

# Althusser and "Communism"

## Étienne Balibar

**Abstract:**

This paper aims at examining the relation of Althusser to communism, its levels and instances, as well as the transformations of his thought with regard to the communism. It explores the possibilities of communism as understood and theorized by Althusser himself.

**Keywords:**

Althusser, Marxism, Communism, theory, politics.

I must begin with some preliminary remarks, caveats if not warnings. The first is that I am too directly implicated in the history which I am going to discuss to see it from an external and objective point of view. This entails both advantages and disadvantages. Among the advantages, I would include, to speak as Nicole-Edith Thévenin recently has, the engagement of the subject in its object, which means that there is an interest in its truth and not only a concern for the possibility of objectivity. Among the disadvantages I would include the inevitable *inadequation* of my ideas on the question, in the Spinozian sense of a knowledge "of the first kind," "mutilated and confused," because it is based in a large part on memories and mostly subject to the illusion that I am able to maintain by virtue of having been the contemporary of certain facts and events, which in reality have to a great extent eluded me and without doubt continue to elude me. This is particularly true of Althusser's facts and gestures, intentions, even obsessions. I was his student and close friend from 1961 to his death, but I am very far from having having known everything, including what concerns his political and philosophical ulterior motives. The published texts, including the enormous mass of posthumous publications, only partially alleviate my uncertainties. Moreover, unlike others, I have not done any research in the archives. Memories, thus, can continue their work of concealment.

The second remark is more fundamental. Any reflection on the relations between Althusser and "communism" by definition refers to our current perception of what is or what was communism, as a political and ideological phenomenon inscribed in history, at the same time that it can contribute to enlightening it. Likewise, it is based on the perception that Althusser himself had, or rather it attempts to elucidate it. Between these two perceptions, ours and his, both of which are evolving, there is necessarily a discrepancy [*décalage*], and a temporal discrepancy begins, resulting in an intellectual discrepancy. For Althusser, communism, as a

“movement” (I will return to the connotations of the term), thought itself in the *present*, a present which was at the same time, as Leibniz would say, “pregnant with the future.” The more this present was troubled, uncertain, contradictory, the more its reality was affirmed and, in a way, perceived, because the contradiction could be thought of as an intrinsic characteristic, it could even serve to specify the modalities of the future which the present would bear. For us on the contrary (and here, I obviously take sides under the innocent appearances of an “us,” which does not oblige the reader), communism is not a real movement, it is at most (which as a matter of fact is not anything), a hope against all odds, that is, an idea or a subjective conviction. Sometime around 1989, a little before or a little after, it appeared to us that the “meaning” of history of which we were the witnesses or the inheritors was not and could not be the “transition” toward communism, in any case not in the form imagined by Marxism, even if the political movement or movements claiming this name had played a big role in history, bearing consequences that were completely paradoxical in regard to their objectives, such as the preparation of a new phase and new hegemonies in the development of capitalism and of relations of power in the world.

Thus there is a great temptation retrospectively to interpret the period in which Althusser’s communism is inscribed as the period of the acceleration of decline and decomposition, whose “contradictions,” locally as well as globally, were the warning signs, and by contrast to record his repeated assertions of the irreversible nature of the fusion of the Workers’ Movement with Marxist Theory (in capital letters), or of the entry into the phase of the death pangs of imperialism, of the proven inability of bourgeois ideology to seize the masses and to control their actions, as so many pathetic illusions.<sup>1</sup> Even in the 1978 text from Venice, ‘The Crisis of Marxism’, in which Althusser notes that Marxism was incapable of understanding its own history and integration into history—which was not for him an extrinsic limitation, a simple “insufficiency,” but what affects the interior, at its core, its scientific pretension—he still claims that the revelation of this crisis (and by the same token the possibility, even an “aleatory” one, of its resolution) is due to “the power of an unprecedented mass worker and popular movement” of which we were the contemporaries.<sup>2</sup> Thus, Althusser was not only completely taken by surprise

