls around the so-called Althusserian theoreticism, which has been fiercely criticized. But it is this statement which requires the fairest consideration. The problem that emerges over this knot of readings, is the problem of time. The elucidation of this problem not only leads forward to the category of overdetermination as a way of putting into a new field the question of theoretical apodicticity, but also to the concept of a differential temporality that enables political thought. At this point we can see a detour into Spinoza (a theory of history and theory about reading, both of them taking into account the opacity of immediacy) and also into Freud’s theory (the critique over a continuous and homogenous time). Althusser understands that the materialistic concept of History demands a confrontation with the Hegelian notion of Time – in which the essence of History is reflected as such. For Hegel, Historical Time is the reflection in existence of the continuity of the dialectical development of the Idea. The relation between the social totality and its historical existence is a relation with an immediate existence. Therefore, the concept of time implies expressive causality, making existence an emanation of the Essence.

Althusser identifies the central features of Hegelian temporality as the homogeneous continuity of time, and contemporaneity of time (involved in the category of historical Present). By this means, the Hegelian whole has a type of unity in which each element of the whole, whether an economic determination, a political institution or a religious or philosophical form, is never anything more than the presence of the concept to itself at a historically determined moment. This entails that the relational complexity of social practices is restricted to existence in a contemporary present. The status of the spiritual whole despises the effectiveness of the differences between the elements, and that’s why the continuity of time expresses the Presence of the Concept in its positive determinations.  

The ideology of continuity and contemporaneity of time is the hard core of the concurrence between empiricism and idealism, and the consolidation of solidarity between immediate-spontaneous conceptions of practice and theoretical idealism. In the last term, ideologies of the pure Theory or pure Practice (or, of the pure frontier between them) have in common this conception of contemporary and continuous time, which, therefore, supports the specular relation concerning the Theory and the Praxis.  

Althusser, 2014, pp.97-98
Althusser, 1996 [1965], p.303  

17 Idem, p.288
18 Idem, p.276
19 Idem, p.277
20 Idem, p.277
Within this framework, the scarce but powerful phrases of Faust spread among the pages of Marxist tradition, draw a spectrum of nuances faced by Althusser as the main enigma of heritage. And thus, invite to a detour whose itinerary provides a glimpse at the variety of problems that configure its own theoretical conjuncture: Marxism, besieged by humanism and historicism; philosophy besieged by theology and positivism, and science besieged by technocratic thinking and relativism.

Burden and opportunity, the richness of these literary evocations lay in their capacity to reveal the excessive element that besieges Marx readings, that what they bring with them beyond them. This heritage is a dense legacy that inscribes Marx (with the several Marxist readings) into the history of philosophy; neither as an anti-philosophy nor as the recognition of its pure “philosophical condition”, yet as a décalage between readings that desestabilises philosophical ground. An event capable of stating what it is forbidden for Philosophy itself: the question about politics. By means of this movement of the reading, dealing with the contradictions of its own heritage, we may find on the surface of Althusserian writing, the blanks that allude to that which overflows its own theoretician frame. At this point, Faust becomes a reader of Althusser, insofar as it involves a deeply interrogation about time inserted on the core of the “Problem of Knowledge”, that displaces the problem and leads it into an interrogation about the limits of the theory.

Althusser’s references to Faust recall, in some elliptical way, those from Hegel, Marx, Bloch and Lukács.

The phenomenological reading of Lukács finds and underlines in Faust a question about Time that concerns politics. Against the tragic and timeless conception of the instant that characterizes the universe of tragedy, Faust furnishes a conception of the “present instant” as the instant of the acknowledging. Neither a tragic nor a messianic perspective, this reading claims the political sense of the temporality of the “present instant” as a moment which opens itself to the world and that inscribes it in the continuity of time.

Phenomenological and hermeneutical readings have the virtue of leading our gaze toward the end of the second part of Faust, characterized as “the fruition of action”:

I open room for millions there, a dwelling
Not idly sure, but to free toil compelling;
Green fields and fruitful, men and herds at home

Upon the word new-wrested from the foam
Straight-settled on the hill-stregh, piled on hight
By swarming tribes intrepid industry.
Within a Paradise how’er so grim
The flood without May bluster to the brim
(…)
My will from this design not swerveth
The last resolve of human wit
For liberty as life alone deserveth
He daily must conquer it.
(…)
Fain would I see such glad turmoil
With a free people stand on a free soil.
To such a moment past me fleeing
Tarry, I’d cry thou are so fair
(…)
Now in the presage of such lofty bliss
The highest moment I enjoy e’en this.

It is indispensable to think the Althusserian reading not as a simple rejection of phenomenological approaches, but their critique instead. A questioning that aims to capture what appears as an allusion, to get out what insists there, but cannot rightly be thought. Phenomenological reading exhibits the idealistic relationship between time and emanative causality in the Hegelian heritage, as a relationship that works at depoliticizing theory. And that, therefore, forcloes the possibility of thinking its own limits.

The temporality of an absolute and homogeneous presence is, according to Althusser, the principle behind the Hegelian formula according to which no individual can jump over his time. The ontological category of present prohibits all knowledge that brings us to the future...

