

## Editorial collective

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Copyedited and typeset by illuminati  
www.illuminatibooks.co.uk

Layout by Peter Osborne and Matthew Charles  
Printed by Russell Press, Russell House,  
Bulwell Lane, Basford, Nottingham NG6 0BT

## Bookshop distribution

UK: Central Books, 115 Wallis Road, London  
E9 5LN Tel: 020 8986 4854  
USA: Ubiquity Distributors Inc., 607 Degraw  
Street, Brooklyn, New York 11217 Tel: 718 875  
5491

**Cover image** *The Decisive Moment*  
(*Left Turn*), 2011.

Published by Radical Philosophy Ltd.  
www.radicalphilosophy.com

## COMMENTARY

The Valuation of Nature: *The Natural Choice* White Paper  
**Kathryn Yusoff**..... 2

## DOSSIER The Althusser–Rancière Controversy

Introduction to Althusser's 'Student Problems'  
**Warren Montag**..... 8  
Student Problems (1964)  
**Louis Althusser**..... 11  
Red Years: Althusser's Lesson, Rancière's Error and the  
Real Movement of History  
**Nathan Brown**..... 16  
Reviewing Rancière, or, the Persistence of Discrepancies  
**Bruno Bosteels**..... 25  
The Patient Cannot Last Long  
**Stéphane Douailler**..... 32

## ARTICLE

Philosophy for Children  
**Matthew Charles**..... 36

## REVIEWS

Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Literature*  
**David Cunningham**..... 46  
Judith Butler, Jürgen Habermas, Charles Taylor and Cornell West, *The Power  
of Religion in the Public Sphere*  
Clayton Crockett, *Radical Political Theology*  
**Roland Boer**..... 51  
Niilo Kauppi, *Radicalism in French Culture*  
**Edward Baring**..... 54  
Heiko Schmid, Wolf-Dietrich Sahr and John Urry, eds, *Cities and Fascination:  
Beyond the Surplus of Meaning*  
**Ross E. Adams**..... 56  
Adrian Mackenzie, *Wirelessness: Radical Empiricism in Network Culture*  
**Jon Goodbun**..... 59  
Encarnación Gutiérrez-Rodríguez, *Migration, Domestic Work and Affect:  
A Decolonial Approach on Value and the Feminization of Labor*  
**Emilie Connolly**..... 62  
Andrew Kolin, *State Power and Democracy: Before and During the Presidency  
of George W. Bush*  
**Terrell Carver**..... 64

## OBITUARY

Margaret Whitford, 1947–2011  
**Kathleen Lennon**..... 66

## Introduction to Althusser's 'Student Problems'

**Warren Montag**

For those familiar with Louis Althusser's published work, reading his relatively early essay entitled 'Student Problems' may be a surprising and even disconcerting experience. Part of the surprise lies in the fact that the essay exists at all. Although it was published in *Nouvelle Critique* (a Communist journal of international reputation) in January 1964 during Althusser's most productive period, appearing shortly after 'On the Materialist Dialectic' and shortly before 'Marxism and Humanism', few references to it can be found in the voluminous literature on Althusser.<sup>1</sup> Of course, to some extent, the essay's obscurity was determined by the fact that it was a political intervention in the very specific context of the French student movement in the period immediately following the end of the Algerian conflict, a context whose debates and polemics were not necessarily directly relevant to the student movements emerging elsewhere. Further, the intervention was not even aimed at the student movement as a whole but at the deeply divided and factionalized Communist student group, the Union des Étudiants Communistes (UEC).

But the essay was not completely ignored: rather, 'Student Problems' was overlooked primarily by those seeking to explicate Althusser's work because they regarded his project as important and powerful. In contrast, some of those most consistently opposed to Althusser after 1968, such as Daniel Bensaïd and former student and co-author of *Reading Capital* Jacques Rancière, held up the essay as decisive, a text that did not require a symptomatic reading to glean from it the political (and not just theoretical) positions that Althusser otherwise carefully guarded.<sup>2</sup>

To them, writing ten years after the essay's publication and thus in a markedly different theoretical and political conjuncture, 'Student Problems' continued to express in an unusually clear and direct manner Althusser's positions not simply in so far as they concerned Parisian student politics in the early 1960s, but in a

general sense. In this way, the importance of the essay lay not simply in the 'theoreticism' of its arguments, namely that theory must precede and guide practice, nor in Althusser's invocation of the PCF's proletarian character to defend its positions against its petty-bourgeois, anarcho-syndicalist student critics (many of whom were members of the party), but in his de facto admission that the politics of the PCF demanded a defence of the order of the university as it existed in capitalist society. 'Student Problems' appeared to show with absolute clarity that to the extent that Althusser wrote from within the apparatus of the Communist Party, his philosophy was condemned to be, as Rancière recalled it, 'a philosophy of order whose every principle divided us from the movement of revolt that was shaking the bourgeois order',<sup>3</sup> and most cunningly did so using the language of revolt itself.

