

The Concept of Structural Causality in Althusser

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Abstract:

Althusser claims that 'the immense theoretical revolution of Marx' is the concept of structural causality. Although only drafted through a series of terms such as *Verbindung*, *Gliederung*, or *Darstellung*, for Althusser this concept lies at the core of *Reading Capital*. The aim of this paper is to show that Althusser's interpretation of Marx is grounded on a conception of causality whose philosophical structure depends on three different thesis: the constitutiveness of relations, the contingency of relations, and the plural temporality.

Keywords:

structural causality, ontology of relations, time, Althusser, Marx

1. The definition of the concept of structural causality

If there is a place in which Althusser attempted to formulate a theory of causality, it is certainly 'The Object of *Capital*', where his reflections on the dialectic in 'Contradiction and Overdetermination' and 'On the Materialist Dialectic' converge. The question at the center of the text is the novelty Marx introduces in *Capital* in relation to the discourse of political economy: if political economy poses economic phenomena within a smooth, homogenous space, Marx's theory poses economic phenomena 'in a *region* determined by a regional structure and itself inscribed in a site defined by a global structure'.¹ We find, in Althusser's spatial metaphor, an attempt to think the complex and deep space of the economy inscribed in the complex and deep space of history. Therefore, in order to think economic phenomena it is necessary to construct the concept of structure that produces them, i.e. the unity of productive forces and relations of production, which however cannot be defined outside of the global structure of the mode of production. This means not only that economic phenomena are not given, but also that a model of linear causality can not even be applied to them; 'to build the rigorous discourse of the theory of history and the theory of political economy' it is necessary

1 Althusser 1965b, p. 202 (397, 253). TN: Morfino's citations are to the French text and Italian translation. In the footnotes, the first page number refers to Ben Brewster's English translation, the first number in parenthesis to the French edition, and the second number in parenthesis to the Italian translation. I have occasionally altered Brewster's translation for reasons of syntax structure or clarity, indicating it each time and providing comments on these changes when necessary. I have changed all of Brewster's references to 'effectivity' to 'efficacy', and unless otherwise noted, all italics in the quotes are Althusser's.

to produce a new philosophical concept. In other words, the *coupure* with which Marx inaugurates the new scientific space of the economy and history requires a philosophical revolution, the production of a new concept of causality. Althusser thus formulates the fundamental epistemological problem posed by the redefinition of the object of political economy as follows:

*By means of what concept or which conceptual ensemble is it possible to think the determination of the elements of a structure, and the structural relations between those elements, and all the effects of those relations, by the efficacy of that structure? And, a fortiori, by means of what concept or which conceptual ensemble is it possible to think the determination of a subordinate structure by a dominant structure? In other words, how is it possible to define the concept of a structural causality?*²

However, Marx himself does not pose this problem as a problem—he did not produce the concept of the efficacy of a structure on its elements. Instead, ‘he set out to solve it practically in the absence of its concept, with extraordinary ingenuity, but without completely avoiding a relapse into earlier schemas, which were necessarily inadequate to pose and solve this problem’.³ These inadequate schemas are the two systems of concepts produced by modern philosophy in order to think causality: the mechanistic model of Cartesian origin and the expressive model of Leibnizian origin. If the first could not express the efficacy of the whole on all its elements ‘except at the cost of extraordinary distortions’,⁴ the second was conceived precisely for this purpose and yet presumes that the nature of the whole is spiritual. Of course, in modern philosophy there would be an author who posed this problem in attempting ‘to outline a first solution’,⁵ namely Spinoza, but ‘as we know, history had buried him in impenetrable darkness’.⁶

Althusser isolates several of Marx’s terms which indicate the attempt to think structural causality: the terms *Beleuchtung* in the 1857 *Introduction to Political Economy* and above all *Darstellung* in *Capital*, but also the metaphors through which the capitalist system thinks: *Triebwerk*,

2 Althusser 1965b, p. 205-206 (401, 256). Translation modified.

3 Althusser 1965b, p. 207 (403, 257).

4 Althusser 1965b, p. 206 (402, 257).

5 Althusser 1965b, p. 207 (403, 257).

6 Althusser 1965b, p. 207 (403, 257).

Mechanismus, Getriebe, and social metabolism. No less important in this sense are the terms *Verbindung* and *Gliederung*.

We will return to these Marxian terms, but for the moment we should turn our eyes to the concepts through which Althusser characterizes in his own terms, beyond those of Marx, the efficacy of a structure: the concept of overdetermination that Althusser himself declares to be taken on loan from psychoanalysis, the concept of metonymic causality coined by Miller, the concept of immanent cause in the Spinozist sense, and finally the concept of a theatre without an author.

