

Revisiting a singular materialism

(Warren Montag, *Althusser and His Contemporaries. Philosophy's Perpetual War*, Durham, Duke University Press, 2013, pp. X+246)

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Recently there has been a new interest in the work of Louis Althusser. In contrast to readings of his work from the second half of the 1990s that mainly focused on Althusser's posthumously published manuscripts from the 1980s with their imagery of a materialism of the encounter, this new interest has more to do with the totality of Althusser's work. This has been helped by developments in the publishing history of Althusser's texts. The recent translation of Althusser's seminal manuscript from 1969 *On the Reproduction of Capitalism*¹, from which Althusser composed the 1971 article on "Ideology and Ideological Apparatuses of the State", the publication of the 1972 course on Rousseau,² and of the *Initiation à la philosophie pour les non philosophes (Initiation to Philosophy for the non philosophers)*,³

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1 Althusser 2014.

2 Althusser 2012.

3 Althusser 2014a.

have offered new insights to Althusser's work.

In this sense, Warren Montag's book represents an important development. It follows Montag's important contributions to the Althusserian literature in the past years,⁴ which brought forward important aspects of Althusser's work such as the importance of singularity, a particular variety of nominalism as opposed to classical criticisms of Althusser as a nominalist. In particular, Montag has stressed the importance of Althusser's distancing from structuralism in the second half of the 1960s, and his turn towards a more Spinozist approach (Montag is also one of the most important contributors to contemporary Spinoza debates⁵). Montag's interventions have been important in highlighting Althusser's distinct quest for a materialism of singular practices and overdetermination.

The book that we are reviewing here attempts to deal with Althusser's complex relation with his theoretical contemporaries. It begins with taking Althusser's 1962-63 seminar on the origins of structuralism as a reference point. Montag indeed offers here an important breakthrough since, in contrast to the traditional im-

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4 Montag 1991; 1998; 2003.

5 Montag 1999; Montag and Stolze (eds.) 1997.

age of a structuralist Althusser of the early 1960s, a different image emerges of Althusser engaging in a double critique of both idealist subjectivism but also of idealist formalism, both strands associated with different theoretical options both coming from phenomenology. This is based upon a careful reading of the entire theoretical and political conjuncture of French philosophy in the post WWII period. In this reading, the particularly French tradition of non-positivist epistemology, exemplified in Jean Cavaillès's call for a philosophy of the concept, coming not from traditional rationalism, but also from Spinozism,⁶ emerges as an answer to the shortcomings of both traditional metaphysics but also phenomenology. Montag, also, points to the importance of Macherey's reading of Canguilhem as an attempt towards a philosophy of the concept. Moreover, Montag points to the importance of Althusser's criticism of Derrida's attempt towards a critique of metaphysics through a reading of Husserl as it was expressed in Derrida's introduction to Husserl's *Origin of Geometry*.⁷ Althusser finds, especially, in the writings of Cavailles and Canguilhem, a radical critique of every philosophy of

origin. Consequently, Althusser's endeavor emerges not only as a non-structuralist project but also as a broader critique of idealist tendencies than traditional histories of his thought tend to suggest. Althusser's position seems like a more general critique of every philosophy of origin and consciousness. In particular, the critique of structuralism emerges as exactly a critique of a particular form of formalism associated with idealist philosophies of conscience. Montag stresses that for Althusser Levy-Strauss' work was not so much a critique of phenomenology but a variation of the same idealist problematic. Moreover, Montag provides ample evidence of the theoretical dialogue and relations between structural linguistics and phenomenology, in contrast to traditional histories of structuralism. He also points to the importance of humanism for certain varieties of structuralism and 'mathematical formalism', the humanism that is exactly the target of Althusser's anti-humanist critique. This gives a broader scope to Althusser's reference to the need to distinguish between Levy-Strauss's research and the philosophy attached to it.