1 On the “fusion,” see the Goshgarian correspondence.

2 Althusser, 1978

by the real course of history in which he attempted to intervene, like every Marxist since Marx without exception, even if only by thought and theory, but it is very difficult to resist the impression that all this thought, like a bird which crashes into the glass wall of its cage, constitutes a defensive reaction against real history, in which the treasures of inventiveness (“dialectical” or not) that it often deploys merely affords a more tragic dimension. It is true that one can also attempt to read things upside down (and I do not rule out that an intention of this type is behind the symposium that we are holding, or in the minds of those who are attending): if it was proven that, fighting against not only the “crisis of Marxism,” but, what is more serious, against the crisis of *historical communism*, and seeking gradually to understand the causes, Althusser pinpointed some “absent cause” which is nevertheless real, some disordering mechanism of “encounters” or “combinations” which—very “aleatorially”—sometimes provides individuals, caught in the history of the modes of domination, the collective capacity to alter the course—whether it is called communism or something else. Thus, perhaps the weakness that in the past belonged to him, may metamorphose into a resource for today or for tomorrow. That remains to be seen.

But all this being said, I am aware of the absolute necessity—even for interpreting the work of Althusser himself—of providing a *factual* corrective to the representation of the history of the 20th century as the history of a decline and decomposition more or less deferred for a long time, contrary to what was the communist imagination. The projection of an “end,” which is ambiguous by definition, onto the process that preceded it is mystifying, in the same way that term-by-term inversions from one historical mythology into another are. The big question that seems to me must dominate the interpretation of Althusser’s elaborations and interventions in the field of the “communism” of his time, is the question of knowing whether or not the intermediary period, say from 1960 up to the milieu of the 70s, when—for a short time—the “eurocommunist” perspective was being outlined, contains a revival of challenges to capitalism, and more generally to the dominant social order, the bearer of historical *alternatives* of which we no longer have any idea of today. If one accepts, all too quickly, that the soviet regime of the Stalinist type was intrinsically part of the established order, under the appearance of a radical challenge to it, does this mean that “de-Stalinization” would, ultimately, only lead to prospects for the restoration of capitalism? And if one accepts that the anti-imperialist movements of any sort, from the Arab world to Africa and from South East Asia to Latin America, contained within themselves the

possibility of inventing another path of development than that which rests on the extreme polarization of social inequalities, does this mean that their being crushed under military dictatorships and financial-political corruption constituted the only possible outcome? The violence of the means that were implemented to achieve this destruction can rightly attest that conflict existed and that the outcome was not fatal. Similar questions arise regarding social movements, worker and non-worker, in Western Europe before and after '68. To put it plainly, what should we think today of the feeling that was shared during this period by a number of communists of my generation, and even those a little older, that we were entering into a new revolutionary season, which would also be an *alteration* in the modalities of the revolution, what Régis Debray (in close collaboration with the Cuban leaders before they fell into orthodoxy) had famously called a “revolution within the revolution” (which, it is true, not everyone viewed the orientation in the same way)? I propose that we keep this question in mind, without preconceived answers, at the same time that we examine Althusser’s trajectory.

This brings me to my subject, beginning yet again with a precaution. The word “communism” is extremely polyvalent, and even equivocal. It designates several things. Contrary to others, I do not believe that we can, even at a very high level of abstraction, reduce it to the simplicity of an idea. Or if such an idea exists, it “bursts out” from its applications and levels of realization. To judge the relationship of Althusser to communism, it is necessary to situate his engagement at different, heterogenous levels, but which are not radically separate from each other, and try to understand the variations that occur. There is no doubt that Althusser, from the moment of his “conversion” in the aftermath of the war, educated by the experience of captivity and the encounters he had there, was completely caught up and formed in the world of communism, which was for him more than for many others a total experience, but, I repeat, at different levels.<sup>3</sup>

At the first level, which I would call subjective in the ordinary sense of the term, I think that it is necessary to situate at one and the same time, in a high voltage short circuit, lived experiences and eschatological hopes, the unity of which is often united by him in the language of *fraternity*. Fraternity experienced in the present, and even in the quotidian, as we all experience in very diverse settings, among which for him meant primarily the framework of militant activities with the cellmates from the

