

# **Towards a Revolutionary Science**

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**Abstract:** The article seeks in Louis Althusser's writings from the sixties and seventies, elements that would allow us to read Spinoza's gravitation in his reading of Marx, concerning a question about the links between philosophy, science, and politics. The work is organized around the so-called "moment of self-criticism" in Althusser's writing, in which the definition of philosophy widens in order to investigate the possibilities and tensions of a materialism that is capable of simultaneously accommodating the concern for objectivity and the assumption of the inherent politicity of philosophy. In this sense, the essay sets out to develop some of the possibilities opened up for materialist thought by the insistence of the paradoxical figure of a "revolutionary science", focusing on two principles that take force in the early Althusserian reading of Marx but unfold its consequences in his movement of self-criticism: the epistemic criterion of the interiority of theoretical practices and the historical principle of the primacy of the relations of production over the productive forces. The aim is to connect some dispersed developments in order to contribute to a collective and long-term work of reflection on the possibilities of a materialist dialectic for the 21st century, as a conflictive ontology capable of taking contradiction as a *real* contradiction.

**Keywords:** Althusser, Spinoza, Materialism, Overdetermination, Transindividual

### Materialism I. Primacy of practice

The renewed interest in Louis Althusser's thought, that has been sparked by the posthumous publication of his numerous manuscripts since 1990, has found a significant impetus from various readers in the field of Spinozist studies.<sup>1</sup> This can be attributed, to some extent, to the relevance of several of his former disciples, including Etienne Balibar and Pierre Macherey, in the development of a materialistic reception which, as Warren Montag and Diego Tatián points out, in his Prefaces to the Spanish edition of *Spinoza and Politics* (Balibar, 2011), together with the decisive contributions of philosophers from other intellectual backgrounds, such as Alexandre Matheron and Martial Guerout, who gave rise to an important philosophical tradition, which also includes Gilles Deleuze, Miguel Abensour, Jaques Rancière, Alain Badiou, among others. This theoretical alliance can also be read within the broader framework of the Marxist tradition, which finds its antecedents not only in Marx's notebooks devoted to studying Spinoza's *Theological-Political Treatise*, written in 1841, but also in figures such as Plekhanov in his

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\*A Spanish preliminar version of his essay was published with the title "Althusser con Spinoza. Hacia una ciencia revolucionaria" In *Nuevo Itinerario. Revista de Filosofía*, N° 16 (1). Mayo 2020.

<sup>1</sup> Among others, W. Montag, V. Morfino, J. D. Sánchez Stop, G.M. Goshgarian, M. de Gainza.

*Fundamental Problems of Marxism* (1978). Warren Montag warns in the preface to the English edition of Balibar's book, that in each successive crisis within Marxism, brought about by the stabilization and expansion of capitalism following an economic or political crisis that was hailed as the last one – as in the 1890s, 1920s, 1970s or 1980s – many Marxists turned to Spinoza's philosophy."(Montag, 2008, p.ix). Thus, we can read the "Althusserian moment" of the Spinozian inheritance as the effort to traverse from the most persistent crisis which, since the last decades of the last century and up to the present day, has captured critical thought in a process of impoverishment of that singular conjunction of theoretical force and political power that was known as "Marxism".

It is interesting, in this sense, to return to the crossroads of Althusser's intervention in the agonal field of twentieth-century Marxism, in order to pursue therein some of those elements which shaped the encounter between Marx and Spinoza, at the dawn of that last "crisis of Marxism" - loudly proclaimed by Althusser in 1977<sup>2</sup> – and to explore the gaps and tensions of that heritage in what it still has to offer, as an enigma and therefore as a task. In his words: "We have reached a point such that it depends on us, on our political and theoretical lucidity, whether the crisis in which Marxism has very nearly perished culminates not just in its survival, but in nothing less than its liberation and rebirth" (2006, p.12). The recommencement of Marxist theory demands, according to Althusser, the assumption of a limit position: "Marx said, on at least one occasion, 'I am not a Marxist'." (p.14).

The truth of the matter is that Marx was profoundly convinced – let us, rather, say absolutely convinced, without the least inner hesitation – that he had inaugurated a new form of knowledge, pitted, as the only true one, against all the others that had been advanced in this domain: the knowledge of the conditions forms and effects of the class struggle, at least in the capitalist mode of production.

(...)

However, in affirming that he was 'not a Marxist', Marx was protesting in advance against any interpretation of his work as a philosophical or ideological system or vision, and, in particular, as a reworking of the 'philosophies of History'. He was protesting, above all, against the idea that he had at last discovered the 'science' of the 'object' which, in the bourgeois culture of the time, bore the name Political Economy. Marx was thereby protesting in

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<sup>2</sup> It was in 1977 that Althusser delivered for the first time, in the lecture entitled "Finally the crisis of Marxism! this expression, but the realization of this crisis percussed Althusser's thought since the beginning of his reading of Marx up to his last days, not only in terms of a political analysis, but especially as the productive pulse of his philosophical writing. And its marks can be read from the philosophical interventions in *La Pensee* to his last writings of the 1980s.

advance against the idea that his thought could lay claim not only to presenting but also to possessing a total or totalizing unity, constituting a body of thought that could then be labelled ‘Marxism’, and that this ‘unified’ *oeuvre* could have been produced by ‘an’ author... (Althusser, 2006, p.15)

Five years earlier, in his *Essays of Self-Criticism*, Althusser proposed this task in the certainly audacious terms of defending the theoretical condition (and therefore, the limits) of Marxism based on thinking from “dialectical-materialist (therefore non-speculative and non-positivist) positions, trying to appreciate that quite extraordinary, because unprecedented, reality: Marxist theory as a revolutionary theory, Marxist science as a *revolutionary science*” (1976, p.115).

It is also in this essay where he explicitly confesses the guilt of his Spinozist passion (p.126). The “self-criticism” consists there in a reflexive movement problematizing the Bachelardian gravitation of “epistemological break” that inspired him, starting from the consideration of those extra-theoretical historical aspects that it does not allow him to conceptualize:

...it was therefore necessary to “prove” that there is an antagonism between Marxism and bourgeois ideology, that Marxism could not have developed in Marx or in the labor movement except given a radical and unremitting break with bourgeois ideology, an unceasing struggle against the assaults of this ideology. This thesis was correct. It still is correct. But instead of explaining this historical fact in all its dimensions – social, political, ideological and theoretical – I reduced it to a simple theoretical fact: to the epistemological “break “which can be observed in Marx’s works from 1845 onwards. (1976, pp.105-106)

His thought opens in this gesture to a practical movement that will give rise to a process of reformulation of the very definition of philosophy: from its “theoreticist”<sup>3</sup> conception of philosophy as “Theory of theoretical practice”, towards a definition of (the materialist position in) philosophy as a practice of polemical intervention (of *taking sides*) in the field of theory – that is, of Philosophy, with capital letters (cf. Althusser, 2006, 251-289). This displacement occurs together with the assumption that “practice” is not the object of materialist philosophy, simply because

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3 Against Althusser himself, it is possible to identify the political sense of his approach to the link between philosophy and science in his “theoreticist” moment, as Sánchez Stop does, by pointing out that the emphasis on the autonomy of scientific practices and of the second nature of philosophy in relation to them, has as its background the discussion with the Stalinist interpretation of Diamat as a “general science of matter in motion” of which the sciences (biology, linguistics, history) would be nothing but the application to fields of its general principles (2018, 543, my translation).

it – unlike the sciences – has no object. It will no longer be a matter of “reconstructing from a philosophy ‘in a practical state’ an authentic theoretical philosophy, but of understanding, with all its consequences, philosophy as a practice” in which “Althusser’s main ally will be Spinoza” (Sánchez Stop, 2017, pp. 543-544, my translation).