Montag suggests that Lucien Sebag's *Marxisme et Structuralisme*⁸ is an example of the possibility to have this rapprochement between

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6 Cavaillès 1960.

7 Derrida 1989.

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8 Sebag 1965.

structuralism and historicist/humanist Marxism. This book by a militant Marxist who in his short life managed to engage in political battles but also ethnographical studies and a dialogue with Lacanian psychoanalysis, is indeed of great interest. It offers a potential coupling of Marxism and structuralist analysis, based on humanist and historicist Marxism and especially the theoretical direction offered by Lukács. Sebag offers a Marxist version of the position, implicit in many of Levy-Strauss texts that what makes possible a structural analysis as a grammar of social relations is exactly the possibility to think of the human mind as common origin.

For Montag, eventually it was not so much Althusser but Derrida that stressed the contradictory co-existence of two conceptions of structures and structurality in the work of Levy-Strauss, one metaphysical and one non-metaphysical. This non-metaphysical conception of structurality in Derrida takes the form of a 'decentered structure' (p. 72) which for Montag is exactly a point of convergence between Althusser and Derrida.⁹

Montag moves from Althusser's confrontation with structuralism to the very concept of

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9 Montag refers especially to Derrida's 1967 text 'Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences' included in *Writing and Difference* (Derrida 2001).

structure within Althusser's own texts. He refers to an important aspect of Althusser's theoretical development – and an aspect the importance of which Montag has stressed repeatedly – namely role played by Macherey's criticism of whatever 'structuralist' could be found in Althusser's work and in particular of any conception of a 'latent structure'. Montag shows how Macherey's intervention led Althusser to excise certain passages from his contributions for the second edition of *Reading Capital*. He also stresses the importance of Macherey's own *Theory of Literary Production*¹⁰, a book that represents a very important critique of 'structuralism'. For Macherey there is no point in seeking a hidden structure as 'abstract intention' and internal necessity. In contrast to such a false interiority is it important to treat the text as surface but also as a surface marked by lack and absences. Consequently, the essential concept of analysis should not be structure but *décalage*.

Montag offers a very important reading of the passages that Althusser excised from *Reading Capital*. These are the passages that in the most explicit way point towards a conception of 'latent' structures, 'anterior to a given text [...] endowing the text with a

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10 Macherey 2006.

depth beneath the surface, the two-level space that allows the manifest to conceal the latent' (p. 83). Without this reference to a latent structure, the text emerges as 'pure surface' with a 'real, irreducible complexity' (p. 84). For Montag there are certain points in Althusser's theoretical endeavor that mark his distancing from any form of structuralist formalism: the emphasis on singularity and what Montag has repeatedly referred to as Althusser's nominalism. It is exactly these aspects that make necessary a new form of causality that is neither linear/transitive nor expressive. For Montag the very notion of a structural causality, expressed in Althusser's insistence of the 'presence of a structure in its effects' is a move away from Descartes, Leibniz, Hegel and even Marx towards Spinoza and a conception of immanent causality. Montag through a very careful and detail textual analysis of the omitted passages from *Reading Capital*¹¹ brings forward the tension inherent in the very notion of structural causality. For Montag the two formulas used by Althusser, in some cases as synonyms, namely the notion that the structure is 'present in its effects' and 'exists in its effects', are in fact contrasting.

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11 The omitted passages can be found in the French full edition of *Lire le Capital* (Althusser et al. 1996).

The first can lead to a conception of a latent structure and the second is closer to an immanentist conception of the conjunction of singular entities' (p. 90).

For Montag it is Macherey's rejection of any conception of a structured whole in favour of a Spinozist conception of an encounter between singularities, that offers a way out of the problems associated with the notion of the structure. This does not mean the notion in 'structure', in this non-formalist conception is useless. Rather, the notion of the structure

allows the conjuncture to be thought of not as the negativity of indeterminacy, as the random encounter of primary elements that themselves require no further explanation than the positing of their irreducibility, but rather as determinate singularities both composed of and composing other singularities, even as they possess their own singular actual essence. (p. 93).