3 See the very beautiful analysis by Stanislas Breton: Breton, 1997.

party, especially since these were, as an exception to the structures of the party of the epoch, in academic milieus, not exclusively intellectuals. At this level, but it is clearly perilous, I am equally tempted to note his relationship with his wife Héléne, ending tragically in 1980, at once functional and conflictual. Héléne, expelled from the party after the Liberation of France for reasons that have not been entirely explained, represented for Althusser an imaginary link (and even stronger) with the militant fraternities of the heroic periods (the Popular Front and Resistance).<sup>4</sup> But fraternity is also the sign under which the eschatological hopes of Althusser are inscribed, that of a society of social relations freed from the commodity form, certainly a “negative” definition, but the most precise that we can find in his texts of “communism” as a mode, or better as a *form* of social organization. At the end of his life, in texts that can appear delusional, such as the “*Thèses de juin*” from 1987 preserved in the IMEC archives (but is not delirium one of the forms under which the truth of the subject is expressed?) the quotidian and the eschatological join together in the thesis: “communism is already here,” among us, invisible or imperceptible, that is, not named as such, in the “interstices of capitalist society,” wherever men associate together in non-market activities.<sup>5</sup> Obviously there is a very high tension here, in the first degree at least, with a thesis often stated elsewhere: no society is transparent to itself, no society without ideology.<sup>6</sup> Unless one thinks, which would not be anti-althusserian perhaps, that fraternity *is the very ideology of communism*, or even that it is *communism as ideology*, as a medium of thought and life, finally freed from its class function...

Anyway, it is a bit of a leap to move from there to what I would call the second level, that of *theory*, where the important thing to say is at first, once again, negative: for Althusser (and this will become more and more clear), theory (including and above all *Marxist* theory) does not have anything to say about communism as such, it only deals with the *possibility of communism*, insofar as it is inscribed in the contradictions of capitalism, that is, in the class struggle.<sup>7</sup> It is not enough, I think, to refer here to the “real movement which abolishes the state of existing things,” even

4 Note the network of common friends of Althusser and Héléne, partly comprised of former resistance fighters.

5 Matheron, 2009.

6 The thesis asserted in *For Marx* and repeated in ‘Ideology and the Ideological State Apparatuses’.

7 Althusser, 2006

if it happened that Althusser embraces this famous formula from *The German Ideology*, because it is clear that for him it runs the risk of implementing a determinist representation of the process of the class struggle, even “in the last instance.” The term that he had increasingly favored is that of “tendency,” on the condition that it is immediately combined with “counter-tendency,” in such a way as to inscribe in the same problematic the possibility and *the impossibility* of achieving communism posed by the vicissitudes of the class struggle. This is what we must theorize, and we immediately see that such a theory can only assume very paradoxical properties from an epistemological point of view. Many problems arise, and I will indicate three, unfortunately without being able to enter into all the details here. First, should we think that the possibility is strategic and the impossibility somehow “tactical”? But politics, especially in the Machiavellian perspective that Althusser privileged while continuously seeking its adaptation to the contemporary form of class struggle, for which it had not been conceived, is nothing but a tactic. And, consequently, the question arises of knowing to what extent the realization of the “final goal,” communism, will be affected not only in its historical possibility, but in its content, by the “tactical” vicissitudes of the class struggle that engenders it.

Here, then, is grafted the second problem, which is that of the articulation between the two categories of “socialism” and “communism” inherited from the “Marxist” tradition on the basis of a very biased reading of *The Critique of the Gotha Programme*, and canonized by Stalin in his evolutionist interpretation of the revolutionary transition, which de-Stalinization has not only failed to call into question, but, on the contrary, has fully extended.<sup>8</sup> Althusser himself, until very late, reasons in these terms. It is therefore necessary to determine precisely the moment when he introduces the thesis (which is today shared by Marxists or Post-Marxists, for example, Antonio Negri) according to which socialism does not exist as a mode of production or autonomous social formation, but represents at most a name to characterize the multiplicity of circumstances in which a tendency within capitalism (that is, a tendency for its reproduction, even its adaptation or its modernization) and a tendency in communism (identified in the insistence of *forms of social relations* rather than a *mode of production*) confront one another.<sup>9</sup> I am tempted to