Hasty readings, bent on establishing periodization, turns or radical cessations, have resolved the tension of this twist in Althusserian thought by managing its “stages” between early theoricism and a sudden preoccupation with politics in the aftermath of the events of ‘68. In this rough sketch, some of the most luminous gestures of his reading of Marxist theory are neglected; among them, the question of the possibility of a critique of epistemology capable of accommodating a politicized conception of objectivity, to render thinkable, the *aporia* of a “revolutionary science”.

This revolutionary condition can be read there in two ways, the first relating to the radically new circumstances of this science which implies a “revolution” in the field of the problem of knowledge; a revolution which, in his writings of the 1960s, Althusser identifies as a radical rupture and as the rise of radically new terms that open a new continent to science, that of the theory of history. This has an impact on the concept of ideology, while reformulating the question of the production of knowledge and the challenges that this new science poses to philosophy and to its relationship with science, understood in materialist terms. But “revolutionary science” is also here an indication of a redoubled problem, opened within the operation of “self-criticism”: if this Marxist science intervenes in a revolutionary way in the field of epistemology, it is because it involves a radically new way of thinking the complexity and multiplicity of the relationship between science and revolution.

It could be said that in the absence of the “and” that struggles between science and revolution, the aporetic power of the idea of a “revolutionary science” is indicated. It is there that the wedge of the question of materialist dialectics is placed. Between science and revolution, the movement of materialist thought is played out not as a pure discontinuity, but rather as a *continuous rupture*, placing a dilemma that constitutes one of the crossroads of the Althusserian problematic in which Spinoza and Marx meet.

The Spinozian formula, *verum index sui et falsi* (E, II, P 43, sc.),<sup>4</sup> frequently mentioned in Althusser’s writings, allows him to approach

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4 “What can there be which is clearer and more certain than a true idea, to serve as a standard of truth? As the Light makes both itself and the darkness plain, so truth is the standard both of itself and of the false. (...) Finally, as to the last, namely, how a man can know that he has an idea which agrees with its object? I have just shown, more than sufficiently, that this arises solely from his having an idea which does agree with its object -or that truth is its own standard. Add to this that our mind, insofar as it perceives things truly, is part of the infinite intellect of God (by P11 C); hence, it is as necessary that the mind’s clear and distinct ideas are true as that God’s ideas are. (Spinoza, 1994:142-3)

the complexity of this cut, in the double dimension indicate above. For, although Spinoza's gravitation becomes more explicit at the very moment in which Althusser broadens his definition of philosophy in order to conceptualize its connection with politics and consequently abandons the pursuit of an "object" of philosophy that homologized it with scientific practices, Althusser maintains the principle of practice as the criterion of the true. And it does so by insisting on the legacy of Spinoza.

Firstly, in terms of the activity of knowing, the idea of the true indicating itself and what is false, accounts for the criterion of the radical interiority of theoretical practices and the retroactive temporality of their demarcation in respect to an ideology which becomes, in that very gesture, its "prehistory". Althusser starts posing that Spinoza discarded the problem of the "criterion of Truth" (1976, p. 137) in order to specify that the main question is not a rejection *in toto* of the true but to warn that a juridicist or extra-theoretical conception of the criterion of truth (whether it comes from the Aristotelian tradition of adequacy, or from the Cartesian tradition of evidence) turns philosophy into a legislator and judge of scientific practices. In this sense, he recalls the Spinozian idea of the true indicating itself " ...not as a Presence but as a Product, (...) this position is not unrelated to the "criterion of practice", (...) this Marxist "criterion" is not exterior but interior to practice, and since this practice is a process (...) the criterion is no form of Jurisdiction" (1976, 137).

As Juan Domingo Sánchez Stop suggests, the true appears not as an unveiling but as the effect of a polemical activity, of a production-demarcation which is immanent to the totality in which philosophy itself is rooted and from which it does not distinguish itself *a priori*, but as the result of a practical and continuous intervention of separation and adjustment (Sanchez Stop, p.549). Insofar as philosophy is in the whole, it is part of the very conjuncture in which it intervenes, so it cannot maintain a speculative distance (of pure knowledge) with that conjuncture. "From this comes that a Thesis does not have an 'object' but a field of intervention (*enjeu*)."  
(Sanchez Stop, 2018: 549, my translation). It is key to understand that the struggle in the philosophical *kampfplatz* – which is the mark of politics *in* philosophy and the exercise of its critique of the theoretical pretensions of the imagination – is a clue condition for the production of a rigorous thinking of politics.

The difficulty with Althusserian philosophy, which explains both the forced readings that have been made of it and its tenacious vitality, lies in the fact that the clause of politicity, which is taking shape in his thought, coexists with a resistance to the abandonment of a criterion of the true. This conjunction offers all kinds of problems and tensions, but at the same time, it functions as a safeguard against the inevitable prejudices and simplifications that creep into any reading exercise.

This opens what we have recognized as the redoubled meaning of the expression "revolutionary science", which evokes not only the

idea of a radical cut, but of a kind of *fold*. This second reading will also have Spinozian thought as an “ally”, but it will have it after a long detour which, we could say, consumes all of Althusser’s writing effort and exceeds it, placing before us the task of unfolding his theory beyond itself. This form of unfolding is itself an exercise of the continuous cut, because it presents itself not only as the pivot for turning Marx against himself (the humanist “young Marx” dethroned by the mature Marx), but to set Althusser against himself, pushed to deploy the most radical consequences of a politicized practice of philosophy, as the key to materialist objectivity, without surrendering to the temptations of the false dichotomy between politicism and positivism. This unfinished task, which has no end, is one of the most vital lines of his active legacy.

In order to locate this second dimension of the dilemma, we can start from Carlos Casanova’s essay on the Marx-Spinoza concept of the political (2007), whose main ideas with respect to the way in which the Spinozian figure that we have already referred to operates in the thought of the young Marx are taken up by Diego Tatián (2012). The axiom *verum index sui et falsi* is taken up by Marx in 1842, in his “Comments on the Latest Prussian Censorship Instruction” (2010: 112), in the framework of a political interpretation of Spinozist theory of truth and then, in his *Critique of the Hegel’s Philosophy of Right*, as Casanova points out, the Spinozist expression appears already with the force of a political manifesto: by recognizing democracy as the truth of monarchy, in order to give an account of the immanent principle of the *demos*. The critique of the State – emphasizes Diego Tatián – “is a critique of all ‘form’, in favor of the *demos*, whose life is presented as an unrepresentable multiplicity and as radical excess”. Democracy against the State, that is Spinoza against Hegel” (2012, p. 177, my translation). “The *demos* is thus thought of as the ultimate background from which the foundation of politics, its own constitution, is sustained” (Casanova, 2007, p. 361, my translation). Such a link between truth and democracy, Casanova poses, allows us to think that what is truth for knowledge, is democracy for politics. And that political link with truth would persist in the form of communism, the true “secret of history deciphered”, in the *Manuscripts of 1844* (*ibid.*).

