

Freeing Althusser from Spinoza: A Reconsideration of Structural Causality

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ABSTRACT:

The concept of structural causality, associated with the work of Louis Althusser, was, one can say, short-lived: even its foremost advocates seemed to drop it just about as quickly as they picked it up, while other concepts in Althusser's work continued to be popular. This paper proposes to discuss both the problems with and the merits of the concept, calling particular attention to the philosophical work it was supposed to do, which was both critical and constructive, negative and positive. Critical and negative in that it offered a way to avoid both a naturalistic mechanism and a Hegelian expressivism. In other words, it aimed to avoid both a naïve materialism and a naïve idealism. Constructive and positive, in that it was contributing to a new picture of the relationship between structure and what is structured, by trying to give an account of the manner in which structure was present and "in the real": and, I will add, thereby providing the groundwork for a better version of dialectical materialism. There is no doubt that Spinoza's philosophy provided Althusser with the model for thinking of this form of causality. But the use of Spinoza as a model can also be identified as the source of many of the problems with the concept. An essay by Warren Montag dealing with an exchange between Althusser and Pierre Macherey will serve as the basis for my discussion of Spinoza and structural causality.

Keywords:

Althusser, Hegel, Macherey, Montag, Spinoza, structural causality.

"Thought must begin by placing itself at the standpoint of Spinozism; to be a follower of Spinoza is the essential commencement of all Philosophy" (Hegel 1994, p. 257)

"But if Spinoza is called an atheist for the sole reason that he does not distinguish God from the world, it is a misuse of the term. Spinozism might really just as well or even better have been termed ACOSMISM... Spinoza maintains that there is no such thing as what is known as the world; it is merely a form of God, and in and for itself it is nothing. The world has no true reality, and all this that we know as the world has been cast into the abyss of the one identity. There is therefore no such thing as finite reality, it has no truth whatever" (Hegel 1994, p. 281)

In so many ways, for so many reasons, Spinoza seems to be a philosopher who is preferable to Hegel – non-totalitarian, radically democratic, a seemingly communist, horizontal ontology... So why try to free Althusser from Spinoza? In 1979 Pierre Macherey asked, intentionally messing with the chronology, “Hegel or Spinoza”? His answer, of course, was “Spinoza,” and his reason for putting Spinoza *after* Hegel was to suggest that Spinoza had been capable of reading Hegel in a certain sense, and was in fact a better reader of Hegel than Hegel had been of Spinoza. At the end of his book, he claims that the choice for Spinoza is made, not without some reservations, in the expectation that Spinoza’s work would aid in the development of a non-Hegelian dialectic, one that would avoid, among other things, what Macherey called the “evolutionism” of Hegel’s. I will assume this criticism of Hegel is familiar enough. Also, Spinoza’s work could, it was hoped, serve as a better basis for materialism. Yet it is fair to say that the jury is still out on all this.

There are some obvious reasons why a Spinozistic model is problematic for any project that wishes to continue with both materialism and dialectics. Such necessary conceptual tools as time, change, negation...these all have a shaky status in Spinoza’s philosophy – or, strictly speaking, on the Hegelian interpretation of Spinoza at least, they have no status at all. Then there is the theism. This is why Hegel called Spinoza’s philosophy an ACOSMISM. The God-drunk philosopher was certainly no atheist: what he did deny, Hegel argued, was the reality of the world itself. By denying the reality of time, the reality of human experience itself is called into question. Thus, “the world,” such as we know it and experience it, it can be fairly argued, *does not exist*, Spinoza’s philosophy must hold. Macherey does not ever really address this aspect of Hegel’s criticism. Perhaps that is because the denunciation of the apparent world in Spinoza actually goes quite well with the Althusserian critique of ideology and its embrace of science as a radical break with the empirical. Isn’t something like Spinoza’s acosmism entirely appropriate as a model for a wide range of contemporary approaches to human experience, from psychoanalysis to Marxism, all of which are suspicious of what is merely apparent and seemingly obvious?

My reconsideration of the question “Hegel or Spinoza” here is in large part driven by concerns about acosmism. Freeing Althusser from Spinoza, I am arguing, means freeing Althusser from Spinozistic “acosmism”. And this, I believe, brings his work closer to Hegel than to

Spinoza, since it will lead to a different way of evaluating the relationship between the apparent and the real. The way to get at this is through a reconsideration of structural causality.