8 Reporting on my conversations with Chinese philosophers?

9 See the Goshgarian correspondence

maintain that this thesis is a by-product of the discussion of the “dictatorship of the proletariat” from 1976, in which occurs a very contradictory, and therefore very violent, sort of *acting out* of Althusser’s relation to the heritage of “*Leninism*,” that is, quite plainly, of Stalin. Thus springs fourth the formula: “Communism is our only strategy (...) it not only commands today, but it begins today. Better: it has already begun”<sup>10</sup> It is necessary to recognize that this formula is rather far removed from the way in which *Reading Capital* had theorized the “transition” between modes of production, which certainly multiplied the elements of “overdetermination” to ward off evolutionism and historical positivism, but which remained more than ever subordinated to a problematic of the *periodization* of the history of social formations.<sup>11</sup>

However, as far as we go in the substitution of a problematic of the present (as well as its differential tendencies and counter-tendencies, or its non-contemporaneity to itself) for a problematic of succession and periodization, there is something which clearly does not change, namely, the idea that the motor of history is the class struggle, “complicated” and “supplemented” if necessary with every other kind of levels and practices, distributed according to the registers of an economic, political, and ideological class struggle (even though essentially any class struggle is political: politico-economic, politico-ideological, or political-state or anti-state ) but only to occupy the place of the “determination in the last instance.”<sup>12</sup> This is why Althusser was completely deaf and blind to the way in which feminism reassessed *the univocality* of emancipation movements, permanently “pluralizing” the idea of forming a process of transformation of social relations or of questioning domination. And he reacted with an extreme violence, in advance, as it were, to the idea that the “mass ideological revolt” of 68 (according to his not entirely irrelevant expression however, if “revolt” is taken in a positive sense : Rancière would have only a small transformation to make in order to return, in the words of Rimbaud, to the “logical revolts”) could constitute the form of an anti-authoritarian struggle that has social bases, but the meaning of which was not defined by the interests and experiences of the working class.<sup>13</sup>

10 Althusser 1977, Althusser 1976a

11 This was particularly the case in my own contribution: Balibar, 1969.

12 See the text “On the Cultural Revolution” published anonymously by Althusser in the *Cahiers Marxist-Léninistes*: Althusser, 2010.

13 The expression “mass ideological revolt” of the students and lycées is particularly used in ‘A propos de l’article de Michel Verret... (Althusser 1969b) and in a letter dated 15 March 1969 to

In the final analysis, we see the dilemma that every rereading of Althusser's propositions, at different stages of its development, will inevitably place before us: if these propositions are inseparable from the assertion of the "primacy of the class struggle," and if the primacy of the class struggle is that which articulates Marxism to communism, do we retain the whole of this system to think the "tendencies" that we want to inscribe in a historically *present moment*, even at the cost of new definitions, or do we consider it necessary to suppress or relativize certain elements, and which ones? It is not certain that this is possible one way or the other.

But it is here that we arrive at the third level of Althusser's "communism," or the communism with which Althusser maintains what might be called a relation of critical interiority: this level is *communist organization*, not only as a project or methodology of political action thought in principle, at the level of the concept, but as a *given*, even if it is contradictory (and if its contradictions more and more appear to be intrinsic, constitutive of it). We must also play here, it seems to me, with several terms. One of them, obviously, is "party," both in the sense of taking part, or of *taking a position* in society, the class struggle, thought, philosophy (it happened that Althusser, at the beginning of the 60's, at the height of his "theoreticism," spoke of the "party of the concept," a term he said he had found in Marx), and in the sense of a historically constituted organization: the "French Communist Party," officially called the section of the Communist International – i.e. the Komintern dissolved in 1943 for which it is clear that, like other militants of his generation, he was nostalgic. He completely identified with this party ("the Party" with capital P), but in order to transform it, to protect it from its "deviations," even to prescribe it paths to its internal rehabilitation, at least obliquely. Thus it could seem that the idea of the party *divides in two*, that there is a kind of empirical communist party, he feels at odds with if not foreign to, and an ideal communist party, which is the true object of Althusser's fidelity.<sup>14</sup> But the constant feature of his attitude, which applies to the "offensive" battles of the 60s, and to the major conflict over "socialist humanism," as well as to the "defensive," if not to say desperate, battles at the end of the 70s, against what had seemed to him a shift toward "bourgeois democracy" of the so-called strategy of the "common program" (not to say against the