Althusser broadly insisted on the concept of overdetermination in two essays, published in *For Marx*, on the theme of the specificity of Marxist contradiction with respect to Hegelian contradiction: what the concept points towards is precisely the type of specific determination implied by the structure in dominance of a complex totality. The concept of metonymic causality in this sense seems to suggest exactly the logic displayed in ‘On the Materialist Dialectic’ of condensation [*condensation*] and displacement [*déplacement*] between the principle contradiction and the secondary contradictions, and between the principle and secondary aspects of the contradiction.⁷ Concerning this logic, we must not be fooled by the appearance of an arbitrary succession of dominations: because [...] the nodality of the development (the specific phases), and the specific nodality of the structure of each phase are the very existence and reality of the complex process.⁸

For this reason ‘*the absence of the cause [...] of the structure on its effects is not the result of the exteriority of the structure with respect to economic phenomena; on the contrary, it is the form of the interiority of the structure, as a structure, in its effects*’.⁹ This implies that the effects are not an object, an element, or a space ‘on which the structure arrives to imprint its mark [*sa marque*]’.¹⁰ On this point, Spinoza’s concept of immanent causality is helpful. The existence of the structure consists in its

7 TN: For a helpful discussion of metonymy and metonymic causality, cf. the conceptual entry in the *Cahiers pour l’Analyse* project, available online: <http://cahiers.kingston.ac.uk/concepts/metaphor-and-metonymy.html>.

8 Althusser 1963, p. 177 (217, 185). Translation modified. TN: As with the citation of ‘The Object of *Capital*’, I have referenced Brewster’s English translation first, with the pagination French original and Italian translation in parentheses.

9 Althusser 1965b, p. 208 (405, 258). Translation modified.

10 Althusser 1965b, p. 208 (405, 258). Translation modified.

effects, that is, the structure is 'in short only a specific combination of its own elements': it is nothing 'outside of its effects'.¹¹ In fact the concept of the theatre without an author indicates 'the mode of existence of the stage direction [*mise en scène*], of 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, first of all, they are forced to be its actors, caught by the constraints of a script whose authors they cannot be'.¹²

What does Althusser mean with these references? In the first place he intends to clear the field of several ambiguities Marx had himself generated by understanding structure as an essential interiority contrasted to a phenomenal exteriority,¹³ and, as a consequence, the path of knowledge as a transition from an abstract essential to a concrete existential (the passage from Volume 1 to Volume 3 of *Capital*). Actually, this movement never takes leave of abstraction, never exits from the concept, but passes from the concept of the structure and its more general effects to the concepts of its particular effects. The border between the concept and the existence of things is in reality insurmountable [*infranchissable*], because it cannot be a frontier, because there is no common homogenous space (spiritual or real) between the abstract of the concept of a thing and the empirical concrete of this thing which could authorize the use of the concept of a frontier.¹⁴

According to Althusser, the two models of causality provided by modern philosophy, transitive and expressive, end up reintroducing the conceptual couple essence and phenomenon:

These two models could quite easily find common ground in the classical opposition between *phenomenon and essence*. The ambiguity of these concepts is indeed obvious: the essence does refer to the phenomenon, but at the same time secretly to the *inessential*. The phenomenon does refer to the essence of which it can be the manifestation and expression, but at the same time, and secretly, it refers to what appears to be an empirical subject, to perception, and therefore to the empirical

11 Althusser 1965b, p. 209 (405, 258).

12 Althusser 1965b, p. 213 (411, 262).

13 Althusser cites a celebrated passage of Marx in which he affirms that 'every science would be superfluous if the appearance and essence of things were confused.' Cf. Althusser 1965b, p. 209 (406, 259).

14 Althusser 1965b, p. 210 (407, 259). Translation modified.

state of mind of a possible empirical subject.¹⁵

In this way, modern philosophy ends up accumulating these equivocal determinations in the real itself, localizing in the real a distinction between an essential interiority and a phenomenal exteriority, thereby defining the real as '*a reality at two levels*'.¹⁶

2. Causality in *Capital*

Althusser identifies a certain number of terms in Marx which constitute if not the presence of the concept of structural causality, at least the symptom of its research: *Verbindung*, *Gliederung*, and *Darstellung*.

Althusser systematically translates the term *Verbindung* with the French term *combinaison*. *Verbindung* is drawn from the first section of *Capital*/Volume 2, Chapter 1:

Whatever the social form of production, laborers and means of production always remain factors of it. But in a state of separation from each other either of these factors can be such only potentially. For production to go on at all they must combine. The *specific manner* (*die besondere Art und Weise*) in which this combination is accomplished distinguishes the different economic epochs of the structure of society from one another.¹⁷

Althusser makes use of the concept *Verbindung* in 'From *Capital* to Marx's Philosophy', first by giving an account of thought as a determinate mode of the production of knowledge, constituted by 'a structure that combines [*Verbindung*] the type of object (raw material) on which it labors, the theoretical *means of production* available (its theory, its method, and its technique, experimental or otherwise), and the historical relations (theoretical, ideological, and social at the same time) in which it produces'.¹⁸ And yet, in the same text Althusser returns to the term *Verbindung* in order to define the combination in different practices (economic, political,