Althusser's critics – and both Bensaïd and Rancière remained unsparing in their criticism – have, regardless of what one thinks of their critiques, helped identify a more important reason for the silence that surrounds the essay in so much work on Althusser. The political and theoretical positions expressed there are not simply surprising but, for the vast majority of his readers, disturbing. Althusser's insistence on the priority of theory over practice, an insistence that accords the vanguard party primacy permanently and in principle over the masses, and within the party a primacy of the leadership over the rank-and-file membership and of theoreticians and philosophers over all, resembles a crude version of a Stalinist politics whose utter failure was clear long before 1964. In addition, it made the demand for the autonomy of theoretical work within the party seem like a ruse to prevent criticism of the party bureaucracy by a membership deemed lacking in the necessary knowledge, whose 'duty' (*devoir* – a word that appears with alarming frequency in the essay) is passively to receive the theory – the correct interpretation of Marx and Lenin, as well as the

lessons to be drawn from the successes and failures of the communist movement – handed down to them by the intellectual leadership of the party.

Worse, Althusser's essay showed with disarming honesty the degree to which the process of the transmission of knowledge in the PCF reproduced and in fact actively imitated the hierarchical order of the French university itself at the very moment that order had been called radically into question not only by the mass of non-party student activists but by both the right and left wings of the UEC (which meant that the students close to Althusser found themselves in a strange alliance with the PCF leadership against both left and right 'deviations').<sup>4</sup> The broad French student movement had been radicalized in response to the Algerian War (even if as late as 1960), a cause that happily united left-wing students and faculty of all tendencies. Even here, however, the PCF played an ambiguous role, supporting Algerian independence only after 1958 and opposing as 'adventurism' the popular tactics of *insoumission* (resistance to conscription) and direct aid to the FLN until near the end of the war. The party's timidity in a period of radicalization



caused enormous turmoil among its youth and led to a rift between the PCF leadership and much of its student group, the UEC.<sup>5</sup> After the conclusion of the Algerian War in 1962, the national French student organization, the Union Nationale des Étudiants de France (UNEF) (which consisted of a number of different factions, including the UEC), turned its attention to the university itself. Up until that point, the common cause that had linked students and faculty together, and that was experienced by its participants as a heroic struggle against French imperialism in Algeria and against the fascist OAS at home, had made issues of concern to students alone seem petty, trivial and above all divisive.

After Algerian independence in 1962, however, distinctively student concerns and struggles re-emerged. The UNEF reasserted itself as a trade union specifically for students, whom it regarded as intellectual workers

united with the classical proletariat by a common alienation. Not content to demand more financial aid, better facilities and a greater variety of courses, it demanded a student wage. Nor did the UNEF limit itself to economic demands: it argued for student participation in administrative and even curricular decisions on an equal footing with faculty. It criticized the 'individualist' nature of instruction, where, despite overcrowded classes, the only relation was the vertical one between student and professor understood as a relation between one who does not (yet) know and one who does. In opposition, it proposed to collectivize knowledge by constituting working groups in which the group as a whole would take responsibility for learning and to search for alternatives to the exams so central to French academic life, but whose pedagogical efficacy was (and is) highly questionable. Radicalized students, including many within the UEC itself, consciously rejected as 'apolitical' and 'economistic' any strategy that focused primarily on economic reforms designed to improve student life and make the universities more accessible. Their demands were part of a 'global contestation'. Whatever our judgement of the French student movement of the early 1960s from the perspective of the present, this was not a movement of a privileged elite seeking to extend its privileges. These were students for whom state repression was not an abstraction: many of them had felt the blow of a police truncheon, the terror of being fired upon and the sight of wounded and dead comrades, and had done so out of solidarity with a struggle against their own imperialism.