---

Maria-Antonietta Macciocchi: Macciocchi, 1969.

14 Cf. Althusser, 1974, 274.

16 Althusser and "Communism"

general idea of Eurocommunism);<sup>15</sup> this constant feature is the conviction that the struggles for the transformation of the party can and must be carried out *inside* by "forces" present in the party, and can only be lost and turned against their objective if they are carried out from the outside. In a way the ideal party is a fragment of the real party, what it reveals to itself and should prevail.<sup>16</sup> Hence Althusser's extraordinary reluctance to follow the path of "dissidence," of which I can personally attest to, in particular for having contributed to the revision of the pamphlet *What Must Change in the Party* in 1978, which it is clear that it would have cost Althusser an excruciating amount of effort, probably not without subsequent aggravation on his mental state.<sup>17</sup>

However the "party" is only one of the names or forms under which, in Althusser's discourse, the question of *communist organization* presents itself to us. There are others which spill over the level of the "party," I am tempted to say extensively and intensively. Both concern the idea of the *workers' movement*. First there is the question of the *international communist movement* considered precisely as a form (and even a superior form, on the world scale) of the workers' movement as it would be established for revolution and the passage to communism first, from its "encounter," then its "fusion," with Marxist theory. It is very striking to see that Althusser maintained against the wind and tide the idea of a virtual unity between elements of a movement more and more fragmented and involved in geopolitical confrontations of the State, because of its supposed opposition irreducible to a single adversary, world imperialism. Which also led him to pose the problem of the crisis of Marxism regarding as an effect of the inability of communists to analyze the opposing divisions between the socialist countries, China and the USSR, later followed by Brezhnev's USSR and the western "Eurocommunist" parties, was to see these as contradictions internal to the movement. This conviction, is I believe, apart from personal allegiances and friendships, the underlying reason for the "double-dealing" that Althusser was tempted to practice for some years—essentially between 65 and 67—between the officially pro-soviet and certainly anti-Chinese PCF, and the Maoist organization created by certain of his older students which, eluding his

.....  
15 What Andrea Cavazzini in an excellent little book (Cavazzini, 2009) calls "Althusser's last struggle," an allusion to a title by Moshe Lewin: *Lenin's Last Struggle*.

16 Still the eschatological schema of the 'remnant of Israel'...

17 The text first appeared in the form of four articles from the journal *Le Monde*, 24-27 avril 1978 (republished in a library volume, François Maspero, Paris 1978).

17 Althusser and "Communism"

grasp, had over run the strategy he had elaborated for them, and under the direct influence of Beijing (even if this was for a very short time) had begun to constitute a pole of attraction in the face of the CP and the General Confederation of Labor. This double-dealing would cost him dearly, on both the political front and the emotional front, since it led to his being attacked from both sides. But the conviction that underlay him (which might, once again, be called an illusion) was that the *membra disjecta* of the “international communist movement” *must* sooner or later join, and that it was necessary in this moment for vanishing mediators to arise, “disappearing into their intervention,” (*Lenin and Philosophy*, 1968), that is to say, “philosophers,” not in order to negotiate agreements from the mountaintop but to “think” the historical conditions and perspectives for this refoundation.