15 Althusser 1965b, p. 210 (407, 260).

16 Althusser 1965b, p. 212 (409, 261).

17 Cited by Althusser in Althusser 1965b, p. 193-194 (386, 247). Cf. also Balibar 1965.

18 Althusser 1965a, p. 44 (42, 40). Translation modified. TN: I have adopted the same practice for citing Althusser's other essay in *Reading Capital*, referencing Brewster's English translation first, and the French original and Italian translation in parenthesis.

scientific, theoretical-philosophical) of 'the different natures of the objects to which they apply, of their means of production and of the relations within which they produce'.¹⁹

In 'The Object of *Capital*' the term *Verbindung* returns to center stage with respect to the relations of production in the chapter dedicated to Marx's critique of political economy. Here Althusser underlines how the relations of production are not reducible to the model of intersubjectivity:

[...] the *relations of production* necessarily imply relations between men and things, such that the relations between men and men are defined by the precise relations existing between men and the material elements of the production.²⁰

Marx conceives the relations of production as a *Verbindung*, or, returning to the terms of the *1857 Introduction*, as a *distribution*, which consists in 'a certain *attribution* of the means of production to the agents of production, in a certain regular proportion fixed between, on one hand, the means of production and, on the other, the agents of production'.²¹ Althusser finds even further distinctions in Marx: on the side of the means of production, the distinction between the object and the instruments of production, on the side of the agents, between the immediate agents of production and the owners of the means of production:

By combining or *inter-relating* these different elements, labor power, direct laborers, masters who are not direct laborers, object of production, instruments of production, etc. – we reach a definition of the different *modes of production* which have existed and can exist in human history.²²

This *Verbindung* of the preexisting determinate elements 'would sincerely and truly constitute a *combinatory*'.²³ *Verbindung* understood as a combinatorial, therefore. However, all of this is in the first edition of *Reading Capital*, in 1965. In the second edition of 1968, Althusser fine tunes his

19 Althusser 1965a, p. 63 (64, 54).

20 Althusser 1965b, p. 193 (385, 246).

21 Althusser 1965b, p. 193 (386, 247).

22 Althusser 1965b, p. 194 (388, 248).

23 Althusser 1965b, p. 645. TN: Morfino refers to the 'Variantes de la première édition', included at the end of the French original cited in the bibliography.

analysis, affirming that this operation 'might make us think of a *combinatory*', but that the specific nature of the relations put into play from these different combinations define and strictly limit the field:

To obtain the different modes of production these different elements do have to be combined, but by using *specific modes of combination* or "*Verbindungen*" which are only meaningful in the peculiar nature of the *result* of the combinatorial.²⁴

We will return to this point, but for now it is sufficient to notice Althusser's affirmation that the concept of *Verbindung* constitutes the foundation of the refutation of historicism, 'since the Marxist concept of history depends on the principle of the variation of the forms of this "combination"'.²⁵

We come to the second term, *Gliederung*, which Althusser translates as 'articulated-hierarchy' or 'structure'. It is drawn from the *1857 Introduction*, and Althusser cites two passages from Marx:

It is not a matter of the connection established historically between the economic relations in the succession of different forms of society. Still less of their order of succession "in the Idea" (Proudhon, in an obscure conception of historical movement) ... but of their articulated hierarchy [*Gliederung*] within modern bourgeois society.²⁶

In its most banal conception, distribution appears as the distribution of products, and thus as further away from and quasi-independent of production. But before distribution is distribution of the product, it is: (1) the distribution of instruments of production, and (2) what is a further definition of the same relationship, the distribution of the members of society into the different kinds of production (subsumption of the individuals under determinate relations of production). The distribution of the product is obviously only the result of this distribution which is included within the production process itself and determines the *articulation of production* [*Gliederung*].²⁷

24 Althusser 1965b, p. 195 (388, 248).

25 Althusser 1965b, p. 195 (388, 248).

26 Cited by Althusser in Althusser 1965b, p. 109 (282, 59).

27 Cited by Althusser in Althusser 1965b, p. 193 (386, 241).

Althusser makes use of the concept of *Gliederung* in section 13 of 'From *Capital* to Marx's Philosophy' concerning the relation of the logical and historical order of *Capital*, between which it is not possible to stabilize a biunivocal correspondence.²⁸ Such a relationship is, in fact, an imaginary problem. What must be produced instead is the *Gliederung*, that 'articulated-thought-totality' which allows the 'real *Gliederung*' to be thought, that 'real articulated-totality, that constitutes the existence of bourgeois society'.²⁹ Althusser adds:

The order in which the thought *Gliederung* is produced is a specific order, precisely the order of the theoretical *analysis* Marx performed in *Capital*, the order of the relation and the "synthesis" of the concepts necessary for the production of a thought-whole, a thought-concrete, the theory of *Capital*. The order in which these concepts are articulated in the analysis is the order of Marx's scientific proof: it has no direct, one-to-one relationship with the order in which any particular category may have appeared in history.³⁰

In section 19 Althusser returns to the question in order to declare the refutation of every origin myth. Genesis and result should be distinguished—they cannot be thought together, because they are two different problems. Althusser writes:

Marx [...] clearly says that we must elucidate the knowledge of *Gliederung* (the articulated, hierarchical, systematic combination) of *contemporary* society if we are to reach an understanding of earlier forms, and therefore of the most primitive forms. His famous remark that 'the anatomy of a man holds the key to the anatomy of the ape', of course, does not say anything but this: correctly understood, it coincides with the other remark in the *Introduction* that it is neither the historical genesis of the categories nor their combination in earlier forms that enables us to understand them, but the system of their combination in contemporary society that opens the way to an understanding of past formations, by giving us the concept of the *variation* of this combination.³¹

28 TN: Brewster translates *biunivoque* as 'one-to-one', which helpfully captures its sense. The mathematical term biunivocal means a univocal correspondence between orders whose inverse correspondence is also univocal.