The foremost criticisms of the concept of structural causality target its fatal circularity. As Ted Benton argued, the concept seems to do either too little or too much: it cannot do much to help us to understand specific causal relations among elements of an event or a totality– and so it is essentially useless as far as political and critical practice goes. And if structural causality is about the causality of something like a totality itself, then it makes structure way too strong, external, and transcendent – yet again making the concept theoretically uninteresting, tautological, and as far as practice goes, even debilitating (Benton 1984, pp. 64-5). On this view, the Spinozism that inspired structural causality would make the concept a bit too God-drunk.

Such objections to structural causality seem to follow a Popperian line of attack, and this seems to be the consensus view of its problems. What Gregory Elliot calls Althusser’s “rationalist epistemology” is described by him as “untenable – condemned by an internalism which insulated theoretical discourse from empirical evidence and severs it from its real referent” (Elliot 1987, p. 329). Since there is nothing that could count as a refutation of the theory of structural causality, this account goes, the concept cannot really be considered to do all that much. What is philosophical and rationalist about it, which Elliot calls its “internalism,” dooms it to the status of a pseudo-science.

For a similar conclusion in slightly different terms, we can also turn to Jacques Rancière, who, in an interview about the *Cahiers* project, was asked by Peter Hallward:

And this idea of structural causality, central to analysis of the ‘*action* of the structure’ (to use the *Cahiers*’ phrase)...could it have, in principle, served as mediation between theory and practice, once all reference to consciousness, to the subject, to militant will, etc. was removed? And this way, through the analysis of causality, it would be possible not only to study history but to understand how to make history. (Rancière 2012, p. 269)

To which Rancière replied:

Yes, certainly, it allowed for a kind of double attitude. First one could say, here we are presenting theory, as far as can be from any thought of engagement, of lived experience; this theory refutes false ideas, idealist ideas about the relation between theory and practice. But

one could also hope that theoretical practice itself might open up other fields for new ways of thinking about political practice... In fact it didn't open any such fields. (p. 269)

And although Rancière does not in this interview go into specific reasons for why the concept did not open up ways for thinking about the links between theory and practice, one can easily imagine that the circularity problem would be a major one.

But it is Jean-Claude Milner, interviewed by Knox Peden in the same volume, who refers explicitly to what he thinks was the lamentable absence of Popper for those working in France during this period. Now that Popper's line of questioning is better known in France, Milner observes that "the will to pose questions on the productive character of a structure, all these kinds of questions no longer command attention. I even feel that the general mode of questioning which was that of the *Cahiers pour l'Analyse* is a mode of questioning that has become very distant" – and the concept of structural causality was of course a crucial one for the *Cahiers* (Milner 2012, p. 242). Milner's verdict is that the works of Althusser "would fall apart" if submitted to the kind of reading he gave to Lacan in his own *L'oeuvre claire*. This is no doubt, again, because of the circular problem theories of "productive structures" have. For, what could count as a refutation of structural causality?

What I describe as the critical, negative force of the concept is still I think fairly easy to appreciate and does not really need much of a defense, as I hope the following discussion will make clear. What it is opposed to is what many thinkers are still opposed to. My reconsideration here wishes to go further, of course, by rehabilitating the constructive work the concept does, a work that needs to be understood in the correct way. I will argue that it needs to be defended and appreciated primarily as a *philosophical, theoretical* point, or as a *philosophical* creation. Against the typical criticisms, I argue that the concept of structural causality is bound to be misunderstood and misrepresented if it is taken in confirmationist, verificationist, or empiricist directions; and, thus, it is misunderstood if objections to it on such bases are taken seriously. It is, instead, a concept that primarily serves to provide a *framework* for more empirical sorts of research (with their own criteria for validity), and as such it should not be expected to give much on its own in the way of specific information about any particular system or structure one wishes to study in the first place. In other words, I am agreeing that the concept of structural causality itself will never have much to say about the specifics of any

model, time, space, or structure to which it is applied – such as, most notably, the capitalist mode of production, its origins, its conditions, its future. A theory of structural causality on its own will not tell us much about the particulars of the social movements, transformations, etc. that are associated with that mode of production's appearance. Yet, philosophically speaking, the concept continues to do much more than it seems at first blush.