It is all the more surprising, then, to read the author of 'Contradiction and Overdetermination', the theoretician of the constant displacement of contradictions and the champion of the concrete analysis of the concrete situation, deducing the correct politics of the student movement from the abstract class position of students rather than from the impulses and imperatives proper to the French student movement in the historical conjuncture. It is perhaps stranger still to read the theoretician of the ISAs and champion of the Chinese Cultural Revolution claiming that bourgeois domination manifests itself not in the material existence of the university, its rituals, its modes of discipline and its individualizing mechanisms, all of which are thereby absolved of any role in class domination and placed off-limits to political struggle, but in the *content* of instruction alone. But perhaps most striking of all is the granting of the primacy of theory over practice, as if the correct theory must precede political practice as its condition of possibility. After all, Althusser had

argued the contrary in 1962 in ‘The Piccolo Teatro’: ‘there is no true critique which is not immanent and already real and material before it is conscious’,<sup>6</sup> and repeated throughout *For Marx* and *Reading Capital* that conceptual problems, as well as their solutions, must be posed first in the practical state before they can be grasped theoretically. Immanent in the practice of mass struggle were theses and hypotheses that might and often did elude official leaderships and party intellectuals for a very long time.

How, then, are we to understand the place of this essay in Althusser’s corpus and even more in the movement by which it became what it is? One response is associated with Jacques Rancière, who, ten years after its publication and after Althusser’s work had undergone important transformations, argued that ‘Student Problems’ represented nothing less than a pure expression of the logico-political consequence of Althusser’s theory in general, the real Althusser, beneath the rhetoric of struggle and resistance. Another response, the inverse of the first, would be to declare ‘Student Problems’ absolutely extraneous to Althusser’s theoretical and political trajectory, whether because it was yet another example of Althusser’s over-clever tactical manoeuvres designed to placate the PCF leadership (and therefore not truly representative of his thought), or because it represented the brief phase in which Althusser saw himself as the enunciator of the Theory of theoretical practices, a phase that quickly gave way to positions that nullified nearly every political statement in the essay.<sup>7</sup>

Both approaches deny the conflictual and irreducibly contradictory character of Althusser’s work and finally fail to acknowledge the tumult that this essay introduces into our conception of his thought. To read ‘Student Problems’ neither as secret truth nor as irrelevant anomaly, but nevertheless as a genuine part of Althusser’s thought as a whole, compels us to see his philosophy from beginning to end as haunted and propelled by its own discrepancies, a philosophy whose greatest resistances were internal to it, a philosophy at war with itself, as if, to cite Hegel, it perpetually confronted itself as its own true other. Althusser’s repeated insistence on the primacy of practice over theory and on the necessary opacity of the field in which political practice operated might in this sense be read as a reaction against, or flight from, what remained, despite everything he wrote, a wish glimpsed fully only in ‘Student Problems’: that the correct theory could act as a guarantee of correct practice.

## Notes

1. The exception is Gregory Elliot’s *Althusser: The Detour of Theory*, Verso, London, 1987, pp. 168–70.
2. Both Bensaïd and Rancière had been militants in the UEC at the time Althusser wrote ‘Student Problems’ in 1964, and both attacked him ten years later: Bensaïd as part of the Trotskyist-inspired collective work *Contre Althusser* (10/18, Paris, 1974), and Rancière from the perspective of Maoism in his *La Leçon d’Althusser* (PUF, Paris, 1974).
3. Rancière, *La Leçon d’Althusser*, p. 9.
4. In fact, it was the so-called ‘Italian’ wing of the UEC, considered by its opponents to be a right-wing, social-democratic ‘response’ to Stalinism influenced by the Italian Communist Party, which most enthusiastically promoted pedagogical reforms. Supporting the project of a Marxist humanism according to which the concept of alienation replaced class struggle as the motor of history, the ‘Italians’, in concert with other non-Communist radical currents in the student movement, launched a critique of what we might call the individualizing and hierarchizing mechanisms of higher education. While Althusser violently denounced this critique in ‘Student Problems’, his ‘Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses’ essay, written six years later, nevertheless bears its imprint. Further, the critique, shorn of its humanist trapping, would also reappear, without attribution of course, in later denunciations of the university inspired by the Chinese Cultural Revolution.
5. It should be noted, however, that once the PCF entered the struggle in earnest it immediately became the target of ferocious repression. Eight of its members were killed at a single demonstration at the Charonne Metro station in February 1962.
6. Louis Althusser, ‘The “Piccolo Teatro”: Bertolazzi and Brecht’, in *For Marx*, trans. Ben Brewster, Verso, London, 1969, p. 143.
7. We might compare ‘Student Problems’ to some of Althusser’s later texts on the student movements. In April 1969, he responded to an article by Michel Verret in *La Pensée*, which was extremely critical of the movement in the universities in May 1968 as the pseudo-revolt of privileged youth as much against their parents as against the established order. Here Althusser argues for the great significance of the student revolt, including its critique of the academy. He reminds Verret that the student movement had its origins in the struggle against French imperialism, a fact that he himself had ignored in ‘Student Problems’. In a later two-part piece published in the PCF weekly *France-Nouvelle* (no. 1393, 23–30 July 1972, and no. 1394, 1–7 August 1972), ‘Sur une erreur politique’, he criticizes the decision on the part of a relatively small group to boycott the annual aggregation exams. He does so, however, on tactical rather than principled grounds, arguing that the boycotters did not establish a mass base for their actions. Finally, we should note that a text by Christian Baudelot and Roger Establet, *L’école capitaliste en France* (Maspéro, Paris, 1971), was the published expression of a collective reflection on the ‘educational state apparatus’, whose participants included Étienne Balibar and Pierre Macherey.