29 Althusser 1965a, p. 51 (50, 45).

30 Althusser 1965a, p. 51 (50, 45-46). Translation modified. TN: Brewster renders *liaison* literally as 'liaison', but I have opted to follow the Italian translation and the more common word 'relation'.

31 Althusser 1965a, p. 69 (72, 58-59). Translation modified.

In the forms of the order of scientific discourse there is indeed a diachrony, 'a regular order of appearance and disappearance',³² but this does not correspond to a historical becoming; instead the diachrony of a 'basic synchrony',³³ 'the forms of the order of the discourse of the proof are simply the development of the "*Gliederung*", of the hierarchized combination of the concepts in the *system* itself'.³⁴

In 'The Object of *Capital*' Althusser returns precisely to this problem, in conjunction with the chapter dedicated to an 'Outline for a Concept of Historical Time'. In clarifying the difference of the whole understood in the Hegelian sense from the Marxist sense, Althusser affirms, along with Marx in *The Poverty of Philosophy*, that 'the single logical formula of movement, of sequence, of time' cannot explain 'the body of society, in which all the economic relations coexist simultaneously and support one alongside the others'.³⁵ It is the specific structure of the totality that permits thinking the coexistence of its members and its constitutive relations. And this structure is a *Gliederung*, as Marx says in the *1857 Introduction*: it is 'the structure of an organic hierarchized whole',³⁶ 'the coexistence of limbs [*membres*] and their relations in the whole is governed by the order of a dominant structure which introduces a specific order into the articulation [*Gliederung*] of the limbs [*membres*] and their relations'.³⁷

We come to the third term, *Darstellung*, which is taken from *Capital*. Althusser evokes the term *Darstellung* for the first time in section 8 of 'From *Capital* to Marx's Philosophy' when he introduces the idea of symptomatic reading. This is the practice of reading Marx 'arrived at in order to read the illegible in Smith', but it is also the practice of reading through which Althusser himself identifies in Marx the answer to a problem he did not pose, 'an answer that Marx only succeeds in formulating on condition of multiplying the images required to render it the answer of the *Darstellung* and its avatars'.³⁸ What Marx does not manage to formulate is 'the

32 Althusser 1965a, p. 73 (77, 61).

33 Althusser 1965a, p. 73 (77, 61).

34 Althusser 1965a, p. 73 (77, 62).

35 Cited by Althusser in Althusser 1965b, p. 109 (281-282, 193). Translation modified. TN: The adjective 'economic' is missing from Brewster's translation, but is present in the French.

36 Althusser 1965a, p. 109 (282, 186).

37 Althusser 1965a, p. 109 (282, 186).

38 Althusser 1965a, p. 30 (24, 29-30).

concept of the efficacy of a structure on its elements'.³⁹The absence of this concept-word, then, is 'the invisible/visible, absent/present keystone of his whole work':⁴⁰

[...] if Marx does "play" so much with Hegelian formulas in certain passages, this game is not just elegance or derision, but, in a strong sense, *the action of a real drama*, in which old concepts desperately play the role of something absent which is nameless, in order to call it onto the stage in person – whereas they only "produce" its presence in their failures, in the dislocation between the characters and their roles.⁴¹

This term returns to center stage in the final chapter of 'The Object of *Capital*', 'Marx's Immense Theoretical Revolution'. For Althusser, *Darstellung* is the key epistemological concept of the entire Marxist theory of value. *Darstellung* is 'the concept whose object is precisely to designate the mode of *presence* of the structure in its *effects*, and therefore to designate structural causality in itself'.⁴² In the first edition of 1965 we find a long digression on the term *Darstellung* that is subsequently eliminated:

Moreover, in German "*Darstellung*" means *theatrical representation*, but the figure of theatrical representation adheres immediately to the sense brought by the word, which means "presentation", "exposition", and in its deepest roots, "position of presence", a visible and offered presence. To express its specific nuance, it can be instructive to oppose "*Darstellung*" to "*Vorstellung*". In *Vorstellung*, there is a position, but it is one that presents itself before, which presupposes, therefore, something that remains *behind* this pre-position [*pré-position*], something that is *represented* by that which was in front, by its emissary: the *Vorstellung*. In *Darstellung*, *on the contrary*, *there is nothing behind*: the same thing is here, "*there*", offered in the position of presence. The entire text of a theatrical *pièce* is here as such, offered in the presence of the representation (the *Darstellung*), but the presence of the *pièce* in its entirety is not exhausted in the immediacy of gestures or speeches of such a character: we "know" that it is the presence of a complete whole [*tout achevé*], that resides in each moment and each character and all the rela-

39 Althusser 1965a, p. 30 (24, 29-30). Translation modified.

40 Althusser 1965a, p. 31 (25, 30).

41 Althusser 1965a, p. 31 (25, 30). Translation modified. TN: Brewster translates *élégance* as 'raffishness', and *dérision* as 'sarcasm'; I have chosen to translate them literally.