It seems that no discussion of structural causality can get started without turning to how Althusser himself developed it as an alternative to other views of causality, called mechanism and expressivism. This may be familiar territory, so my discussion here will try to link these two views, or models, to some contemporary theoretical (and anti-theoretical) positions that should help to shed light on why I think the philosophical insight associated with the concept of structural causality is still important today.

According to the mechanistic or linear model of causality, any given thing or event, considered as an effect, is generally thought to be caused by something external to it and materially distinct from it. On this model, one may posit a multitude of elements, some with more force than others, some able to bring about a greater number of effects than others, influencing other elements in the space or domain being considered to greater and lesser degrees. One thing to observe right away about this model of causality is how it contains an almost inevitable reductionistic tendency: and with this point we can already see one of the philosophical errors the concept of structural causality was designed to avoid. In Althusser's work the mechanism, and reductionism, to be critiqued and avoided would have been found especially in the sort of economism present in some variants of Marxism.

While some type of mechanical causality may be necessary in the natural science (along with its reductionism...and is this model really changed at all by quantum physics?), it does not seem to work as well in the social or human sciences. One would expect regularities and laws to emerge from a mechanistic model of causality. Yet these seem to be totally absent from social and historical phenomena. Obviously, classes do not always act in their objective economic interests! Obviously, decreases in wages do not automatically cause strikes, revolts, etc., or even any increase in militancy and discontent... Strategically, politically, and rhetorically, however, one can see the appeal of this model for

social scientists and political militants: it would allow for the claim that capitalism's demise is etched into the very nature of capitalism as a mode of production itself...provided the nature of capitalism as a social, economic, political "cause" is understood a certain way.

And there's the rub. Within this model, how can something like capitalism be thought of as a cause at all? One could think of capitalism as a sort of cause that is in principle independent of its effects, but this would seem to suggest some sort of Platonism. Capitalism is what it is. It emerges at certain times, and will (possibly, inevitably?) fade away at others...In other words, its causal power may be seen to ebb and flow, and there may be periods in which it is operating better than others – more effectively within a totality, for example. It is interesting that Marxists as well as Libertarians, Neo-Liberals, Neo-Classicists, etc. may be said to flirt with such a crypto-Platonist understanding of capitalism. Empirical failures of capitalism may be thought to be due to its impure incarnations. Capitalism, for example, may be too constrained by State mechanisms that are alien to it and hampering its growth. Hence one can equally well, within this model, advocate for a more pure capitalism, a better incarnation of it.

But far more common is another option or variant consistent with mechanistic causality; one that seems to destroy the thing itself, capitalism, by atomizing it into nothingness. This is an anti-theoretical hyper-empiricism or eclecticism. This variant thinks of capitalism not as some kind of essence, but as a swarming multiplicity of events and effects. The more causes for whatever effect or event is being studied that one can incorporate into one's story the better, and more accurate, the story is. And for this reason this variant within mechanical causality always in fact says too little – for there is always more that can be said, more effects to consider, more causes to posit: the French Revolution from the point of view of x, y, z...

Some version of this hyper-empiricism is probably the most widespread view among historians and social scientists today. Far more threatening to such disciplines than the claim that there is no truth is this, their own ingrained postmodern eclecticism, according to which the best a scholar can do is take into account as many different causes of an event as she can. Thus it can readily be admitted that it is impossible to give a total picture of all the causes of capitalism, the French Revolution, or the Civil War...What one can be sure of, in fact, is that there is never any one cause of anything, and certainly no one true story (except the total story that one could give, *per impossibile*, if one had

access to all the facts, and all the causes...). In this way, even when they wish to avoid postmodern relativism, such scholars have a rather empty notion of truth: truth is the inaccessible totality of facts. Hence, with respect to something like capitalism as a distinct mode of production, it is easy for advocates of this variant within mechanical causality to become nominalists since they are not willing to become Platonists. Much better to argue that there is no such thing as capitalism, strictly speaking, and to see it instead as a sometimes useful, sometimes misleading, theoretical abstraction. Or, one can go the Margaret Thatcher route and claim, as she did about society, that it just does not exist! There is no such thing. Or, if you prefer (as libertarians and neo-liberals also seem to in the case of capitalism)...it has ALWAYS existed, a little bit, insofar as some people have always pursued profit and trade. Then, capitalism becomes naturalized: it becomes equivalent to exchange. The ways in which exchange occurs change (different tools, different relationships, etc.)...and all this is simply the history of capitalism.