The inquiry about that excess is actually placed at the final pages of Faust: the moment of the future and the masses, the departure time of solitude. This is the time in which the dichotomy Theory/Praxis has nothing else to offer. At this point, it seems that there is more in Lire le Capital than Althusser himself would have preferred to settle there: that inquiry is “present by absence” in Lire le Capital, under the form of a question about a knowing capable of thinking the future. This kind of thought can-

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25 Goethe, 1912, p.332.
not be a purely theoretical one, but it could be conceived in the conjunction between theoretical practice and non-theoretical practices. The opportunity of putting into shape this question depends on the opportunity of the combination of the theory with that which is not identical or immediate to it.

In the Preface of Philosophy of Right, Hegel states the task of Philosophy (the apprehension of what is, because what is is reason). Philosophy becomes, from then on, an inquisition into the rational, and therefore the apprehension of the real and present. In this sense he submits that every individual is a son of its time, while Philosophy is its time apprehended in concepts. Hence, it would be as foolish to believe that a Philosophy can transcend its present world as to believe that an individual could leap out of his time or “jump over Rhodes”. To recognize reason as the rose in the cross of the present is to conceive clearly the unity of form and content.26

As Althusser has pointed out, this conception of the present constitutes the absolute horizon of all knowing, since it can only be anything but the existence in knowing of the internal principle of the whole. Tomorrow is in essence forbidden for thought.27

Althusser’s reading take us to Marx own reading of Hegel, in the well-known passage of Der 18te Brumaire des Louis Napoleon...... where a sort of complex temporality arises: “The social revolution of the nineteenth century cannot draw its poetry from the past, it can only draw it from the future. It cannot start upon its work before it has stricken off all superstition concerning the past. Former revolutions required historic reminiscence in order to intoxicate themselves with their own issues. The revolution of the nineteenth century must let the dead bury their dead in order to arrive at its own issue. With the former, the phrase surpasses the substance; with this one the substance surpasses the phrase.”28

The core question rises among the Hegelian notion of time, as an Absolut Present, and that one which Althusser reads in Marx. It is within the spectrum opened by this difference of temporalities where the question of politics starts to take shape.

The ontological category of the Hegelian present prevents any anticipation of thought, any knowing that deals with the future. At this point we understand why Althusser affirms that no Hegelian politics is possible, and that, in fact, there has never been a Hegelian politician.29

This quotation of Lire le Capital, about the lack of a hegelian politician alludes to the problem of political thought placed in the liminal space of theory. This liminal space cannot be considered by a Philosophy of the adjustment between substance and phrase. Moreover, we are led to think that this kind of philosophy finds its own task on the effort of resisting any décalage between substance and phrase.

This will be the great challenge for the materialist philosophical position: to give rise to a concept of time from the very deconstruction of continuous/contemporary time. This task would only be possible by assuming seriously the imaginary “problem of individual in history”30 and developing instead the accurate concept of political practice; this is to say, to identify its difference with theoretical practice. The future of Marxist dialectical materialism depends on it, Althusser repeats this frequently. But, this means that it should be conceivable a sort of philosophical “necessity” capable of opening its own “inner space” to such a “knowing of the future”.

Can we guess, following Althusser, where could we find that “knowing of the future”? Could we consider it a “knowing”, in the strict sense of the term?

We can risk a thesis, searching – as Althusser would say- twenty pages forward: that kind of knowing claims for a political thinking. Not a theory about politics, but the political reading of an actual conjuncture: “...the analysis of the structure of a conjuncture, the displacements and condensations of its contradictions and their paradoxical unity, all of which are the very existence of that ‘current situation’ which political action was to transform, in the strongest sense of the word, between February and October, 1917.”31

Against the speculative thesis that conceives the concrete and the singular of a situation, as the phenomena in which an aprioristic necessity expressed itself, the political thought manages to consider the contradictory unity of an actual conjuncture. Far from idealist theo-
ries this singular kind of knowing is a knowing of the singular. A knowing of revolutionary practice, placed within the liminal space of theoretical field, and performed while thinking the limits: "...about the practice of the class struggle, in other words, about what makes it possible to act on History from within the sole history present, about what is specific in the contradiction and in the dialectic, about the specific difference of the contradiction which quite simply allows us, not to demonstrate or explain the 'inevitable' revolutions post festum, but to 'make' them in our unique present, or, as Marx profoundly formulated it, to make the dialectic into a revolutionary method, rather than the theory of the fait accompli." 32

III. A few words to jump out of the train

The simultaneous battle against both the empiricist and idealist forms of continuous and contemporary time is, at last, a conflict within the religious images of genesis: the idealistic unity between logical order and historical order which reminds us the Edenic nostalgia of immediacy of life. Althusser led us to understand that it will be only by questioning these ideologies of Time interwoven into Epistemology, that it will be possible a political thought; and thus, to consider political practice as a real practice.

Between the green and the gray, “fate” of the materialistic dialectics is played. It is only after having settled this confusion, that the distance to think politics as a practice of this world can be opened, and rooted out of the domains of “the small god of the world” image of the great God.

“Althusserian theoreticism” can be considered, hence, as an immense theoretical effort to pursue the implications of the aporia called theoretical practice, to its limits; that is, towards that impossible place of the current instant. There lays the great challenge of the materialist position: the radical adventure of thinking politics.

Reading Althusser is not about elucidating his psychological intentions, and has nothing to do with exegetical pleasure. It responds to the political urgency of (re)commencing a thought that has obligated itself to elude the dichotomies with which, finally, the 20th century has been entangled.

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