According to Montag, Althusser's attempt to redefine the materialist dialectic in the essays included in *For Marx* moves exactly towards a theorization of how singular elements combine into new larger singular entities. After 1965, Althusser continued to elaborate upon this notion of an encounter of singularities, both through an

elaboration upon Spinozist themes but also through a critique of any identification of the structure with the symbolic exemplified in his exchanges with Deleuze.¹²

Montag then turns to Althusser's theory of ideology. Montag begins by a reading of Althusser's 1964 'Marxism and Humanism' essay in *For Marx*, a reading that attempts to avoid treating it in a teleological fashion as the first form of Althusser's later elaborations upon ideology and ideological apparatuses of the State. Althusser in this text characterized humanism as ideological, in the sense that it refers to existing realities but does not offer the means to know them in the sense that science offers the possibility of knowledge. Montag analyses Althusser's definition of ideology as 'a system (with its own logic and rigour) of representations (images, myths, ideas or concepts, depending on the case) endowed with a historical existence and role within a given society'¹³. Montag stresses the notion of a system possessing its own logic and rigor proper to it, but at the same time he insists that Althusser's reference to 'representations' (images, myths, ideas or concepts) distances this position from a 'structuralist' po-

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12 See Stolze 1998 for this dialogue.

13 Althusser 1969, p.231.

sition. At the same time, the very notion of ideology as inadequate representation is not defined in an exhaustive way since Althusser moves on the function of ideology. Montag stresses the importance of the necessary character of ideology for any given society, 'no society [...] can exist outside ideology' (p. 110). Therefore, ideology is not something that is invented; rather it is secreted by society as a totality, and represents the necessary decentering of consciousness. However, for Montag this is not the main argument. More important is Althusser's tendency to treat ideology in material terms, exemplified in the recurring reference to the *lived* experience, although there is a resemblance between this reference and aspects of phenomenological Marxism. For Montag, even if Althusser had in mind the references to lived experience in phenomenological Marxism, in reality he inscribes both conscience and lived experience in a different problematic that links consciousness to attitude and behavior. For Montag this 'is not only to make ideology an affair of bodies rather than minds, but it is to materialize it altogether' (p. 117).

Montag then moves towards the relation between Althusser and Lacan. Montag offers a close reading of Althusser's seminar

presentations on psychoanalysis¹⁴ and, in particular, Althusser's appreciation of Lacan's insistence that psychoanalysis is not reducible to either biology or philosophy. He also opposes any attempt to incorporate psychoanalysis into some sort of a philosophy of consciousness or intersubjectivity and it is there that Althusser finds the importance of Lacan's critique of ego-psychology. Montag also points to the importance of a critique of the subject for Althusser and his political conception of the process of subjection. He also links this to the question of subject of truth as a central question of the political philosophy of modernity, expressed in the question why should the subject of truth take the form of an ego (p. 127). For Montag it is important that Althusser points to the direction of Spinoza stressing the fact that in Spinoza the imaginary "exists outside of and prior to the mind of the individual" (p. 129). For Montag, Althusser in this reading of Spinoza as part of his confrontation with psychoanalysis not only desubjectifies the imaginary but also refuses to it any sense of ideality. This takes place in a lecture that in the end dealt not so much with Lacan but more with the confrontation between Descartes and Spinoza, and which ends by Althusser

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14 Althusser 1996.

insisting that in Spinoza one can find a reference to the imaginary as a social structure that necessarily produces a subject in order to exist.¹⁵

Montag then turns to another important text by Althusser, the unpublished 'Three Notes on the theory of discourse'.¹⁶ This is an important transitory text, because it was Althusser's last effort to think various questions (theory of ideology, theory of the unconscious, theory of scientificity) in terms of a 'general' theory. In light of this attempt, the theory of the unconscious would be a regional theory of a general theory of discourse. According to Montag, this conception of the unconscious as a discourse offers to Althusser the possibility to 'abandon the concepts whose use by others he found so unsatisfactory' (p. 132), discourse being thought of in a more general sense than the one used in linguistics. However, as Montag points, the opposition between discourse and practice means that Althusser in his effort to develop a theory of ideology, in contrast to any theory of consciousness, again creates some form of dualism:.. Moreover, in the end of the Three Notes Althusser has modified his initial position

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15 Althusser 1996, pp. 119-120.

