

The Pedagogical Detour

Louis Althusser, *Initiation à la Philosophie pour les Non-Philosophes*, Paris: PUF 2014.

Reviewed by Jason Read

The name Louis Althusser is often taken to be synonymous with the academization of Marxism, shifting its focus from the factory to the classroom. This characterization overlooks two crucial things. First, and most generally, no matter how one conceives the history of (Western) Marxist thought in the twentieth century, tracing a lineage from Marx, Lenin, Mao, and Gramsci to Althusser, or crafts a lineage that passes from Lukács to Horkheimer and Adorno, it is hard to avoid a trajectory that begins with militants and ends with professors. Even Italy, long considered the holdout for a more engaged and political Marxism eventually ends in the classroom even if the professors continued their extracurricular activities. Which is to say both that the history of the academicization of Marxism exceeds the space of this review, and that it extends beyond Althusser. Althusser may be guilty of a philosophical reading of *Capital*, but he cannot be seen as single-handedly responsible for the academic nature of Marxist

thought. Moreover, and this is the second point, is that despite his reputation of producing a highly theoretical Marxist, Althusser spent much of the seventies teaching, lecturing, and writing books that were intended for non-philosophers. These activities ranged from a course for scientists to the idea of writing manuals introducing Marxist concepts to activists and workers. Even Althusser's most famous or infamous text, the essay on "Ideological State Apparatuses," which is often considered to be the exemplary text in a turn away from history and politics towards theory and academia, is itself part of a larger text titled *Sur la Reproduction*, aimed less at students of theory than with those actively involved with the class struggle.

The posthumous publication of *Initiation à la philosophie pour les non-philosophes* makes it possible to not only to expand the picture of Althusser's writing that exceeded the discipline of philosophy, but to see the way in which the experience of teaching outside ultimately redefined Althusser's conception and practice of philosophy. That Althusser offered courses and lectures meant to introduce non-philosophers to philosophy necessarily comes into contradiction with his own attempt to develop Marxist thought as a

new practice of philosophy. In these lectures Althusser sets himself a double task, to introduce non-philosophers to philosophy while simultaneously redefining and contesting the dominant image of philosophy. Althusser's attempt to define philosophy necessarily passes through a series of detours (It is for this reason that this text, like *Sur la Reproduction* was not published during Althusser's lifetime, left to the gnawing of its own internal contradictions and tensions). In order to define philosophy in a materialist, or Marxist way, it is necessary to situate its place in the superstructure, which in turn requires a definition of society, labor, ideology, and so on. Far from being a simple watering down of philosophy, philosophy for non-philosophers, or rather a non-philosophical account of philosophy for philosophers, defining philosophy for non-philosophers has the added difficulty of presenting a non-philosophical account of philosophy. Althusser draws the two tasks together, presenting philosophy to non-philosophers while examining from its outside. Philosophy is turned inside out, explained to philosophers based on its own internal limits.

In the *Initiation* these two projects coincide with Althusser's adoption of Gramsci's famous

dictum that "everyone is a philosopher." As with Gramsci this universal definition splits into two. Althusser posits two different types of philosophy. The first inherits its questions if not its answers from religion. The religious questions are the questions of the origin and end of the world. It is not just the religious questions that philosophy initially inherits, but its attitude as well. The dominant attitude of such religious philosophy is one of resignation, resignation to the world as it is. In this text it is resignation, and not the reproduction of the relations of production, that ties together idealism and ideology. The resignation of the world as it is slides from an acceptance of Gods infinite wisdom to the acceptance that "the poor will always be among us." The acceptance of the world as created leads to an unthinking acceptance of the social order. In contrast to this Althusser argues there is a second tendency in philosophy. As Althusser, "This philosophy is in principle no longer religious, no longer passive, and no longer resigned. On the contrary it is a philosophy of work, of struggle, an active philosophy...that affirms the primacy of theory over practice" (84). If the philosophy of resignation connected idealism and ideology, then the philosophy

of practice connects together materialism and revolution.

The dualism that Althusser posits between resignation and practice could thus be situated along the history of the demarcations that Althusser draws between different philosophies from the early distinction between philosophy and the scientific theory of theoretical practice, and the final division between idealism of necessity and the aleatory materialism of the encounter. It can be seen how it participates in elements of both. However, no sooner is this division posited by Althusser than it is interrupted by a "grand detour." If the first aspect, the line of demarcation, corresponds to Althusser's attempt to both define philosophy and make it understandable, then the second, the detour, corresponds to his attempt to problematize the very practice of philosophy, questioning its fundamental presuppositions. In order to answer this question a detour is necessary, a detour not into a definition of philosophy, but also philosophy's relationship with its outside, with non-philosophy. Here once again there is a particular structural similarity with *Sur la reproduction*, which also proceeds by a massive detour into the very nature of society, which in turn entails an examination of the

mode of production, reproduction, and so on. To situate philosophy in the superstructure is to first theorize the superstructure.