Revisited in *The German Ideology*, the political reading of the Spinozian idea of the true as an *index sui* and of the false is, at the same time, *displaced* from a certain autonomy of the political to its superstructural condition, based on social relations of production that shape the material life of men and women. For Casanova, this opens up a decisive gap with respect to the relationship between truth and politics, and therefore between Spinoza and Marx’s *Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (1971):

It seems that an essential question is at stake in the way in which these “social relations” are understood. Either they are conceived in

the sense of the ensemble, (...) as the only effective reality of human beings, that which is played out between individuals and between these and nature, as a result of their multiple practical interactions. Or they are conceived in reference to the development of the productive forces, whose first premise is man's biological needs (Casanova, 2007, p. 364, my translation).

Casanova locates a crucial question regarding the nature of Marxist materialism, which opens as a kind of dilemma between political immanence and material objectivity, in the form of a tension between the primacy of the relations – which the emphasis on the French term *ensemble* implies – and that of the development of the productive forces. This dichotomy is further reinforced in his view by the teleological substratum that assumes the axiom of economic determination. He thus assumes that the materialist premise of historical necessity presupposes mechanistic and positivist materialism: “a prioritization of the reality of man's physical forces with respect to thought, which is, in the last instance, subordinated to the conditions of the ‘natural process’ of history” (Casanova, op. cit., p. 365). Here one can infer a depoliticization of Marx, in the sense of a shift from the political foundation to its “absorption by the social” (*ibid.*), during the very transition that Althusser would recognize as an *epistemological break* towards the beginning of his theoretical maturity.

The question is not a minor one, if we consider that Althusser's thesis organizes Marx's writing in a reverse way. Spinoza allows us, in his opinion, to read, from 1845 onwards, the beginning of Marx's very materialism by means of a *radical break* (2004a, pp.187-191) against that moment that Casanova identifies as Marx's Spinozian political moment. In other words, where Casanova reads Spinoza's gravitation in Marx's conception of politics, Althusser reads a Marx still entangled in idealist-humanist jargon (rationalist and liberal until 1841, humanist-communitarian in his Feuerbachian moment, between 1842 and 1842) (Althusser, L. 2004a, pp. 184-185).<sup>5</sup> And where Casanova reads a Marx distanced from Spinoza along the lines of a mechanistic and economic positivism, Althusser finds the materialist Marx separated from the Hegelian philosophy of history, whose rejection is assisted by the reading of Spinoza.

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<sup>5</sup>The humanist trace that survives in Marxian writing prior to 1845 can be clearly seen in the relationship between demos as truth - in the idea of the “real man as foundation”, in the “real man as foundation” and in the relation between demos as truth - in the idea of the “real man as foundation”, in the fragments taken up by Casanova and Tatián: “La democracia es el enigma resuelto de todas las constituciones. Aquí, la constitución no es solamente en sí, en cuanto a la esencia, sino en cuanto a la existencia, en cuanto a la realidad, en su fundamento real, el hombre real, el pueblo real, estableciéndose como su propia obra” (Marx, 1987, pp 342-343; citado en Tatián, 2012, p. 176).

The question is trapped in a scheme of alternatives that requires us to opt for the autonomy of politics or for the materialist clause of objectivity, redistributing once again philosophy's relation with science and politics in a new dichotomy. This dilemma is in some way noticed by Tatián, in his reading of a new formulation of the idea of truth as a production and as a criterion of itself in "*Eléments d'Autocritique*" ([1974] 1976) and "*Est-Il Simple d'Etre Marxiste en Philosophie?*" ([1975] 1976), where Althusser relates it to another idea, from the *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect* where Spinoza poses that, because we hold a true idea and only because of it, we can produce others according to its standard. And indeed, for Althusser, it is "because we have a true idea that we can know that it is true, because it is *index sui*". (Althusser, 1976, p. 188) From this statement, Tatián underlines the "anti-Cartesian anomaly" of a discourse that is not "of the method" and that dismisses any transcendental consequence of the fact that man thinks: "Spinoza refuses to start from objectivity" (Tatián, 2008, p. 56, my translation).

The question we are interested in is sketched out here regarding the rejection of an *a priori* criterion of objectivity. Can this imply the absolute rejection of a criterion of objectivity?

An approach to this question, which seems to be a concern that emerged around Althusser's moment of "self-criticism", is anticipated, as we have pointed out, in his canonical writings of the 1960s, within the framework of the development of the *criterion of the interiority of theoretical practices* as a criterion of the true which, under the condition of strict materialism presupposes, a theory of historical totality.

But there can be no scientific conception of practice without a precise distinction between the distinct practices and a new conception of the relations between theory and practice. We can assert the *primacy of practice* theoretically by showing that all the levels of social existence are the sites of distinct practices (...) We think the relations establishing and articulating these different practices one with another by thinking their *degree of independence* and their type of 'relative' autonomy, which are themselves fixed by their *type of dependence* with respect to the practice which is 'determinant in the last instance': economic practice. (...) To speak of the criterion of practice where theory is concerned, and every other practice as well, then receives its full sense: for *theoretical practice* is indeed its own criterion, (...) i.e., the criteria of the scientificity of the products of scientific practice (Althusser and Balibar, 1970, pp.58-59).

This excerpt enables us to notice that a criterion of the true which is immanent to theoretical practices very close to the Spinozian problematic, coexist in this "theorist" Althusser, with a criterion of

historical objectivity that reads the primacy of the practice in terms of a complex totality of different and unequally articulated practices – or an overdetermined social practice – among which, theoretical practice is woven.<sup>6</sup>

This allows us to explore the density of the problem in order to find a certain caution in Casanova's essay. It seems to be just a nuance of his argument, but it is crucial for us: a crucial question – Casanova says – is played out in the way in which "social relations" are defined: whether it is with emphasis on the primacy of the relational condition, understood as a specific modality of combination – where the French term *ensemble* is required – or from the point of view of a primacy conferred to the terms in relation, in this case, to the productive forces in their development.

We are now in a better position to anticipate, at least roughly, that if the key to Althusser's wager in philosophy consists in sustaining "the two ends of the chain" (Althusser, 2004a, p.91) in order to precisely avoid the false choice between objectivity and politics, the question pivots precisely on "the way in which these social relations are understood", as Casanova underlines.

The writing in which this metaphor of the chain is put into play is precisely the one in which the Freudian category of *overdetermination* becomes a figure capable of rendering thinkable the specificity of Marxist apodicticity – that is, its "problematic" – in two senses. On the one hand, as the philosophical consideration of the specificity of materialist practice of theoretical thought and, on the other, but imbricated with it, as a theory of the social totality capable of accommodating in a unique rationality, the thesis of determination 'in the last instance' by the economy, and the formula of a relational immanence in the conception of State Power, which finds its development in the theory of Ideology (cf. Althusser, 2015a).