This could be an illustration of what I believe to have been a strategic—and I am also tempted to say *stylistic*—factor of the conception that Althusser had of theory and more precisely of philosophy in relation to *organized politics*. He sought to “found” theoretically at the same time, not exactly a clerical or “ecclesiastical”<sup>18</sup> conception, in which philosophy serves a previously defined political line; also not—despite his proclaimed admiration for the great “leader theoreticians”: Lenin, Gramsci, Mao, extinct with Stalinism and de-Stalinization— as a guiding and almost “sovereign” conception, corresponding to the idea of a *deduction* of political practice from “scientific” knowledge of the social totality; but on the contrary both as a pedagogical and critical conception aiming to register in the *vicinity* of political decision (as well as in the *difference*, the “interior distance” or the “emptiness of a distance taken” in relation to the political)<sup>19</sup> A conception close enough, it seems, to which the ecclesiastical tradition, of which Althusser remained extremely close through his training and certain of his friends, called *potestas indirecta*: the “spiritual power” or “intellectual power” that did not substitute for political power but overdetermined it, and thus in a way characterizes the political essence of “conjunctural” politics.

But what is even more interesting, for us today, is the way in which the question of the “party form” itself emerged in Althusser—without it

18 As Bernard Pudal correctly says in his commentary on *Lettre à Henri Krasucki* from 1965, an extraordinarily revealing document, testifying to another moment of the ‘double act’: see the documents published on the Fondation Gabriel Péri Foundation: Pudal, (date)

19 Matheron, 2009.

ever being exactly formulated in these terms.<sup>20</sup> The question of the “party form” does not only concern so-called “democratic centralism,” correlative to the “dictatorship of the proletariat” in Stalin’s construction, but above all the idea of the hierarchical distinction between the “economic class struggle” and “political class struggle,” as embodied by the organizational distinction between the party and the trade union, where the latter belongs to the system of “transmission belts” of the party and of the dictatorship of the proletariat itself—according to Stalin’s eloquent formula perpetuated in every communist party but severely undermined by the strikes of 1968 and, in Italy at least, by the factory struggles and the emergence or resurgence of the “council” forms of organization from below.<sup>21</sup>

Here is the heart of Lenin’s contradictory legacies, in Stalinism as well as in Gramsci. It is interesting that Althusser had come, in the texts of the period of “crisis” (in particular the intervention of the Venice colloquium, “The Crisis of Marxism” to pose an *intrinsic limit of Marxism*, of which the origin was in Marx himself, what he called the “calculable concept of surplus-value,” as the quantitative difference between the value of labor and the value retained or created by its productive utilization (the responsibility for which he attributes, in *Capital*, to the famous Hegelian order of exposition, once more the root of error in his eyes).<sup>22</sup> Because, according to him, this conception which would relegate to the margins the articulation of the accumulation of capital and its logic with the concrete forms of exploitation and extortion of surplus labor as experienced by workers, would be precisely the origin of the division between the levels of organization, or at least of the inability of Marxist theory to fight its perpetuation, which in addition corporatist interests sustain by apparatuses organizing the class struggle and their cadres (obviously one might think that Marxist theory is here judge and jury).<sup>23</sup>

Such thoughts can give one the feeling that we are in a rearguard battle with organizational forms and the conception of the party with

20 Contrary to what was happening at the same time in certain branches of Italian *Workerism* that he had completely ignored at first, but which it is not absolutely impossible that he was aware of afterwards. And above all, I think, in the tendency of “the left” of the PCI, such as Pietro Ingrao and syndicalists such as Bruno Trentin, or the exterior by Rossana Rossanda and the journal *Il Manifesto*. Cf. my intervention in the Padua colloquium on Rossana Rossanda.

21 See the implicit indications in Georges Séguy’s *mémoires*: Séguy, 2008 on his conflict with the direction of the party, represented within the CGT by Henri Krasucki. See also Trentin, 1980.

22 Althusser, 1977, p. 247-266.

23 Althusser, 1978b, p. 281-296.

which, as I have recalled, Althusser himself was completely impregnated. But I would like, by way of a provisory conclusion, to qualify this impression by invoking a banal, but quite persistent, formula to which Althusser periodically had recourse: the formula that suggests that Marxism (and consequently, ideally at least, the “communist party” that is demanded by it) must give rise to “another practice of politics,” in the double sense (but the two things are obviously linked) of a *new practice* in relation to that which has already existed in history, and a *heterogenous* practice in relation to that which invented the bourgeoisie (of which Marx said in the *Manifesto*, in a formula extremely ambiguous to Althusser, but one that raises a crucial problem, had “educated the proletariat to politics” to the extent that it needed to mobilize it in order to have sufficient forces, that is, mass movements, necessary to its victory over feudalism and the monarchy of the *Ancien Régime*).