In the *Initiation* this detour concerns not the outside of philosophy, society, but its internal condition, abstraction. Philosophy exists because there are abstractions. As much as Althusser espouses a philosophy of practice, a philosophy grounded on transformation, this philosophy is not identical with the everyday common sense, or what Althusser would call "spontaneous philosophy of practice, which claims that everything is concrete. Althusser cites Spinoza and Hegel to argue that the operative distinction is not between the abstract and concrete, but between different ways of conceiving abstractions. Materialist philosophy recognizes the abstract as always already there. Althusser's argument owes much to Hegel, to the opening passages on sense certainty in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*. As in those passages Hegel asserted the primacy of the abstraction of language, the "this" over every attempt to simply posit the empirical existence of this tree. Althusser extends, and in some sense, materializes Hegel's argument, arguing not just for the primacy of language over any enunciation, but the primacy

of law over social relations, and the primacy of the relations of production over every productive act. As Althusser writes,

...the social appropriation of the concrete passes by the relation of abstract relations. There are therefore two concretes: the concrete that is not socially appropriated, which at the limit is nothing, and the concrete not just socially appropriated by mankind, but produced as concrete by this appropriation. That is to say: without language and without right, without the relations of production and ideological relations, nothing in the world is concrete to man. Without it I can neither name, nor produce, nor signify my intentions (120).

The primacy of abstraction becomes a materialist thesis when it is expanded from language, from the primacy of the word and the concept over experience, to encompass the abstractions that shape social existence. Language is not the only abstraction or even the determining abstraction, all of our actions and thoughts have abstractions as their precondition. Or rather, materialism and idealism are differentiated in terms of how they posit abstraction: the first takes abstraction as a fact, the primacy of the relations of production, of social relations over any experience, while the latter

posits the abstractions of the idea as determining. Materialism is not just the assertion of the brute facticity of material existence, the fact that history requires living men and thus the production of food, but is the assertion of the primacy of the relations of production as abstractions over the other abstractions, of the social over linguistic abstractions.

Althusser's detour thus intersects with another path in the history of Marxist thought, one with a different starting point and a different destination. I am referring to Alfred Sohn-Rethel's *Intellectual and Manual Labor*, and its attempt to develop the concept of "real abstraction" of an abstraction that is lived rather than thought. To borrow a phrase from Marx, it is not just that life determines consciousness in terms of the former's irreducible concreteness and particularity, but that that life is experience first and foremost through its constitutive abstractions. Althusser and Sohn-Rethel differ in terms of how they conceptualize these "real abstractions." For Sohn-Rethel real abstraction is grounded in the forms of capitalist existence, specifically the commodity form and abstract labor. These abstractions posit a form of equivalence that structures experience, even as thought focuses on the specifics

of use value and concrete labor. As Sohn-Rethel argues thought and experience go their separate ways, thought is focused on particularity while practice, labor and exchange, engages with the abstract equivalence. In contrast to this, Althusser turns not to the commodity form, as the basis of production, but the primacy of the relations of production over the forces of production. The former stresses abstraction as equivalence, while the later stresses abstraction as relation.

While Althusser's detour on abstraction raises interesting points of connection and comparison with other texts, and traditions—connections that ultimately bear on the different invocations of abstraction in Marx's thought from exchange value to relations of production, it is equally revealing for what it reveals about Althusser's thought particularly during the period of the seventies, a period situated between the defining works of structural causality and the conjuncture from the sixties, and the aleatory materialism of the eighties. As I have noted above, there is a particular formal similarity between this text, and *Sur la Reproduction*, both of which are not only pedagogical in their orientation but structured by detours. The detours that define these texts could be considered

simply residues of their pedagogical nature. The detours could just be the digressions where the teacher recognizes the necessity of defining terms and clarifying perspectives. Any systematic knowledge is always going to be difficult to present without entering into a series of presuppositions for each term. This can be seen in Marxist thought in which the concepts of ideology, relations of production, mode of production, and capitalism necessitate and imply each other. Any attempt to define one passes through the others. However, it is also possible to understand this detour, or displacement, as something of a kind of dialectic at work in Althusser's thought. What is first presented as a division between two different conceptions of philosophy is transformed in terms of their relation to a third term, to a third question, that of abstraction. Abstraction both unifies the two conceptions, it is abstraction that makes even materialist philosophy a philosophy, differentiating it from the everyday assertion on the concrete nature of things, but it also abstraction that differentiates the two very different perspectives on philosophy. Materialism asserts a very different primacy of abstraction, not the primacy of language or the concept but the primacy of the abstractions that

define the relations of production. The detour does not so much present a synthesis, bringing the two into one, as it displaces and extends their very antithesis. The detour is both the mark of the transformation of philosophy, it is through the detour that philosophy encounters its outside, and it is the necessary encounter with contingency. Thus, it is possible to argue that between the Althusser of the conjuncture, and its corollary of structural causality, and the Althusser of the encounter, there is the Althusser of the detour, of the necessary displacement of philosophy onto its non-philosophical conditions.

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