An ambitious program of thought opens out of this unsettled crossroads which is the basis of the Althusserian operation in his singular way of inheriting Spinoza in Marx. Theory and politics consist of a body of thought that points in the direction of the paradoxical relational and processual ontology that Etienne Balibar has identified

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6 It should be added that Althusser insists that his position aims to take up the Marxist axiom of the primacy of practice (over theory) without thereby drowning in an egalitarian conception of practices, the specific mode of intervention of a given practice. In this connection, he writes: "Taking Marx as an example, we know that his most personally significant practical experiences (his experience as a polemicist of 'the embarrassment of having to take part in discussions on so-called material interests' in the *Rheinische Zeitung*; his direct experience of the earliest struggle organizations of the Paris proletariat; his revolutionary experience in the 1848 period) *intervened* in his theoretical practice, and in the upheaval which led him from ideological theoretical practice to scientific theoretical practice: but they *intervened* in his theoretical practice *in the form of objects of experience, or even experiment*, i.e., in the form of new thought objects, 'ideas' and the concepts, whose emergence contributed, in their combination (*Verbindung*) with other conceptual results (originating in German philosophy and English political economy), to the overthrow of the still ideological theoretical base on which he had lived (i.e., thought) until then. (Althusser, 1970, p. 60).

as the *transindividual* (2000, 2019), and which opens the way for thinking a “conflictual objectivity” capable of sustaining the idea of an aporetic *science of class struggle*.

## Materialism II. Primacy of relations

Casanova’s dilemma regarding the nature of social relations – with emphasis on a relationality whose background would be political or subordinated to the social-economic development (of the productive forces) – is worked out by Althusser in another way, regarding the problem of *social reproduction* within a processual conception of existence as *duration*.

In the posthumous volume, *Sur la reproduction* (2011) which appeared in the months after the events of 1968, Althusser warns of the politicistic detour which, under the generic term of “domination”, simplifies the materialist overdetermination while subsuming economic exploitation, and therefore erases the contradictions and struggles within political and ideological field. Against this impoverishment of historical totality and materialist causality, Althusser proposes a rigorous materialist reading of social reproduction, assuming as its central principle the *primacy of the relations of production over the productive forces*.

In a social formation there is not just *one* mode of production, but one that functions as *dominant* in a historical whole in which, conditioned by its dominance, heterogeneous residual or incipient productive forces and relations survive in a complex and contradictory unity. In this sense, a given social formation is, in its objective unity, a contradictory and unequal combination of temporalities.

Thus considered, the “point of view of reproduction” is crucial to account for any concrete situation, in which the capitalist relation of production – as a structural relation of dispossession and separation of labor-force from the means of production – is *abstract* with respect to this concrete and contradictory complex of relations of a social formation in which its reproduction takes place – as *duration* and therefore, as *existence*.

From the point of view of reproduction, the concept of relations of production is not to be confused neither with the technical organization of labor nor with the juridical notion of property: the social division of labor is neither technical division of labor nor the legal forms of its organization, but it must be placed in terms of the complex *ensemble* of concrete relations in which the historical existence of a social formation lasts.

The ambivalence of duration is the core of the concept of overdetermination with which Althusser conceives the materialist causality that presupposes in the very structure of the historical totality a duplicity of relations, a *relation of relations*, which exists only overdetermined in its temporal complexity and contradictory materiality.

Marx can write: 'the characters who appear on the economic stage are merely [juridical] personifications of economic relations; it is as the bearers of these economic relations that they come into contact with each other'. Economic agents (capitalists, wage-workers, merchants, etc.) never meet (gegenübertreten) in the original nakedness of simply 'living' human beings. They can meet usefully, which is to say socially, only if they have (in advance) become autonomous, individualised persons, recognised as such, and if, therefore, they cannot be confused with 'things'. In Marx's problematic, this means that the juridical forms which liberate the individual for exchange (and, where applicable, for exploitation) constitute a second level of alienation, at one and the same time original and correlative to the preceding one, into which it is in practice inserted to ensure its realisation. The economic informs the juridical and the juridical activates the economic. It is this complex form, precisely this *double structuring, at once reciprocal and dissymmetrical, that I propose to consider the new, developed concept of the 'transindividual' in Marx's theory.* (...) these terms, which push the idea of an *objective imaginary* inherent in social relations to the extreme, are precisely what makes it possible to understand (beyond a problematic of transcendental illusion with which, however, they have an undeniable affinity) in what sense the transindividual must present itself to individuals in an inverted form (not as what constitutes them structurally into subjects, but as what they could decide to institute or not to institute) (...). Social reality must take on a hallucinatory character, or be woven from fantasy, in order to exist as such, in history and in practice. It is at this point that, without a doubt, the 'detour via Spinoza' can become illuminating again. (Balibar, 2020, p.154)

The problem of ideology becomes relevant for philosophy and thinkable in terms of an "objective imaginary" by means of a philosophical *materialism of the imaginary* coherent with the principle of the primacy of class struggle over classes and of the unconscious over conscience – as Michel Pêcheux (1975) posed it. Ideological dimension of social formation is considered within an objective complex of contradictory processes and not as an operation of pure domination nor as a failed ideal universalization, neither as a sociological opposition between two "worlds" of meaning; but rather as a complex of formations with dominance: form and effect of an *ensemble*" of relations. Balibar (2006 [1993], 2020) underlines the philosophical relevance of this idea in Marx, in the terms of a *transindividual ontology*, with a double consistency, both material and imaginary.

Balibar reads in Marx, a singular relational materialism that finds its antecedent in Spinoza, since "from the ideas sketched from the sixth

'Thesis on Feuerbach' onwards, his theory incontestably maintains this central philosophical intuition: the double rejection of individualist and holistic (organicist) ontologies and their socio-political consequences, in favor of giving primacy to the relation, or to a constituent relation." (2020, p.154) And a key word is underlined by Balibar in his reading of *Thesis VI*:

It is significant that Marx (who spoke French almost as fluently as he did German) should have resorted to the foreign word 'ensemble' here, clearly in order to avoid using the German '*das Ganze*', the 'whole' or totality. (...) we have, in fact, to think humanity as a *transindividual* reality and, ultimately, to think transindividuality as such;" Not what is ideally 'in' each individual (as a form or a substance), or what would serve, from outside, to classify that individual, but what exists *between individuals* by dint of their multiple interactions. (Balibar, 2006, p. 30-32)

The idea of the transindividual as an ontological position supposes the replacement of the classical essence/individual controversy by an enquiry into the multiplicity of relations that connect individuals and community in a materialist and complex way. Not in terms of an emanative causality, nor in terms of empiricist schematizations – which, as Althusser has shown, are ultimately equally idealist – but as an open-ended set of transmissions or passages in which the link between individuals and the community is made and unmade and which, in response, constitutes them (*ibid.*). This opens up a series of considerations about a kind of singular structural *necessity* that can only be conceived as working in an increasingly complex relationship of relationships in which the imaginary is part of the concrete materiality (cf. Balibar, 2018).