What is this “other practice of politics” to which Althusser would always return, which would somehow be *specifically communist* practice? I am not entirely sure, but I can formulate some hypotheses, which partially arise from the way in which the terms of a dispute that we had in 1978 have, in retrospect, become clear to me, precisely as part of the discussion prompted by *II Manifesto* as a result of the Venice colloquium, and which had begun with Althusser’s responses to Rossanda, under the title “*Le marxisme comme théorie ‘finie’*.”<sup>24</sup> Althusser argued two things, one aimed directly against the plans for participation in coalition governments proposed in France by the Union of the Left and in Italy by the “historic compromise,” and the other being of a wider theoretical scope. The first consists in contrasting the practices of compromising apparatuses required by such alliances (which he would call, in *What Must Change in the Party*, “contractual”) and what we called here recently (Kenta Ohji) the “mass line,” that is, mass mobilization, and particularly working class masses, at the center, in an autonomous manner, as an *arbitrating* force and not a *supporting force* of official politics (he would cite several times Maurice Thorez in ’36: “we do not have ministers, but we have the ministry of the masses”).<sup>25</sup> The second, which is of a wider theoretical scope, consists in saying that the “communist party” is by definition a *party “outside the state,”* which goes beyond the idea of non-participation or non-subordination in the government. In line with what had formed the

24 Althusser, 1978b, p. 281-296. The originale version appeared in Italian in the volume *Discutere lo Stato: Posizioni a confronto su una tesi di Louis Althusser*, De Donato editore 1978.

25 Althusser, 1978, p. 118.

basis to his opposition to Khrushchevism, thus had sustained, but without saying so explicitly, his project of a “left critique of Stalinism” (that many, obviously, understood as a relic of Stalinism itself), Althusser explains without qualification that the “fusion of the party and the State” constitutes the element common to the Stalinist deviation from Marxism (and in fact from communism) and to the “socialist” politics that could emerge from the construction of a parliamentary alliance between communists and socialists, or more generally “bourgeois” parties, on the institutional terrain. This is why it is necessary that communists don’t play this game: they would lose the working class at the same time that they lose themselves. The communist party “is not a party like others,” in a way it is even the *antithesis* of all the other parties. I had objected at the time that this thesis was not compatible with the way in which the “ideological state apparatuses” allowed one to think about “parties,” and I continue to think this. But perhaps what this signifies is that the theory of the ISAs is insufficient to analyze the *ideological modalities* of the class struggle itself. This is at least what would seem to specify such texts—remarkable in many ways, even if they remain more than ever contradictory—such as the “Granada conference” on “The Transformation of Philosophy”<sup>26</sup> and the incomplete manuscript “Marx in His Limits” (1987), particularly by the strange thesis the latter upholds: the State Apparatus *is outside of the class struggle*, precisely to be able to dominate it from the point of view of the bourgeoisie (Poulantzas in the same period, in founding Eurocommunism, said exactly the opposite).<sup>27</sup> The counterpart to this thesis, therefore, would be that the communist party, in order to separate from the State, and to escape it as much as possible, must perpetually strive to *enter into the class struggle*, in particular through the door of “economic struggles,” that is, struggles that are underway in the very sites of exploitation. Hence the opposition to “the autonomy of politics” proposed by a party of Italian Marxists (notably Mario Tronti).<sup>28</sup> Hence also, perhaps, the aporia of a “communist politics” which must at once *lead (or be led)* as would a Prince, to find the “Archimedean point” where it is necessary to enter to transform the world (in any case society), and *to return* political

26 Althusser, 1976b

27 Althusser, 2006, 7-162. I later said that, in the “dispute” on the Dictatorship of the Proletariat, I had realized after the fact that Poulantzas’ position was more correct than Althusser’s (cf. Balibar, 2010, 145-164)