16 In Althusser 2003.

regarding the relation between discourse and subject: not all discourse 'produce' a subject effect, this is the effect of ideological discourse alone. For Montag the important aspect of this formulation is Althusser's reference to the subject possessing 'a structure of specular centering [...] the empirical subject duplicated by a transcendental subject, the man-subject by God etc'.¹⁷ Montag then points towards Althusser's 1967 manuscript on Feuerbach¹⁸ as an elaboration of these points, where he thinks that we can find elements of an elaboration of this theoretical schema of the subject/Subject relation. In this sense, Althusser, according to Montag, reverses the traditional reading of Feuerbach, since in reality it is not human subjects that are at the centre, but the Subject, in this case God, which makes possible this specular relation of recognition. Moreover, Montag points to the introduction in the 'Three Notes' of the notion of ideological interpellation of individuals into subjects. Montag notes the particular signification of interpellation, which points exactly to subjects being endowed with the 'status of a moral and legal subject' (p. 137). However, there are contradictions in Al-

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17 Althusser 2003, p. 50.

18 In Althusser 2003.

thusser's attempt to theorize ideological interpellation in the 'Three Notes...', namely 'the contradiction between a notion of interiority as constituted from the outside and a notion of interiority that precedes and founds the outside' (p. 138.). Despite this contradiction, Montag thinks that Althusser's attempt to think a potential theory of unconscious that excludes any theory of consciousness is also a way to rethink ideological interpellation beyond this contradiction of a Subject that somehow pre-exists the subject. Consequently, 'it is no longer possible to conceive of ideology as a discourse that interpellates someone who already exists to recognize himself in the specular image and respond to the summons of the Subject' (p. 140).

Montag then turns to Althusser's elaborations in the 1969 manuscript *Sur la Reproduction*.¹⁹ He points to the importance of a theory ideology in the attempt to answer the question how the reproduction of the relations of production is secured (p. 143). For Montag, Althusser's emphasis on the materiality of ideological state apparatuses is very important because it makes 'visible the way in which the very notion of consent is inextricably bound up with the forms of subjection characteristic

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19 See Althusser 2014 for the English translation.

of capitalist societies' (p. 145). The important aspect has to do with the material existence of ideology in apparatus, and he stresses the reference to existence instead of realization, which means that ideology cannot exist external to its material form, suggest a form of immanence of ideology in its apparatuses and their practices. For Montag this suggests a conception of ideology that is beyond any form of interiority; rather it points to a theory of ideology as a theory of the materiality of practices, action, behaviors, discourses. And this transforms the very notion of ideology as representation since 'we must understand "represent" here as a transformation, a reworking and refashioning, the product of which is as real and material as that which was transformed' (p. 155). Moreover, such a conception moves beyond the coercion/consent dualism since it forces us to 'acknowledge the "consubstantiality" of force and persuasion' (p. 158). For Montag, the full version of the manuscript, with its references to struggles and the potential fragility of the ISAs, lacks the abstract character of the published essay that could justify accusation of 'functionalism'. The evolution of Althusser had to do with both his theoretical elaboration but also with a conjuncture of struggles.