42 Althusser 1965b, p. 208 (404, 258).

tionships between the characters given in their personal presence; but, however, it cannot be known, as the presence itself of the whole, as the latent structure of the whole, *if it is only in the whole*; and only sensed in every element and in every role. It is for this reason that, *according to the level at which it is situated*, we can say that "*Darstellung*" is the concept of the presence of the structure in its effects, of the modification of the effects through of the *efficacy of an absence*. It is in this sense that Rancière has utilized the *decisive* concept of "*metonymic causality*", elaborated with profundity by Miller last year, in the course of our seminar on Lacan. I believe that, understood as the concept of the *efficacy of an absent cause*, this concept is wonderfully useful for designating the absence in person of the structure in the effects considered from the close perspective [*perspective rasante*] of their existence. But we must insist on the other aspect of the phenomenon, that of the *presence*, of the immanence of the cause in its effects, in other words of the *existence of the structure* in its effects.⁴³

Finally, after recalling the different metaphors with which Marx attempts to think the efficacy of a structure on its effects, Althusser returns to that 'highly symptomatic'⁴⁴ term *Darstellung* in order to place it together with the term 'machinery' [*machinerie*]: the *Darstellung* identifies the existence of this *machinerie* in its effects.

3. The schema of causality

The reference to Marxian terms seems to bring with it some ambiguities, as Althusser himself underlines: understanding *Verbindung* and *Gliederung* in the sense of a combinatory of elements, emphasizing in *Darstellung* the aspect of the efficacy of an absence. In order to bring out the novelty of Althusser's concept with clarity, it is necessary to highlight the deep philosophical fabric on which it is built. Such a fabric can only materialize in the integration of the following three theses:

- the thesis of the constitutiveness of relations, or the primacy of the relation over the elements;
- the thesis of the contingency of relations;
- finally, the thesis of plural temporality.

43 Althusser 1965b, p. 646. TN: Morfino refers to the 'Variantes de la première édition,' included at the end of the French original cited in the bibliography.

44 Althusser 1965b, p. 213 (411, 262).

In my view, it is only by thinking these three theses together that it is possible to define the Althusserian schema of causality.

To begin, let's take the first thesis, the constitutiveness of relations. Althusser repeatedly insists on the fact that structure does not exist without elements, and that the elements and the space in which they are arranged cannot exist without the structure.⁴⁵ Surely, the translation of the term *Verbindung* with combination and a reading of this in terms of a combinatorial of elements could make one think of a preexistence of the elements, which then enter into different relations in different modes of production. The correction Althusser introduces in the second edition of *Reading Capital* seems aimed at avoiding the risk of thinking of invariable elements combined in different ways in different modes of production. Rather, it is necessary to think of the specific *Verbindungen* that have meaning only as a result of the combinatorial.

But what are the elements that enter into relation? Althusser affirms that 'all of production, according to Marx, is characterized by two indissociable elements: the *labor process*, which deals with the transformations man inflicts on natural materials in order to make use-values out of them, and the *social relations of production* beneath whose determination this labor process is executed'.⁴⁶

The first element can in turn be broken into three simple elements (labor power, object of labor, and technical means), the analysis of which reveals two decisive features: on the one hand the material nature of the conditions of the labor process, and on the other the dominant role of the means of production in the process. The first feature brings out, against the idealism of labor, the material conditions of the process that Marx thinks for the capitalist mode of production through the distinction between variable and constant capital, on one hand, and Sector 1 and Sector 2 of production, on the other. The second feature affirms the dominance of the instruments of labor in the process, which permits a fixing of 'the differential mode of unity existing between "man and nature" and the degree of variation in that unity'.⁴⁷

This first element cannot be thought unless it is thought together

45 TN: I have purposefully translated "structure" in this passage both with and without a definite article. While an English presentation of the language of structure sometimes benefits from the definite article, it should be kept in mind that the concept of structure outlined here resists an invariantly understood definition, and that the same caveat applies to the concept of encounter.