One of the main virtues of structural causality is that it is fairly easily able to avoid these unpleasant variants contained within mechanical causality. And on my reading, structural causality in fact will always have an easier time avoiding mechanical causality than it will have avoiding the next model of causality to consider, expressive causality. This is directly due, we shall see, to the Spinozist inspiration for structural causality.

We can think of mechanical causality as a sort of externalism, in which any given thing or phenomenon, considered as an effect, is caused by something other to it. By contrast, then, it is helpful to think of expressive causality as a model that corrects externalism with a kind of internalism. Effects are seen in this case not as external to their causes and thus distinct from them, but as expressions of their causes instead. One can easily see how such a model would allow for the existence of something like capitalism as a distinct mode of production, while avoiding both the transcendent, idealist Platonism and the hyper-empiricist atomism that mechanism encourages. For in this model causes present themselves, at least a bit, in what they bring about. They are in the real, a real presence. And it is on the question of the distinctness, or not, of causes (or essences, it is easy to see now) from their effects that different variants open up within expressive causality.

Of course, Hegel is in many ways the paradigm for this type of

causality in Althusser's discussions of it. Consider here the clichéd and ridiculous criticism of Hegel: that he could deduce the necessity of everything from the same simple system, even the existence of the keyboard I am using. But some strands of contemporary theory can be read as variants of this view. To mention just one that is relevant today: expressive causality seems to be present in paranoid and totalizing histories. Consider Foucauldian micropower, which is seen to radically permeate the social space and manners of behavior... Consider also Judith Butler's performative theory of gender identity, in which it is never clear when or if we are ever *not* performing gender. The performance of gender seems to accompany all other acts a person can possibly engage in. From this perspective, expressive causality is always able to explain *too much*, while also always saying really nothing at all, since it is always saying the same thing.

Here is how Althusser recaps these two models, as he transitions into his discussion of Marx's discovery of structural causality (the word "effectivity" in this passage is referring to the manner of presence of a cause, or a whole, or a structure):

Very schematically, we can say that classical philosophy...had two and only two systems of concepts with which to think effectivity. The mechanistic system, Cartesian in origin, which reduced causality to a *transitive* and analytical effectivity: it could not be made to think the effectivity of a whole on its elements, except at the cost of extra-ordinary distortions (such as those in Descartes' 'psychology' and biology). But a second system was available, one conceived precisely in order to deal with the effectivity of a whole on its elements: the Leibnizian concept of *expression*. This is the model that dominates all Hegel's thought. But it presupposes in principle that the whole in question be reducible to an *inner essence*, of which the elements of the whole are then no more than the phenomenal forms of expression, the inner principle of the essence being present at each point in the whole, such that at each moment it is possible to write the immediately adequate equation: *such and such an element* (economic, political, legal, literary, religious, etc., in Hegel) = *the inner essence of the whole*. Here was a model which made it possible to think the effectivity of the whole on each of its elements, but if this category – inner essence/outer phenomenon – was to be applicable everywhere and at every moment to each of the phenomena arising in the totality in question, *it presupposed that the whole had a certain nature, precisely the nature of a 'spiritual' whole in which each element was expressive of the entire totality as a 'pars totalis'*. In other words, Leibniz and Hegel

did have a category for the effectivity of the whole on its elements or parts, but on the absolute condition that the whole was not a structure. (Althusser 1970, p. 186-7)

What Althusser is actually describing here is what unifies the two models of causality discussed so far: a traditional philosophical conception of a whole in terms of a homogenous unity. The natural sciences posit this for nature, and Hegelianism posits this for Absolute Spirit (as Nietzsche posits this for the will to power, etc.): these are wholes in which one and the same set of rules and conditions applies. While such notions of a whole can certainly, Althusser claims, think of "the effectivity of the whole on its elements or parts" they fail to think of the whole as a structure, he adds. So the question is, what does thinking of the whole as a structure, rather than as anything else (a unified totality? an essence?) do? Why is this important?