From a strongly structuralist approach, Jean-Claude Milner recognizes it with the aporetic expression of a *thesei*-objectivity which allows us to think about the possibility of a "political science" that inhabits in Marx's enterprise, his reading of Democritus or Hegel, up to his developments on political economy (2003).

Althusser had touched Marx (...) to touch Marx was to open a crisis in thought; at that moment it was also to encounter the structure. The question of necessity and the way in which it is affected by the physei/thesei dichotomy had constituted one of Marx's major objects. (...) At last Marx found posed there, in terms of positive science, the question that only Hegelian dialectics had seemed to articulate until then in terms of speculative logic: the existence of a necessity freely created by men. (...) it was no longer a question of convention but of history and politics. (...) Marx's *dispositif* is paradoxical. If the whole of *thesei* is understood as the whole of what depends on man, then it is also understood as the whole

of what can be transformed by man. Social relations are *thesei*. They are therefore not immutable. (...) they are modifiable by men because they are imposed on them (Milner, 2003, p.224, my translation).

Social relations impose themselves with the force of inexorable laws on the isolated individual *for the very reason* that they are transformable by the whole. For Milner, therefore, it is necessity that opens the way to political thought: social relations “impose themselves on each individual to the exact extent that they can be transformable by the union of all (...) a political doctrine is derived from necessity” (2003, p. 224).

The “political” structuralism that Milner finds in Althusser’s reading of Marx dialogues with Marilena Chaui’s readings of Spinoza, where she finds an ontology of the immanent relations between potencies which, by rejecting all theological association between contingency, possibility and will, enables ethics and politics to recover the foundations of a demonstrative discourse which “since Aristotle had been denied to them” (Chaui, 2004, p.160, my translation). In this sense, Montag (2008) also underlines that it is against classical political philosophy, based on the distinction between speculative and practical philosophies, where Althusserian reading of Spinoza is placed.

Spinoza approaches the affections in *more geometrico* “after having criticized the distance that philosophers had placed between political theory and practice. Political discourse (contrary to political theology) speaks of an ‘order of things’ that is not (...) but a logic of concordant and contrary forces that institute the logic of power and the exercise of freedom” argues Chaui (op cit., p. 160.).

“Love of things and pursuit of the common good: not one thing next to the other but one thing for the other, cause of the other. The more we understand the singular res, writes Spinoza, the more we understand God...” says Tatian (2012, p.41, my translation).

Spinoza’s notion of *individuality* is considered by Chaui in terms of the theory of common notions, as a “constitution of parts”. Based on the Definition 7, Part II of *Ethics*, she deduces that, by presenting singularity as a composition of individuals who concur in the same action, Spinoza assumes that “individuality means causal unity” (2004, p.140).<sup>7</sup> Such a theory of transindividual individuality goes beyond the ontic dimension allows Spinoza to formulate, in a subversive way, the conception of *essence*:

.....  
7 “By singular things I understand things that are finite and have a determinate existence. And if a number of individuals so concur in one action that together they are all the cause of one effect, I consider them all, to that extent, as one singular thing.” (Spinoza, 1994, p.116)

... “essence” does not refer to a general idea of humanity, an abstract concept under which all individuals are subsumed and their differences neutralized. On the contrary, it refers precisely to the power that singularizes each individual and confers on him a unique destiny. Thus, to affirm that desire is the essence of man is to affirm that each individual is irreducible in the difference of his own desire. We could say that this is a form of “nominalism” since Spinoza considers that the human species is an abstraction. Only individuals exist in the strong sense of the term. But this nominalism has nothing to do with atomistic individualism (...) It is the relation of each individual to other individuals and their reciprocal actions and passions that determines the form of the individual’s desire and drives its power. Singularity is an individual function (Chauvi, 2004, p.125).

### **Materialism III. The Real of History**

The question of individuality brings us closer to the paradoxical thinking that connects ontology with politics: a thought of singular essences, a relational nominalism. *Ensemble*, we read in Marx; relational ontology or transindividuality, formulates Balibar; the primacy of relations over elements we read in Althusser’s *Sur la Reproduction* (2011) and of encounter over form, interprets Morfino (2012) in his recent writings on aleatory materialism, as a philosophy of the constatation of the encounter or of the fact:

...the fact is not the Faktum in the transcendental sense, it is not a question of a priori conditions of possibility, but of material conditions of existence. To take the fact in its accomplishment or in its being accomplished means to show its contingent foundation, the fluctuation of elements that originated or can originate the encounter beyond all pre-established harmony. (Morfino, 2014, p.81, my translation).

We find this relational ontology now deployed as a strange metaphysics of the “case”, in Althusser’s late texts:

This superb sentence says everything, for, in this world, there exists nothing but cases, situations, things that befall us without warning. The thesis that there exist only cases - that is to say, singular individuals wholly distinct from one another - is the basic thesis of nominalism. (...) I would go still further. I would say that it is not merely the antechamber of materialism, but materialism itself (Althusser, 2006, p.265)

It is worth recalling here the formulas that early on insisted on the rejection of “simplicity” as an original category, making this idea the key to the confrontation with Hegel’s idealist dialectics. As a reader of Marx and Mao, Althusser pointed out in the early sixties that the real complexity of social life could not be reducible to simple elements (even to a simple contradiction) but must be assumed in the complexity of the *overdetermined* structure.

... the simple only ever exists within a complex structure; the universal existence of a simple category is never original, it only appears as the end-result of a long historical process, as the product of a highly differentiated social structure; so, where reality is concerned, we are never dealing with the pure existence of simplicity, be it essence or category, but with the existence of ‘concretes’ of complex and structured beings and processes (Althusser, 2005, p.196-197)

The nominalism of aleatory materialism, as well as its various and vague references to the void, find a clearer and more coherent channel in this reading hypothesis. Various readers have shown that aleatory materialism is not an ontology of the “void”, nor of the “atoms”, but rather a materialism of the encounter of atoms of the reciprocal consistency of the world and of the retroactive constitution of its laws (cf. Matheron, 1998; Montag, 2010). It is not about, nor can it be about, a surrender of all legality to the benefit of pure chance. Rather, it is a question of sustaining from an ontological questioning, the idea of a structurality which modifies the very definition of law, regardless juridical formulas, replacing them with a conception of *tendential* and *processual* legality, immanent and open to contradictory tendencies - not to the “future”, but to the actuality of the political moment which pulsates in every plexus of relations as a *determined* contingency. In this sense, Montag points out that it is in the reading of Marx, whose historical observations are just a “prelude”, that it becomes clear what is at stake in the materialism of the encounter. To state that in the beginning was nothingness is different from adopting an aprioristic position to any assemblage, but it is to placing alongside a theory of the dialectical progression of the modes of production – of history as order – a second theory, of modes of production as effects of contingent encounters, irreducible to the former. A theory of the commencement that results from an encounter that might not have taken place, supposes that capitalism might not have come into existence (Montag, 2010) A problem “ besides the other “gives us but a single problematic, as Althusser warns in his reading of Marx and whose unification is the pulse that drives the Althusserian problematic

itself.<sup>8</sup> Its result is a theory of structure as the effect of an encounter: a “structuralist” theory of transformations.