For Montag such a reading of a materialist theory of ideol-

ogy can also help us revisit the potential dialogue between the conceptions of Althusser and Foucault. He stresses how Foucault's arguments in *Discipline and Punish* underscore 'the way in which the arguments that comprise the thesis "ideology has a materialist existence" appear to call into question the distinction between violence and ideology (understood in turn as an opposition of force and consent)' (p. 162). In this sense, the materiality of technologies of bodies in Foucault is also a way to rethink what Althusser designated as the materiality of ideology and the interpellation of individuals as subjects by ideology. For Montag, this 'history of the body, of the individual itself' is 'an entire dimension that Althusser's essay unwittingly presupposes' (p. 166), and in this sense he 'described the material conditions of interpellation' (p. 166). Revisiting Foucault's critique of Althusser's theory of ideology, he points that their common use of allegories (the policeman 'hailing' the subject in the case of Althusser, Panopticon in the case of Foucault) points to their confrontation with the challenge of theorizing ideology beyond any theory of consciousness.

The third part of the book returns to Althusser's later texts on aleatory materialism and in particular his text on 'The Underground Current of the Materialism

of the Encounter'.²⁰ He points to the importance of chronology in Althusser's genealogy of aleatory materialism and especially to Althusser's reference to the importance of the void in Spinoza and in particular to Althusser's reading of parallelism in Spinoza. According to Montag, this not a misreading but has to do with the importance the notion of the void has in all of Althusser's work which must be related to Althusser's insistence on philosophy not having a proper object but also, and more importantly, to the every nothingness that is the origin. This importance of non-origin, as non-encounter, is an important part of Althusser's non-teleological conception of a materialism of the encounter. Moreover, Montag points also to another unnoticed theme in Althusser's text: the fact that Althusser refers to falling atoms in Epicurus and Lucretius as opposed to the reference in the original texts to moving, something that he attributes to Althusser trying to stress the non-finalism of his position. For Montag, through a parallel reading of Derrida and Heidegger, this implies '[t]he world is thus falling: it has been given (away), dealt (out), sent, abandoned, all actions that the thesis of the primacy of absence over presence renders

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20 In Althusser 2006.

irreducible'. Consequently it is important to think of the non-world that precedes the world because 'it is precisely in the nothing that precedes what is that philosophy dwells, the eternal void in relation to which being is mere rain' (p. 184). However, Montag thinks that there is also another sense of the void, which is not the void as origin, but rather a conception a void immanent in the encounter. In this reading, the 'void that philosophy makes would not be a contestation of the real, as if it were external to that which it represents, but rather is one of its effects, a means by which it frees itself of origins and ends in order to become the infinite diversity it is, the indissociable simultaneity of thought and action' (p. 188). Moreover, this reference to the void is also an expression of Althusser's attempt to think of another time, not the time 'of the encounter that strikes like lightning in the void', but rather the empty time of 'waiting in vain for a future that does not arrive late or on time' (p. 189), the time of the event that never comes, the time of crisis of revolutionary politics.

The book ends with a look at one of Althusser's early writings, a text from 'Althusser before Althusser', 'The International of Decent Feelings'.²¹ This text coming from 1946, from the period

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21 In Althusser 1997.

that Althusser was moving politically towards communist militancy while remaining a catholic. A virulent text it opposes a certain kind of mentality that emerged after WWII, exemplified in intellectuals like Malraux, Camus or Marcel who tried to propose the reunification of human community in terms of an answer to the fear of the post-WWII world and of a certain 'universalization of guilt' (p. 198). Montag stresses the contradiction induced in Althusser's argument by him sharing aspects of a Christian eschatology, and consequently of an 'end'. At the same time, he shows, how to this apocalyptic panic Althusser opposes the possibility that the proletariat, who is actually, now, experiencing poverty and hunger, can overcome the possibility of such an apocalyptic end, by creating the condition of its own liberation, first of all as a necessary liberation from the prison of fear.