Beyond externalism and internalism, mechanism and expressionism, thinking of a whole as a structure is supposed to open up a different way of thinking about the relation between causes and their effects, as well as to give us a different vision of the presence and status of a cause itself. Thus, the concept of structural causality was developed by Althusser in order to be able to explain better the real presence of something like capitalism as a distinct mode of production in diverse economic situations – situations, always, in which capitalism is also seen to have not fully saturated the field within which it operates; and thus, situations that in some way exceed the cause in question, and are not entirely permeated and affected by it. In this way, what Althusser is proposing is a conception of a whole or totality that differs from the classical philosophical one. This is why notions like overdetermination, domination, determination in the final instance, etc., would be associated with the concept of structural causality: a structural cause may be seen to dominate and determine its situation, although it never functions as a TOTAL cause for all the effects/events in a situation. In this way it differs from an expressive cause, which, on the (bad) Hegelian model, is one that does permeate the whole; and it differs from a mechanical cause, the conditions for which are universally applicable to the situation in which it occurs. As Althusser describes it:

If the whole is posed as *structured*, i.e., as possessing a type of unity quite different from the type of unity of the spiritual whole... not only does it become impossible to think the determination of the elements by the structure in the categories of analytical and transitive causality, *it also becomes impossible to think it in the category of the global*

expressive causality of a universal inner essence immanent in its phenomenon. The proposal to think the determination of the elements of a whole by the structure of the whole posed an absolutely new problem in the most theoretically embarrassing circumstances. (Althusser 1970, p. 187)

And the next lines of this passage are where Althusser claims that it was Spinoza who signals the way out of this theoretical embarrassment.

Notice the description of expressive causality here in terms of immanence: it posits a totality, a whole, whose “inner essence” is “immanent in its phenomenon”. This suggests that structural causality, by contrast, is not going to lean exclusively on the notion that a structure is immanent in its effects either. But if it is not immanent is it transcendent, as well as being transcendental? That is, is a structural cause not only present in its effects but must it not also be in some sense *other* to them? Can it be a condition of possibility for its effects (which it must be, if we are to continue to think of it as a cause at all) without also somehow being *beyond* its effects?

This line of questioning is the focal point of Warren Montag’s brilliant essay on a debate between Pierre Macherey (who would later author, of course, *Hegel or Spinoza?*) and Althusser, which is a chapter entitled “Between Spinozists” in *Althusser and His Contemporaries* – the entire book is a must-read for anyone interested in these matters. Macherey, in a letter to Althusser in 1965, after reading the then still unpublished manuscript of *Reading Capital*, and himself still committed to the notion of structure and a certain structuralism, expressed concerns about the very presence of the notion of a “structured whole” in Althusser’s work. The issue was this: for Macherey “the idea of the whole is really the spiritualist conception of structure” (Montag 2013, p. 74). In other words, Macherey felt that retaining the notion of a whole, at all, rendered problematic the very distinction Althusser was struggling to articulate between structural causality and expressive causality; the latter, as we saw above, being linked by Althusser himself to a “spiritual” (i.e., Hegelian) notion of structure. What was at stake in Macherey’s point, as Althusser himself articulated it in his written reply to Macherey, was the difference between positing a “latent” structure vs. positing one that is, in Althusser’s own words, an “absent exteriority” (Montag 2013, p. 75-6). Relying on a notion of latent structure would of course bring up the hermeneutic problems that Althusser was keen to avoid throughout *Reading Capital*, and such a notion is not all that different from a key aspect of expressive causality itself. As Montag puts it, this would be

a “theory according to which the meaning of a text is expressed in all its parts, each of which in turn is read insofar as it is reduced to the meaning that pervades the whole” (Montag 2013, p. 81). The direction Althusser wanted to go, no doubt, was toward the notion of structure as, not latent, but an “absent exteriority” then. Althusser therefore seems comfortable with hanging on to a notion of structure that is in some sense distinct from what it structures. Freeing Althusser from Spinoza is very much about how to make such a move, for, as we shall see, his Spinozism ultimately obscures it.