... we find it very hard to grasp (for it does violence to our sense of ‘what is seemly’): that laws can change – not that they can be valid for a time but not eternally (...), but that they can change at the drop of a hat, revealing the aleatory basis that sustains them, and can change without reason, that is, without an intelligible end. This is where their surprise lies (there can be no taking-hold without surprise) [*il n'est de prise que sous la surprise*] (Althusser, 2006, pp.195-196).

The category of the encounter becomes a matrix for interrogating the logic of politics itself, its immanent thinking, its condition of an activity *ordered in itself*. And not only in an ontic sense, but in the sense of rendering thinkable objectivity's inherent politicity.

Two decades before writing his theses on aleatory materialism, Althusser was already pursuing this *real of politics* in his theory of the whole as a relational and historical complex of articulated practices.

The first of Marx's *Theses on Feuerbach* is thus revisited when the question concerning the real of politics forces us to go back to our understanding of materialism regarding a conception about knowledge as an activity.<sup>9</sup> Althusser reads this question in his controversy with French phenomenology, which he homologizes to humanism in the Feuerbachian tradition: “You can stay indefinitely at the frontier line, ceaselessly repeating concrete! concrete! real! real! This is what Feuerbach did,” (Althusser, 2005, p.244). For us, the ‘real’ is not a theoretical slogan; the real is the real object that exists independently of its knowledge, but which can only be defined by its knowledge (p.246).

This real is an *incognita* that cannot be solved by appealing to the immediacy of a brute empiricity of Nature (“biological necessities”, for example) which is the specular partner of the idealist image of Truth. Nor is it a question of calling History in our help, by means of the genetic

.....  
8 “This attitude may be paradoxical, but Marx insists on it in categorical terms as the absolute condition of possibility of his theory of history; it reveals the existence of *two problems*, distinct in their disjoint unity. There is a theoretical problem which must be posed and resolved in order to explain the mechanism by which history has produced as its result the contemporary capitalist mode of production. But at the same time there is another absolutely distinct problem which must be posed and resolved, in order to understand that this result is indeed a *social* mode of production, that this result is precisely a form of *social* existence ...” (Althusser, 2005, p. 65)

9 “The chief defect of all hitherto existing materialism – that of Feuerbach included – is that the thing, reality, sensuousness, is conceived only in the form of the *object (Objekt) or of contemplation (Anschauung)*, but not as *sensuous human activity, practice*, not subjectively. Hence, in contradistinction to materialism, the *active side* was developed abstractly by idealism – which, of course, does not know real, sensuous activity as such. Feuerbach wants sensuous objects, really distinct from the thought objects, but he does not conceive human activity itself as *objective activity (gegenständliche)*...” (Marx, 1969., p. 13).

mode of a historicist question for the Origin or the foundation, which pretends to be historical but is, like the previous one, metaphysical. They both constitute, in fact, a false alternative.

The genetic question, which is the price that idealist philosophy has paid to occupy the places of theology, leads philosophies back to the myth of the State of Nature, and for Althusser, this demonstrates the profound solidarity between epistemological empiricism and liberal political philosophies (cf. 2014). A rigorous materialist development requires instead to discard any temporal evocation of the *genesis*, which is in solidarity with empiricism and humanism, in the sense of the philosophies of Natural Law, whose attempt fails to pierce the essentialist circularity and, therefore, is never produced as a thought of the beginning, but rather, as its ideological obturation. (Althusser, 2014).

As Althusser puts it in his *Cours sur Rousseau* (2012), the essence of State of Nature's philosophies consisted in an assumption that was in itself a retrospective projection of the Civil State. To appeal to the State of Nature appears, then, as a circle, since the result, namely, the Social State, the Civil State, is projected at the origin in order to better *engender* the result; when in fact, it has already been presupposed in the form of an Origin. In this way, this Social State very easily becomes the *cause* of itself, the legitimation of itself.

Against Political Philosophy, entangled in this circular exercise, the Althusserian materialism opens a window to think politics as *real thought*; paying the price of assuming that this real thought takes its singular shape in the dispute (itself *real*) with Philosophy "as such". We could say that the only way to access the thought of politics is by facing the politicization of thought: by thinking within that rupture. Less a "new thought" that follows a rupture, but more sharply, a thought that exercises the rupture insofar as it pursues a rationality that is immanent to its very political nature. In Spinozian philosophy this rupture has already begun as a rupture against the theological component of philosophy, against all moralization and utopianism.

Only in this way does political experience become thinkable as an *ordered experience in itself*,<sup>10</sup> by taking the human individual as "parts of Nature" and not as its metaphysical centre, the shape and measure of all things. Thus, a thought capable of pointing to *the real of politics* takes shape in the dispute with the Political Philosophy grounded on a jusnaturalistic anthropology, conceiving man as an Empire within an Empire and renders political practice an object of judgment.

Althusser repeatedly confronts Natural Law philosophy's theological affiliation, even in its modern formulations, since they are

.....  
10The expression corresponds to Claude Lefort's reading of Machiavelli. Cf. Lefort, C., Machiavelli. *Le travail de l'oeuvre*, Gallimard, Paris, 1972., p.358. And it should be noted that Althusser takes into consideration and pays homage to this interpretation of Lefort (Althusser, 1988)

also characterized by the effort of dealing with the problem of politics by means of a philosophical discourse on the Origin – as the genesis of social life. It thus shows that invocations of politics may well leave us once again trapped in the realm of the most idealistic empiricism, which is nothing other than that of the biblical myth of self-manifesting immediacy.

Reading Rousseau, Althusser (2012) describes Origin as the projection of the titles of Right in the evidence of Nature. Both, the titles of Right of the Truth and of Right of all Essence and, in particular, the essence of civil law and of political law. Such is the case in the philosophy of Natural Law, for the simple reason: the thought that identified Origin with Nature and made it evident to a subject of law was, in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the form par excellence of philosophical thought. That is to say, the founding form of philosophical thought and therefore, that which confers on it the role of founder, justifier, legitimizer of an order of things.

It is, in short, the circular, or doubly-specular model of ideology as an imaginary circle of evidence. Thinking the real of politics requires political thinking in the sense of operating a process of *continuos-rupture* in the imaginary. The very possibility of theory depends on a real struggle, insofar as it is a “science of ideology” and only in this way does it manage to grasp the real of the struggle. The kind of connection that Spinoza draws between ontology and politics, based on an immanent causality, makes possible the development of a conception of politics adequate to the historical materialism inaugurated by Marx in theory and by the revolutionary practice of the workers’ movement, in effective politics. And it is this that Althusser sets in motion, in an exercise of reading that gathers the encounters that were already there. He is not the only one in doing so, but he is undoubtedly the one who has most extended its possibilities in understanding what was at stake.