46 Althusser 1965b, p. 188 (379, 243).

47 Althusser 1965b, p. 192 (384, 246).

with the second: the relations of production, i.e., the social conditions of the process of production. These consist in a specific *Verbindung* 'within a certain regular proportion fixed between on the one side, the means of production and, on the other, the agents of production',⁴⁸ and this gives rise to a determinate structure of production, a *Gliederung*. In Marx's analysis these elements are further split, on the side of the means of production, into object and means of production, and on the side of the agents, into immediate and non-immediate agents: 'The application of the specific relations to the different distributions of the elements present produces a limited number of formations which constitute the relations of production of the defined modes of production'.⁴⁹

The mode of production is therefore a relational unity, a system man-nature, in which, however, the two terms always and only exist inside a relational structure constituted in its specificity by two dominant relations: the relation between labor and object established by the means of production, and the relation between agents and means of production established by the relations of production. However, the specific combination of the elements is not defined as only economic:

[...] the definition of the concept of the relations of production of a determinate mode of production—Althusser adds—necessarily passes through the definition of the concept of the totality of different levels in society and their peculiar type of articulation (i.e. their efficacy).⁵⁰

Therefore, the elements do not preexist the relation in which they are combined, and in a strict sense they only have an existence as such inside the complex relation of the social whole. Not only is labor not given as a creative force outside of the specific relation with technical means in determinate material conditions inside of specific social relations—the economic is not even given as a universal element that is possible to invariably identify in the different modes of production:

[...] the identification of the economic passes through *the construction of its concept*, that presupposes, to be constructed, the definition of the specific existence and articulation of the different levels of the structure of the whole, such as these are necessarily implied by the

48 Althusser 1965b, p. 193 (386, 247).

49 Althusser 1965b, p. 195 (388, 248).

50 Althusser 1965b, p. 196 (390, 249). Translation modified.

structure of the mode of production that is considered.⁵¹

In this sense, the relations are constitutive of the elements insofar as they are the *Träger* (supports) of established places and functions '[of the] *relations of production* [and] political and ideological social relations'.⁵²

We can now take the second thesis. The first thesis, which for brevity we can call the thesis of the primacy of the relation over the elements, defines the complexity of a social totality. This is not an expressive relationality, in which each relation expresses all of the others in a homogenous space, but a structural relationality that defines a complex, deep, and stratified social space.

Althusser thinks this first thesis together with a second that we have called the thesis of the contingency of relations. In section 12 of 'From *Capital* to Marx's Philosophy', referring to the concepts that permit the construction of a history of theoretical practice, Althusser underlines how the history of the sciences is 'profoundly steeped in the ideology of Enlightenment philosophy, i.e. in a teleological and therefore idealistic rationalism'.⁵³ The history of reason is not the continuous and linear development of an origin in which it was present *en germe*: 'We know that this type of history and rationality is merely the effect of the retrospective illusion of a given historical result which writes its history in the "future anterior", and which therefore thinks its origin as the anticipation of its end'.⁵⁴ The real history of the development of knowledge is in reality punctuated by 'radical discontinuities' and 'deep reworkings'. 'With this', Althusser concludes,

we are obliged to renounce every teleology of reason and to conceive of the historical relation between a result and its conditions as a relation of production, and not of expression, and therefore as what, in a phrase that is a blasphemy for the classical system of categories and demands the *replacement* of those categories themselves, we can call the *necessity of contingency*.⁵⁵

51 Althusser 1965b, p. 197 (391, 249-250).

52 Althusser 1965b, p. 199 (393, 251). Translation modified.

53 Althusser 1965a, p. 47 (45, 42).

54 Althusser 1965a, p. 47 (45, 42).

55 Althusser 1965a, p. 48 (46, 43). Translation modified. TN: Brewster translates *un mot qui jure* as 'clashes with' rather than 'blasphemy'.

The decisive question is that of the relation of the result with its conditions. Even Hegel, in the *Science of Logic*, speaks of the 'necessity of contingency', but he does so in order to indicate the transcendental structure of the becoming subject of substance: the result is the result of its becoming. Althusser returns to the question in section 19, affirming that it is 'constitutive of Marx's theory, *precisely in the domain of the theory of history*':⁵⁶

When Marx studied modern bourgeois society, he adopted a paradoxical attitude. He first conceived that existing society as a historical *result*, i.e., as a result produced by a history. Naturally, this seems to commit us to a Hegelian conception in which the result is conceived as a result inseparable from its genesis, to the point where it is necessary to conceive of it as "the result of its becoming".⁵⁷

Marx takes an entirely different path: Marx's object of study is indeed bourgeois society as a historical result, and yet its intelligence does not pass through its genesis, but through the 'theory of the "body", i.e. of the *actual structure of society*, without its genesis intervening in any way whatsoever'.⁵⁸ The question of genesis and structure is therefore two distinct problems that should not be confused. The theory of bourgeois society as a historical result explains the genesis but not the contemporary structure, which is the object of a theory 'of the mechanism that produces the "*society effect*" peculiar to the capitalist mode of production'.⁵⁹ And returning to the question of the history of knowledge, Althusser affirms: 'we consider the result without its becoming, at the cost of making us accused of an lese-Hegelianism or lese-geneticism'.⁶⁰ In other words, the relational structure of a knowledge or a society is not contained in the history of its linear and gradual development.