As is well known, Spinoza can be read as both an atheist and a pantheist. In one and the same passage from *Reading Capital*, Montag observes that, discussing the manner in which structure is supposed to be present (and not latent) in the real, “Althusser will employ the formulae ‘present in its effects’ and ‘exists in its effects’ as if they are synonymous, while in fact they constitute the two opposing directions that readings of Spinoza have taken, the pantheist and the atheist” (Montag 2013, p. 90). At first blush, this may be making a mountain out of a molehill: there hardly seems to be any difference between saying that a structure or cause is *present in* its effects versus saying it *exists in* its effects. If the point is to avoid a notion of *latent* structure, it would seem that either formulation would work fine. However, there are very different implications to each, as Montag keenly observes. If a structure is merely “present in” its effects, this suggests that structure may well be present elsewhere – a structure present in its effects is not necessarily exhausted by its effects. Thus, it may be “present in” as well as “absent from”. Such a structure would be, in principle, transcendent to what it is present in. And if it is transcendent to what it is present in, it is not all that different from the expressivist notion of a latent structure – this is chief among Montag’s, and Macherey’s, concerns.

Montag’s idea is that if, as Althusser also put it, structure is said instead to “exist in its effects,” then this would amount to going with a more radically “atheistic” conception of it: for the implication is that that’s all there is to it; structure is only there in them and nowhere else. Hence going more in the direction of Spinoza than Hegel, in this context, means less transcendence and more immanence. More Spinoza, according to Macherey and Montag, means saying not that structure is somehow magically “present in” its effects...but that it just *is in* them, full stop. The god is in the statue, but not only there, in this one statue, but elsewhere as well...in other places and phenomena *at the same time*...

and yet nowhere else.

But is this view – let's call it radical immanence – a sufficiently atheistic Spinozism? I suggest that Althusser's own notion of an "absent exteriority" would go even farther in this direction, even if it risks repeating the problems found in a notion of latent structure. As Montag himself notes, Althusser did wish to avoid "any reading of overdetermination as chance or indeterminate and therefore unknowable disorder" (Montag 2013, p. 96). The point, I take it, is that Althusser was concerned that there would be an insufficient difference between a doctrine that would uphold the radical immanence of structure and the hyper-empiricism of mechanistic causality. What Montag identifies as the atheist reading of Spinoza amounts to holding that a structure *just is* in its effects. And if that is the case...then there is nothing, strictly speaking, but effects.

Let's agree that Althusser too had to avoid any notion of a latent structure in order not to fall in to expressivism. And so he had to go in the direction of Spinoza to work his way out of this particular version of Hegelian philosophy. But, as Montag points out, Althusser also felt like he had to avoid the doctrine of radical immanence (the atheist, not pantheist, Spinoza, as Montag would have it), since this would have been hyper-empiricist in its own way: it would have been, as Montag describes it, "a lapse into a 'pluralism' and 'hyper-empiricism,' according to which Marxism is nothing more than the observation of innumerable indifferent and indeterminate factors, to cite the critique of Althusser's comrade Gilbert Mury" (Montag 2013, p. 93). Here we see the difficult position the concept of structural causality is in, caught between the Scylla and Charybdis of mechanistic empiricism and spiritualist expressivism, seeking what seems to be an impossible middle ground between them. Montag wishes to place an atheist interpretation of Spinoza in that middle ground, not appreciating sufficiently that the radical immanence of structure makes it hardly discernible from the pluralism and hyper-empiricism of mechanistic causality that are also to be avoided.

Rather than seeing Althusser's use of both "present in" and "exists in" as an inconsistency or hesitation that could be settled by going in the direction of a more atheistic reading of Spinoza, we should take the use of both phrases to signal the way toward a key positive insight. One must be able to say both at the same time – present in and exists in – if one is to think of structure as an "absent exteriority". This does risk positing structure as a latent structure, but that risk is

ultimately avoided by marking the structure's exteriority as "absent". This should be taken to mean not that a structure is absent from what it effects, in the sense that it is beyond, but rather that its very exteriority is itself an absent, voided out one. So that if there is a Spinozism here, it is not one in which there is a superabundant substance/cause/structure, but instead a hollowed-out one: a void placed there where there was God or Nature. One could argue (as Zizek and others have, of course) that this is the way to understand Hegel.