#### **Materialism IV. Primacy of the process**

In order to move forward in the specificity of a thought capable of grasping the real of politics, it is necessary to go back to Marx’s relationship with Hegel, to whom Althusser acknowledges owing the precious concept of history understood as a dialectical process of production of figures (1970). This is a big challenge while the Hegelian dialectic is teleological in its structures.<sup>11</sup> The task then consists retaining the concept of process (without Subject) by transforming it in such a way that its structure does not respond to the formula of the *negation of negation*, which exists only to

.....  
11 “...”...what irremediably stains the Hegelian conception of history as dialectical process is its teleological conception of dialectics, inscribed in the very structures of Hegelian dialectics, at an extremely precise point: *Aufhebung* (overrunning-that-preserves-rebased-as-rebased-interiorized) expressed directly in the Hegelian category of the negation of negation (or negativity) (...) teleological because from its origins it pursues a goal (the realization of Absolute Knowledge)...” *Ibidem*, 1970a, p.104, my translation.

recover under the figure of Telos what had been denied (affirmed-denied; that is to say, crossed out) as Origin.

What is that which can be retained, that which endures as a concept, once the teleological element has been removed?

In a note that, according to Althusser, only exists in the French edition of *Capital*, he finds the a path: the word *process*, which expresses a development considered in the whole of its real conditions, has long been a part of the scientific language... (1970, p.103). Hegel's productive legacy has a formal character so, in order to reformulate it in materialist terms, a fundamental question about the *conditions* of the process of history must be addressed. The very elaboration of this question -which brings something that has no precedent – gives rise to properly Marxist dialectics:

There is no other process than under relations: the relations of production (to which Capital is limited) and other relations (political, ideological). We have not yet fully pondered this discovery (...) Marx's *Verbindungen* release us from a "combinatory"! (...) The continent has been open for more than a hundred years. The only ones who have been able to penetrate it are the militants of the revolutionary struggle (Idem, p. 109, my translation).

"Conditions" has the status of a concept that can only be weighed with the necessary rigor in the real political struggle. Only militants, in their political thinking and practice, have put Marxist dialectics in motion, writes Althusser in 1963 (cf. 2005, pp.87-119).

The product of this intuition is the implementation, in 1964, of the Freudian notion of *overdetermination*, which takes shape as a concept of the materialist dialectics in the framework of the effort of thinking about history in terms of positive processes of material complex articulation, where the points of rupture – or of reproduction – are conceived in terms of a displaced-condensation of material and imaginary elements. This renders historical processes thinkable as movements of a non-concentric complexity; or, in other words, as a *processual and contradictory objectivity* of history that is produced as a continuous exceptionality and requires a legality of the exception (2005, pp. 87.119). That processual necessity of contingency that Althusser places in the core of materialist dialectics, is named with the Freudian category of overdetermination with which he points towards the complexity of the historical totality.<sup>12</sup> And "conditions" is a theoretical concept grounded in the very "essence" of this theoretical object: the concrete-complex-whole.

.....  
12 A (complex, real, structured) whole different from a (concentric, ideal, expressive) totality; but also different from an additive multiplicity of plural elements. A whole that is a relation of relations and not an empirical multiplicity of dispersed elements.

These *conditions* are, in fact, “these conditions are no more than the very existence of the whole in a determinate ‘situation’, the ‘current situation’ of the politician, that is, the complex relation of reciprocal conditions of existence between the articulations of the structure of the whole” (2005, p.207). *Overdetermination* is the concept of structural causality which makes it possible to think of these “conditions” as both existing conditions and as conditions of existence; this is to say, that the actual existence of the whole inhabits in them, not by an expressive connection with “Truth”, but as the absent cause that works in the “displacements” and “condensations” that constitute the complex and real condition of that whole. In this sense, the efficacy of politics is not an accident but the deductive consequence of the axiom that poses the primacy of the relations of production over the forces of production and by virtue of the primacy of relations, superstructural relations must be considered not as phenomena of the structure but as its “conditions” of existence (*id.*, p. 208).

The reference to the work of “condensation” and “displacement” as an inherent activity of every “formation” and as its mark in the conjuncture, is read by Althusser in de Mao, just as he develops in “On the Materialist Dialectic” (cf. 2005, pp.161-218), but it reveals the trace of his reading of Freud, who recognizes these operations in the oneiric work, as a ciphering mechanism of dream’s formations (1994).

A path could thus be opened to approach to what we call here the *real of politics*, as was suggested by Althusser in his interview with Fernanda Navarro (2005), where history appears as the *unconscious* of philosophy. This means that “the real” is neither a “given” nor an Origin, but both an effect and an activity of resistance to the constitutive repression of the mythical condition that actively participates in every social “reality”, in the form of its historical experience.<sup>13</sup>

“Conditions,” Althusser affirms, does not indicate a series of “empirical concepts” that would result from a “verification of what exists”; rather, it is the mark of an apodicticity that makes from the thought of what exists (delimited as thought of the real, by the real of thought) its own theoretical horizon. The real of history is not a “state of affairs”, but the effect of the repression of the historical relational complex by (hegemonically idealist) theory and the activity of resistance to it. An open objectivity capable of taking seriously the transformative efficacy of politics – as practice and as thought. A legality of history characterized by its tendential and non-judicial condition.

To move forward, even if only by tentatively, it is interesting to follow the Spinozian trail in Althusser’s thought, towards his last writings, where the relationship with Hegel -and therefore with Spinoza- is taken

.....  
13 In this sense, it marks the working relationship proposed by the Marxist conception of science, such as the distance between experience and experimentation. In this regard, Pêcheux, 2015.

up again: “Certainly a Marxist cannot carry out the detour through Spinoza without regretting it. For the adventure is dangerous and no matter what is done, Spinoza will always lack what Hegel gave to Marx: contradiction” (1975, p. 55). In this regard, Mariana De Gainza stresses the old criticisms launched by Pierre Bayle (1647 -1706) to Spinoza who “would have performed the monstrous prodigy of making contradiction the very principle of reality” (Gainza, 2007, pp-41-42).<sup>14</sup>This discovery of a form of contradiction in Spinoza, which de Gainza points out in Bayle, converges with Balibar, who finds a sort of “logic of *coincidence oppositorum*” in Spinoza’s philosophy (2009, p. 146).

Althusser fails to perceive contradiction in Spinoza’s philosophy when he interrogates it in relation to science, even though he puts it to work when he thinks about politics through Spinoza. But the Althusserian reading of Spinoza, with Althusser and beyond him, aims to take for materialism, the place of contradiction. The immanence proposed by Hegel’s philosophy, processual and anti-subjectivist, remains trapped in the circle of teleological unfolding and does not allow us to think the real of overdetermined contradiction; Spinoza’s, on the other hand, clears the way for it.

Balibar enables us to move forward into the analysis of this critical condition, with his characterization of psychoanalysis and Marxism as “conflictive” sciences. The key to understanding the type of relationship established between objectivity and conflict that the Althusserian problematic seeks to make visible, is found in them.

“schismatic sciences”, that is: determined in their very constitution by the way in which they are inscribed in the conflict whose knowledge they represent. Sciences that, far from subscribing to the subjectivist figure of contemplation, are not spectators of an object, but rather parts in play in a conflictual process. (Balibar, 1991, p.79).

