

On Althusser

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I had already read *Capital* twice, but always in order to research arguments and to situate myself in one or another of the Marxist-Leninist orthodoxies. In this way, within the communist section of Bastia, where I taught philosophy, we had organized a conference on salaries two years earlier, inspired by a text written by Maurice Thorez¹ on absolute pauperization that Marx's *Capital* cites. Throughout the discussion, a communist dockworker, on the basis of his own experience, had formulated serious doubts about this generalized fall of income.

In the professorial hall of the Marboeuf College, a colleague, historian of Corsica, Pierre Sim², whom reached the echo of our statistical improvisations, summoned us.

- Salary! You know what the salary was at the time of my father? Men waited at the village square. The property landlord arrived and chose with his finger some of them: "you! You! You! And You!" Four jobs had been assigned, seven others would wait till tomorrow for a possible salary.

Maurice Thorez, whose son Paul would, from time to time, join us at the Louis-Le-Grand College, in a beautiful limousine, was able to better perceive the evolution of income.

We had undertaken to read *Capital* philosophically like Alquié, Gouhier or Guérout taught us to read Descartes, Rousseau or Spinoza, by bracketing all the current political problems: no question to confuse the text and its posterior interpretations. Althusser did himself give an example of this in his magnificent book on Montesquieu³ and in his unforgettable course on Machiavelli. In this classical way we liberated our reading from all orthodoxies. And in the end we discovered a system of luminous concepts that allowed for the examination of history in a coherent and open manner. A problematic, to use a term dear to Louis Althusser.

And just in the moment when we planned *Reading Capital*, Bourdieu published an admirable analysis of the quest for independence of social classes in Algeria.⁴ The explicit reference to Marx was rare, but this was the territory where the problematic of *Capital* had to guide us: "the concrete analysis of concrete situations." Thanks to Althusser's support, the admiring review of Bourdieu's work that I wrote could appear in "La Pensée,"⁵ a Party journal.

Since then, I allowed myself, with others, mainly Christian Baudelot, to experiment with the Marxian problematic – in good company – on those terrains most relevant to it. And, following this laborious pathway, one is far from forming simplistic ideas about the societies under study, including our own: sometimes the essential data is missing, sometimes one also encounters researchers in the field who were guided by other

problematics than Marx's and who passionately highlighted the facts to properly illuminate the class struggles. I am thinking here, among others, of the sociologist of labor, Renaud Sainsaulieu, inspired by Crozier and Touraine and by the work on a long term project on the Ouvriers Spécialisés OS6, and I am certainly also thinking of Marie Duru-Bellat and Alain Mignat, whose works, broadly inspired by Raymond Boudon, has contributed to bringing school sociology closer to the everyday performances of teachers and their students.7 These discoveries about our capitalist societies should lead us not only to re-read Capital, but to reinforce the construction of a problematic that integrates the new discoveries about capitalism, particularly the discovery of human capital, which plays an essential role in production and whose reproduction very intimately concerns the class struggle in the imperialist metropolises, as Bourdieu and Passeron have shown.8 In a country like France the dividing line between social classes cannot only be defined by the inequalities of economic resources: one has to include "cultural capital", its hereditary transmission and its economic efficacy. This is an enormous, eminently collective work and one realizes that, Marxist or not, one is far from having a general theory of history and even further from disposing of a dreamlike vision of the future of societies. The 1970s renewal of the interest in the great text of Lenin9 about imperialism has rendered the task of social-class-analysis more passionate and even more difficult: today the social formation takes place on a global scale. And it is on this scale that one has to assess the contradictions without situating oneself in the petty frontiers of nations. And who knows if the rights that have been acquired by the popular classes in the imperialist metropolises are not also redistributed privileges? In any case, in 2010 the average income of 50% of the poorest French was attained or topped only by 0,6% of Indian households.10 And France is not the richest imperialist metropolis and there are southern countries that are poorer than India.

Vested in these researches, the Marx of *Capital* continues to inspire analysis and indicates paths of social transformation, even if the orthodoxies that have emerged have luckily faltered.

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September 2015
Translated by Frank Ruda

- 1 Thorez 1961.
- 2 Pierre Simi had realized a detailed study of "le Nebbio", an agricultural region in the North of Corsica and in 1981 he had published a reference book on the whole geography of Corsica.
- 3 Althusser 1959.
- 4 *Travail et travailleurs en Algérie*, in collaboration with Alain Darbel, Jean-Paul Rivet et Claude Seibel (Paris: Mouton 1963).
- 5 LA PENSÉE No 121 01/06/1965 -
- 6 Sainsaulieu 1988
- 7 Bellat & Mingazt 1997.
- 8 Bourdieu & Passeron 2000 .
- 9 Emmanuel 1962 & 1966; Magdoff 1975.
- 10 Jaffrelot 2012.

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