But what is this really doing? How is marking structural cause as an "absent exteriority" not making structure into nothing at all? One of the keys to Althusser's philosophy of course is the distinction between real objects and conceptual, theoretical objects. Claiming that a structural cause is an "absent exteriority" is another way of saying that structure is a conceptual object, and not a real object. What does that mean? Conceptual objects are not identical to real objects (the concept of sugar is not sweet), but they are not merely fake or unreal for all that either. Similarly, Althusser's view that structures are an absent exteriority avoids simply identifying structures with what they are structuring, while also avoiding seeing them as *mere* "constructs" – since they are, after all, identified as causes...just as one should not assert that the conceptual objects of the natural sciences are merely constructed since they are not identical to the objects of the senses. Such objects are indeed *produced* by a theoretical labor and leap, and yet this does not take away from their real efficacy. Structural causes are to be thought of in a similar manner, and reducing them to the immanent obscures this.

If one problem with Spinozism is its proximity to an atheoretical pluralism – the "atheist" Spinozism, which would seem to reduce a cause or structure to its effects – another problem with it is its derealization of the apparent. This is what Hegel called Spinoza's acosmism, and, as I mentioned earlier, it does not seem to be of concern to Macherey and Montag.

It is certainly the case that in order to get a grip on the true nature of the real some kind of parallax view is required, as Zizek has long argued: some way of looking awry, some theoretical break is needed in order to get a grasp on what is really there. The distinction between ideology and science is still entirely relevant. But it is also a mistake to take this to mean that the apparent is false and unreal...which is another problem with what going too far in a Spinozist direction does.

A Hegelian thesis that is helpful in this context is articulated in the *Logic*: it is of the essence of essence to appear. Modified for our purposes, this would mean that a structural cause *is not without its effects*. This is a thesis, I suggest, that cannot be maintained within a Spinozist framework, and is one of the reasons why Hegel rightly accused Spinoza of acosmism, not atheism.

What does acosmism mean? Literally, of course, it means that the cosmos does not exist – a ridiculous point to make about Spinoza, it would seem. But given the irreality of time and finitude in Spinoza, is it not possible to take Spinoza to be saying just this? Even someone as otherwise sympathetic to Spinoza as Deleuze noted this very point. For Spinoza, he wrote,

there still remains a difference between substance and the modes: Spinoza's substance appears independent of the modes, while the modes are dependent on substance, but as though on something other than themselves. Substance must itself be said *of* the modes and only *of* the modes. Such a condition can be satisfied only at the price of a more general categorical reversal according to which being is said of becoming, identity of that which is different, the one of the multiple, etc. (Deleuze 1994, p. 40)

What else is this saying other than that the modes are *irreal*? And is this not to agree with Hegel's charge of acosmism?

Structural causality upholds the status of structure as a real presence. But it should also be taken to mean that the presence of structure *is in the apparent*, without any hint of a de-realization of the apparent – which is a needless and unjustified move, as the distinction between conceptual and real objects shows us. What this allows for is the thesis that something of the apparent is able to overrun its conditions. Thus, only some aspects of the apparent are effects of the cause – not the whole of the apparent. A structural cause is thus not fully determining of a situation, and this is just what the notion of determination in the last instance is supposed to be getting at. There may well be a dominant shape to a given domain, but there is always more in the domain than what is causing its particular, dominant shape. An acosmism couldn't strictly speaking allow for this: for the apparent must be real for this kind of "downward causation" (or upward?) to be the case.

Thus, structural causality lets one hang on to the apparent and preserve the appearances, thereby avoiding the philosophical errors of reductionism and de-realization...while also giving us a purchase on

a truth and a real that are not self-evident (that are not, in Althusser's terminology, ideological), by means of the creation of conceptual objects. Can't we read Hegel as an inversion of Spinozism, wherein we see a much-needed now *promotion* of what otherwise appears to be derived and merely apparent (thinking, culture, etc.)? And where in the place of God/substance/Nature, we have an (active, efficacious) void/cause? What Montag describes as the incomplete project of Althusser's philosophy seems to lie more in this Hegelian direction than in the direction of Spinoza.

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