When Althusser develops his conception of reproduction, he reaches an idea that assumes a sort of contradiction, according to Balibar (1991, p.71) which assumes that all structural continuity is the necessary effect of an irreducible contingency in which, at every moment resides the latent possibility of a crisis. This movement describes a sort of contradiction or paradox because, on the one hand, it sustains an invariance: the conditions of production are themselves incessantly reproduced in such a way as to ensure the structural continuity of the mode of production. But to the extent that Althusser develops the complexity of the Marxist topic -of which he recognizes its descriptive value, but points out its explanatory insufficiency – and advances in the

.....  
14 “Spinoza’s God is, therefore, a being opposed and contrary to himself, who feels at the same time love and hatred, joy and sadness, who affirms and denies at the same time the same things and is responsible for the most sublime that man realizes and, at the same time, for the most perverse and evil. A God who ‘thinks believes and wills one thing in me, but believes, thinks and wills the exact opposite in another.’ De Gainza, 2007., pp.41-42, my translation)

superstructural relations, to rediscover in them the space of the class struggle (for the power of the state and its apparatuses), the argument is transformed, turns on itself, by virtue of the primacy of the relations (of the relations of production over the productive forces and of the superstructural relations as conditions of existence of the infrastructure). Instead of grounding historical variations in an invariance, he assumes that all (relative) invariance presupposes a relation of forces. Thus, the paradoxical condition Balibar finds operating in the problem of reproduction is that of a *conflictual objectivity*:

...the specificity of the Althusserian concept of social reproduction (...) produces for us the ambivalent effect of an opening of Marxist theory at the very moment in which, literally, Althusser does nothing more than reveal its limits. (...) this specificity immediately communicates with what is undoubtedly Althusser's fundamental ontological proposal, that which identifies in general and at all costs, the notions of "struggle" and "existence" (Balibar, 1991, p.73, my translation).

This idea refers to the expression repeated by Althusser in various writings: the class struggle is not an effect (derived) from the existence of social classes, class struggle and the existence of classes are one and the same thing (cf.1973). Class struggle is at the very core of Marxist theory because it allows us to understand the "fusion" between the workers' movement and Marx's theory, according to Althusser, because Marxist theory is fully involved in this struggle, in its discoveries and in its gaps and contradictions (cf.1978). This phrase, which is often identified as a mark of the abandonment of Althusserian theoretician deviation, after the episodes of '68, and that refers to another expression from the seventies, that I have already quoted (*vide supra*, Part IV), can be found in the early pages of *Lire le Capital*: "What philosophers who are able to pose *Capital* the question of its object and of the specific difference that distinguishes Marx's object from the object of Political Economy, classical or modern, have read *Capital* and posed it this question? The only philosophers ready to take *Capital* for an object worthy of a philosopher's concern could long only be Marxist militants" (Althusser and Balibar, 1970b, pp. 76-77).

### **Concluding remarks**

From the critique of epistemology to philosophy as an intervention in a field of struggle, the question of politics thus brings us back to the problem of the theoretical: how could this happen other than in a circular sense?

To get out of the circular space, it is necessary to note that, in the Althusserian problematic, such as it is read and developed by Balibar, the concept of class is in itself the bearer of an ambivalence and must be conceived simultaneously in the two meanings with which Althusser plays it out: as a historical concept and standing for the philosophical name for identity (the *idem est ac*, or the *tauton gar esti* of the philosophers) which is the equivalent of saying that identity is division, poses Balibar (1991) in a footnote: “...*pugnare idem est ac existere*, the ideal Spinoza would have said.” (1991, not2 21).

In “Marxisme et lute de classes” (1976), Althusser puts it with an axiom that organises both his materialist position in the philosophical field, and the materialist principle underpinning his theory of reproduction: “Althusser states it with an axiom that organizes both his materialist position in the philosophical field and the materialist principle that sustains his theory of reproduction: class struggle is not an derived effect from the existence of classes: class struggle and the existence of classes are one and the same thing. And according to him, this is the decisive clue to understand *Capital*. When read “from the point of view of the class struggle” *Capital* ceases to be a theory of political economy: Marx gave back in scientific theory what he had received in political experience ( (Althusser, 1976).

As Vittorio Morfino (2014) has shown, the thesis of the primacy of class struggle over the existence of classes can be translated in abstract terms into the thesis of the primacy of relations over their elements. But this endows the concept of “relation” with a constitutive conflictuality – which means that *relations* cannot be conceived, in this framework, in the classical sociological terms of “social bonds”. Consequently, the entire philosophical tradition that bases the question of politics on the antecedence of the social bond – whether this is perceived as a natural anthropological tendency or as the artificial sociability of the institution – remains in crisis; and so is the identification of economic determination with a new essentialism and an “absorption of the political in the social”, as we read in Casanova (*vide supra*, Part I).

In the paradox of this relational, historical and conflictive objectivity whose path of exploration Althusser opens up, Balibar develops the gravitation of Spinozian philosophy, in which the classic alternative “of ‘nature’ and ‘institution’ is displaced, which forces us to pose the problem of the social relation differently.” (2008, p.77) Wherein does this “problem” consist? In that both “natural sociability” (of Aristotle, Bossuet or Marx) and in the “sociability of the institution” (of Hobbes, Kant or Rousseau), sociability is understood in the same way, despite opposing anthropological considerations: “...it is the assumption that sociability is a bond which ‘unites’ men, expressing their reciprocal need, and their ‘friendship’ (...) and that society is the order through which they live out this bond made good” (*id.*, p.78 ) With Spinoza, on the

other hand, the possibility of thinking an aporetic sociability opens up: rational-passional, of obedience and freedom, a process in permanent transformation and equilibrium of combination and struggle.

Sociability is therefore the unity of real agreement and imaginary ambivalence both of which have real effects. Or to put it in another way, the unity of contraries *la unidad de los contrarios* – of rational identity *and* affective variability but also of the irreducible singularity of individuals and the “similarity” of human behavior – is nothing other than what we refer to as society. The classical concept of social bond” and the alternative between nature and human institutions are thus rendered wholly inadequate (Balibar, 2008, p. 88).

In what way, by means of what concepts can we deploy the thesis that the class struggle is the midwife of history? Or, of what use is Marx for us today?

What this long lucubration allows us to think is that when theory confronts politics, it confronts its own limits. And from there, the development of this connection-disjunction of theory and politics, calls for philosophical reflection, producing theoretical critique and the vacillation of metaphysics; and triggering, once again, renewed theoretical processes in their complexity. To think politics can only be, Althusser will say, reading Machiavelli, to think politically; that is, in the crisis of thought. Marxist theory is not, strictly speaking, a “Social Science” although it allows us to think about social processes, but neither is it a “Political Philosophy” although it allows us to think about the inherence of conflict in the social fabric. Rather, it is a “schismatic science” of history, where politics is not an object of science but a force in science, based on persevering in the question of the possibility of a social objectivity; a field in which the critique of metaphysics and politics meet; a “revolutionary science” and a theoretical thinking in torsion with it.

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