Of course, the question returns in the chapter of 'The Object of *Capital*' dedicated to historicism. Here Althusser constructs, through several passages from Marx's *1857 Introduction* and *Capital*, a 'limit form'

56 Althusser 1965a, p. 69 (73, 59).

57 Althusser 1965a, p. 69 (73, 59).

58 Althusser 1965a, p. 70 (73, 59). Translation modified.

59 Althusser 1965a, p. 71 (74, 60).

60 Althusser 1965a, p. 72 (76, 61). TN: The term 'lese' derives from the French verb *léser*, meaning 'to wrong' or 'to do wrong by'. One non-verbal form is the noun *lése-majesté* signifying a crime, often high treason, against a sovereign power. Althusser adopts *lése* as an adjective, and I have chosen to follow Brewster's literal rendition despite its relative rarity in modern colloquial English.

of Marxist historicism, a limit form that consists precisely in thinking a perfect reciprocity of genesis and structure, becoming and result, logic and history:

We need only take one more step in the logic of absolute knowledge, think the development of history which culminates and is fulfilled in the present of a science identical with consciousness, and reflect this result in a justified retrospection, to be able to conceive all economic (or any other) history as the development, in the Hegelian sense, of a simple primitive, original form, e.g. value, immediately present in commodities, and to read *Capital* as a *logico-historical deduction* of all the economic categories from one original category, the category of value, or even the category of *labor*. Given this, the method of exposition in *Capital* would coincide with the speculative genesis of the concept. And this speculative genesis of the concept is identical with the genesis of the real concrete itself, i.e. with the process of empirical history.⁶¹

However, if this disarticulation of genesis and result is clear in *Reading Capital*, it is less clear how the category of genesis should be reformulated. And here a note from September 1966 with the title 'On Genesis', in which we find some important indications, comes to our aid:

In the schema of the "theory of encounter" or theory of "conjunction", which is meant to replace the ideological (religious) category of genesis, there is a place for what can be called linear genealogies.

To take up again, then, the example of the logic of the constitution of the capitalist mode of production in *Capital*:

1. The elements defined by Marx "combine" – I prefer to say (in order to translate the term *Verbindung*) "conjoin" by "taking hold" [*prenant*] in a new structure. This structure cannot be thought, in its appearance, as the effect of a filiation, but as the effect of a conjunction. This new Logic has nothing to do with the linear causality of filiation, nor with Hegelian "dialectical" logic, which only says out loud what is implicitly contained in the logic of linear causality.

2. And yet, each of the elements that come to be combined in the conjunction of the new structure (in this case, of accumulated money-capital, "free" labor-power, that is, labor-power stripped of the instru-

61 Althusser 1965b, p. 139 (319, 207).

ments of labor, technological inventions) is itself, as such, a *product*, an effect.

What is important in Marx's demonstration is that the three elements are not contemporary products of one and the same situation. It is not, in other words, the feudal mode of production that, by itself, and through a providential finality, engenders at the same time the three elements necessary for the new structure to "take hold". Each of these elements has its own "history" or its own genealogy (to take up a concept from Nietzsche that Balibar has used very well for this purpose): the three genealogies are relatively *independent*. We even see Marx show that a single and same element ("free" labor-power) can be produced as the result of completely different genealogies.

Therefore the genealogies of the three elements are independent of one another, and independent (in their co-existence of their respective results) and of the existing structure (the feudal mode of production). Which excludes any possibility of a resurgence of the myth of genesis: the feudal mode of production is not the "father" of the capitalist mode of production in the sense that the latter would be contained "as a seed" in the first.⁶²

Thus, the theory of genesis should be substituted with a theory of encounter. The term *Verbindung*, which was attributed great importance in *Reading Capital*, comes to be translated more with '*conjonction*' (conjunction) than '*combinaison*' (combination), and the elements that enter into this conjunction, that take hold, are themselves in turn the effects of multiple and relatively independent histories. Only *après coup* can they be identified as the elements of a new mode of production, the capitalist one.

This second thesis, which we have called the contingency of relations, becomes intelligible though a third thesis, which I propose to call the thesis of plural temporality. If in fact the theory of genesis necessarily implies a preformationist model that hinges on a linear temporal schema, the theory of encounter has as a necessary base a schema of plural temporality. In this sense the nucleus of Althusser's theoretical project and the secret of the concept of structural causality is found in the chapter of 'The Object of *Capital*' dedicated to the 'Outline for a Concept of Historical Time'. Here Althusser rejects the Hegelian model founded on the dual

62 Althusser 1966.

axis of 'homogenous continuity' and 'contemporaneity'. In order to think the social totality in Marxist terms it is necessary to think of 'a certain type of *complexity*, the unity of a *structured whole* containing what can be called levels or instances which are distinct and "relatively autonomous", and co-exist within this complex structural unity'.⁶³ The keystone of Althusser's theory consists in thinking of a 'co-existence' that cannot be flattened out onto a 'contemporaneity'. We find the term *Gliederung* at the center of this definition: the hierarchy that this term introduces into the whole is not that of an expressive center, but an articulation of each of the levels which have a time proper to their specificity, i.e., a relative autonomy, and this hierarchy is founded on a precise dependence on the whole:

We can and must say: for each mode of production there is a peculiar time and history, punctuated in a specific way by the development of the productive forces; the relations of production have their peculiar time and history...; philosophy has its own time and history...; aesthetic productions have their own time and history...; scientific formations have their own time and history, etc.⁶⁴

Here we do not have a plurality of independent times, but rather times that coexist in one and the same social whole without being contemporaneous: a coexistence without contemporaneity, which in order to be thought requires a different schema than traditional causality (succession) or reciprocal action (simultaneity). Althusser points us in passing to the adequate term, *entrelacement*. Making reference to the capitalist mode of production, he says that Marx, taking only the economic level into consideration, indicates the type of temporality in it as an 'interweaving of different times [*entrelacement des differents temps*], that is the type of "dislocation" [*décalage*] and the torsion of different temporalities produced by different levels of the structure, the complex combination of which constitutes the proper time of the development of the process'.⁶⁵ In another crucial passage Althusser refers to 'interference':

[...] it is only possible to give a content to the concept of historical time by defining historical time as the specific form of existence of the social totality under consideration, an existence in which the different structural levels of temporality interfere, because of the peculiar rela-

63 Althusser 1965b, p. 108 (319, 185).

64 Althusser 1965b, p. 111 (284, 187).

65 Althusser 1965b, p. 116 (290, 192).

tions of correspondence, non-correspondence, articulation, dislocation, and torsion which obtain [*entretiennent*], between the different "levels" of the whole in accordance with its general structure.⁶⁶

Althusser thinks the thesis of plural temporality, or to use his own words, '*temporalité différentielle*',⁶⁷ together with the first thesis, that of the constitutiveness of relations: the terms *entrelacement* and *interférence* indicate that we are precisely not in the presence of the flux of unrelated and, in the last instance, unintelligible temporalities. But then plural temporality is also fundamental in order for the second thesis, the contingency of relations, to be thinkable. In the absence of a plurality of different rhythms, the encounter falls into the category of genesis: the necessity of contingency is not the breach of an empty and homogenous timeline, but rather the necessity of an encounter, an encounter which assumes more times, more rhythms. For this reason Althusser rejects both the continuous and discontinuous conceptions of historical time. Both options are a simplification of the complex temporality of the social whole.

If these three theses are thought together, therefore, a theoretical consequence of great importance results: the presence of the structure in its effects does not manifest itself as a temporal presence, but as an articulation, a weave of temporality. If there is a time of the structure, then it is non-contemporaneity, its impossible contemporaneity. Of course, Althusser insistently reaffirms that there is a determination in the last instance of the economic, and yet on the one hand the temporality of the economic does not play the role of the timepiece of being because even at this level we are not dealing with a simple and visible temporality, but rather a complex temporality that must be built conceptually; and on the other hand, because in every society it is only possible to determine the level of the economic by passing through the complex articulation that links it to the other levels of society. In reality therefore, structure, far from being a Parmenidean cage that imprisons becoming, is an articulated whole of temporality, a conjugation of elements, whose becoming is the precise product of its structural non-contemporaneity. In particular, the translation proposed by Althusser of the term *Verbindung* as 'conjunction' specifies the reciprocity of structure and conjuncture, a reciprocity

66 Althusser 1965b, p.120-121 (296, 194).

67 Althusser 1965b, p. 116 (291, 194).

that rules out, as rightly noted by Balibar, the classic theories of transition.⁶⁸ Precisely because structure is a weave of temporality, a complex conjunction [*Verbindung*] of elements that is structured in a *Gliederung* of relations with a determinate articulation, it is actually a conjuncture, as Althusser comes to say explicitly:

[...] it is only in the specific unity of the complex structure of the whole that we can think of the concept of these so-called backwardnesses, forwardnesses, survivals and unevennesses of development which *co-exist* in the structure of the real historical present: the present of the *conjuncture*. [...] To speak of differential historical temporality therefore absolutely obliges us to situate *this site* and to think, in its particular articulation, the *function* of such an element or such a level in the current configuration of the whole; it is to determine the relation of articulation of this element as a function of other elements, of this structure as a function of other structures, it obliges us to define what has been called its *overdetermination* or *under determination* as a function of the structure of the determination of the whole, it obliges us to define what might be called, in another language, the *index of determination*, the *index of efficacy* currently attributable to the element or structure in question in the general structure of the whole. By *index of efficacy* we may understand the character of a more or less dominant or subordinate and therefore more or less 'paradoxical' determination of a given element or structure in the current mechanism of the whole. And this is nothing but the theory of the conjuncture indispensable to the theory of history.⁶⁹

Structure and conjuncture should be thought as reciprocal terms. Structure is not an invariant, deep form of superficial, conjunctural variations thought in a succession of contingent instants (whether continuous or discontinuous). Rather, structure is the complex articulation of the differential temporalities and relations in which the conjuncture itself consists: in this sense the present of the conjuncture is a deep, complex, and stratified present.

Translated by Dave Mesing

68 Balibar 1987.

69 Althusser 1965b, p. 118 (293, 196). Translation modified.

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