Montag's afterword brings forward both the difficulty and the challenge and fascination associated with trying to retrace Althusser's theoretical adventure. For Montag if Althusser

remains ungraspable, it is because there is something new, a beginning, rupture there, not a new doctrine, a new theory of history or society, but simply a new way of inhabiting philosophy, that

is, the philosophical conjuncture, that makes visible the lines of force that constitute it, opening the possibility of change. Althusser, too, it appears, has slipped away: he has disappeared into his intervention, a line of demarcation that is not even a line, the emptiness of a distance taken, a cause that exists only in its effects, the shattering of obstacles that opens new possibilities.

The above presentation makes more than obvious the importance of Montag's book. It is not just the breadth and scope of this attempt to place Althusser in the actual conditions of his dialogue and complex relationship to his theoretical contemporaries. It is also Montag's own attempt to read Althusser's endeavor as an attempt towards a highly original form of materialism, in opposition to any form of metaphysics and teleology. This materialism opposes any form of surface/depth dualism, rests upon immanence, and, in a Spinozist manner, refers to the encounters and articulations between singular essences. In this sense, Althusser comes out not as a 'structuralist' but rather as a radical critique of all forms of idealism, including the humanism and formalism inherent in important aspects of what we traditionally tend to treat as 'structuralism'. The same goes for Montag's elabo-

ration on questions of ideology where he brings forward how Althusser distances himself from any theory of consciousness in favor of a materialist theory of practices, bodies and apparatuses. Moreover, such an approach offers a way to rethink Althusser's late writings. The conception of a materialism of the encounter emerges as a philosophical tendency that runs through most of Althusser's work and not an expression of Althusser 'turn' in his post 1980 isolation, in contrast a some part of the Althusserian literature in the 1990s. Therefore, it is a book that is an indispensable reading for any attempt to approach Althusser's work.

Regarding potential points of criticism of the book, I would like to suggest two points. They are not points of disagreement; rather they are research directions that in my opinion need to be further developed. On the one hand, the relation between Althusser's philosophy and politics must be stressed. We have now a much better apprehension of Althusser's confrontation with the notion of the encounter and, in general, of his attempt towards a non metaphysical and non teleological materialism of singularity, contingency and conjuncture, during a large part of his theoretical trajectory. We have to relate this to Althusser's attempt towards a left-wing critique of the

reformism and strategic impasse of western communist parties, a political position he held from the mid-1960s onwards. The materialism of the encounter is not simply an opposition to metaphysics or a (non) ontological position; above all it is a reference to the constant effectivity of class antagonism, the singular nature of all conjunctures, and the overdetermined character of political practices. Consequently, it is intrinsically linked to any attempt to rethink the potential for revolutionary politics. In the 1970s the Althusser of the encounter is also the Althusser of the quest for a revolutionary renewal of communist strategy.

On the other hand, I think that more attention needs to be placed upon the emphasis on the reproduction of social relations of production through the intervention of material apparatuses and in particular the Ideological State Apparatuses. Montag rightly points to Althusser's gradual turn towards a more materialist conception of ideological interpellation. However, I think there is also a more general theoretical position articulated in *On the Reproduction of Capitalism*²². If there is no dialectic of latent structures – surface social forms and if all social practices, relations and forms all take place at the same 'plane of im-

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22 Althusser 2014.

manence', then how is social reproduction possible? Althusser's answer is that this is not the result of deeper structures operating 'behind the backs' of social agents, but of material apparatuses that make sure the repetition of practices, rituals, interpellations, at the same time that they are traversed by the constant effectivity of class antagonism. In this sense, when we take as starting points the causal primacy of class struggle and the primacy of relations of production over productive forces, then the very notion of the apparatuses acquires a broader analytical and philosophical dimension. This is the strategic importance of *On the Reproduction of Capitalism* in Althusser's endeavor.

However, these are just points to enlarge the scope of research on Althusser. Moreover, books such as the one Warrant Montag has written can help these debates. Warren Montag has done an impressive attempt to bring forward the materialism of Althusser's endeavor. This is a reason for this important book to be read and discussed.

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