28 Note on the Tronti-Negri opposition: but neither does Althusser side with Negri, because one dissolved the “working class” in to the working-mass, the other in the multitude ?

power to the masses (Althusser often said, in a terminology reminiscent of the PCF of the 30s, to the “popular masses”), this capacity that they possess in themselves, but which apparatuses of every sort never cease to dispossess.<sup>29</sup>

*Translated by Joseph Serrano*

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Althusser, Louis, 1969a, *For Marx*, London: Verso, 1996
- 1969b, ‘A propos de l’article de Michel Verret sur « Mai étudiant »’, *Penser Louis Althusser*, Le Temps des Cerises, 2006.
- 1971, “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses,” trans. Ben Brewster, *On the Reproduction of Capitalism*, 232-272 London: Verso, 2014.
- 1976a ‘Un texte inédit de Louis Althusser: Conférence sur la Dictature du Proletariat à Barcelone, Revue *Période*, <http://revueperiode.net/un-texte-inedit-de-louis-althusser-conference-sur-la-dictature-du-proletariat-a-barcelone/>
- 1976b, ‘La transformation de la philosophie’, *Sur la philosophie*, Gallimard, collection ‘L’infini’, 1994.
- 1977a, ‘Avant-propos du livre du G. Duménil, *Le concept de loi économique dans « le Capital »*, *Solitude de Machiavel* Paris: PUF, 1998, 247-266.
- 1977b, *22ème Congrès*, Paris: Librairie François Maspero, Collection ‘Théorie’.
- 1978a, ‘The Crisis of Marxism’, trans. Grahame Lock, *Marxism Today*, 215-220, 227.
- 1978b, ‘Le marxisme comme théorie « finie »’, *Solitude de Machiavel*, Paris: PUF, 281-296.
- 1995, *The Future Lasts Forever*, trans. Richard Veasy, New Press
- 2006, ‘Marx in His Limits’, trans. G. M. Goshgarian, *Philosophy of the Encounter*, London: Verso, 7-162.
- 2010, ‘On the Cultural Revolution’, trans. Jason E. Smith, *Décalages*,

<sup>29</sup> Cf. the items added in my conversation with Yves Duroux in *Cahiers du GRM*.

- <http://scholar.oxy.edu/decalages/vol1/iss1/9/>.
- Balibar, Étienne, 1969, ‘The Basic Concepts of Historical Materialism’, trans Ben Brewster, *Reading Capital*, London: Verso, 223-345.
- 2010, ‘Communism and Citizenship: On Nicos Poulantzas’, *Equaliberty*, Durham: Duke UP, 145-164.
- Breton, Stanislas, 1997, ‘Althusser et la religio’, *Althusser philosophe*, ed. Pierre Raymond, Paris: PUF, 1997. (English translation in *Althusser and Theology*, forthcoming 2016.
- Cavazzini, Andrea, 2009, *Crise du Marxisme et critique de l’Etat*, Editions le clou dans le fer, Materialimes.
- Duménil, Gérard, 1978 *Le concept de loi économique dans « le Capital »*, Paris: Maspero.
- Macciochi, Marie-Antonietta, 1969, *Lettere dall’interno del PCI a Louis Althusser*, Feltrinelli.
- Matheron, Francois, 2009, ‘*La récurrence du vide chez Louis Althusser*’, *Machiavel et nous*, Tallandier.
- Pudal, Bernard, 1965 ‘*La note à Henri Krasucki*’, Gabriel Péri Foundation, [http:// www.gabrielperi.fr/la-note-a-henri-krasucki-\(1965\)-par-bernard-pudal.html](http://www.gabrielperi.fr/la-note-a-henri-krasucki-(1965)-par-bernard-pudal.html).
- Séguy, Georges, 2008, *Résister : de Mauthausen à Mai 68*, L’Archipel.
- Trentin, Bruno, 1980, *Il sindacato dei consigli. Intervista di Bruno Ugolini*, Editori Riuniti, Roma.