# Student problems

Louis Althusser

What are the theoretical principles of Marxism that should and can come into play in the scientific analysis of the university milieu to which students, along with teachers, research workers and administrators, belong?\*

Essentially, the Marxist concepts of the *technical* and *social* divisions of labour. Marx applied these principles in the analysis of capitalist society. They are valid for the analysis of all human societies (in the sense that social training [*formation*] relies upon a determined mode of production). They are valid *a fortiori* for a particular social reality like the university, which belongs for obvious reasons to every modern society, capitalist, socialist or communist.

A society lives and develops by a labour process carried on by people in a particular mode of production. The labour process, which is a total social process, gives to each individual who makes up this society a place in the division of labour. The division of labour thus defines the various jobs [*postes*] or positions that a society assigns to the individuals who compose it, in a labour process that maintains its life and development.

Marx has shown that the division of labour has *two forms*, which are sometimes distinct and sometimes confused, either in the jobs, and the individuals, or in their results; *the technical division and the social division of labour*.

(A) The *technical division of work* corresponds to all jobs whose existence is exclusively justified by the technical necessities that define the mode of production at a given moment in its development in a given society. These *technical* necessities are defined objectively and are therefore scientifically definable in every society. For example, the production of consumer goods in a given society that has at its disposal definite instruments and means of production necessarily brings with it a technical division of labour. In a factory this technical division of labour comprises not only the technical jobs (skilled workers, unskilled workers etc.) but also administrative jobs (overseers in

charge of the organization or the control of a complex process, engineers, technical management of the business etc.).

Under this relationship an institution like a university (corresponding to the *technical* necessities of economic as well as scientific production by its pedagogic function, and by its major role in scientific development and research) is basically a part of the technical division of labour in a given modern society. Its role in the *technical* division of labour consists of undertaking the *pedagogic training* [*formation*] of future technical, scientific and social cadres of the society, and of participating in creative scientific work. Pedagogical training [*la formation pédagogique*] – that is, the transmission of the knowledge [*savoir*] that exists in a society, knowledge which conditions the existence and development of the labour process of the society, is a vital necessity for every society; pedagogical training is therefore based above all on the technical division of labour.

(B) The *social division of labour* expresses a completely different aspect of the division of labour. Its function is to ensure the work process of the society *in the forms of class structure and domination*. The social division of labour is therefore only technical in the sense that it reflects the mode (social, political, ideological) of domination in the social work process. In this way the state is, with its instruments – army, police, law courts, and so on – and with all the personnel and all the jobs attached to these means of class domination, the basis par excellence of the social division of labour. This division has profound repercussions at every level of the production process. The management of a factory is not only a form of the technical division of labour; the greatest part of its commercial and publicity apparatus, and so on, and of its internal apparatus for controlling and repressing the workers (legal or otherwise), comes under the social division of labour. Miners see in the foreman, generally speaking, an ex-worker risen to the rank of overseer,

\* This text is a lightly corrected reprint of the translation by Dick Bateman of part of Louis Althusser's article 'Problèmes étudiants'. The French text was published in *La Nouvelle Critique* 152, January 1964, pp. 80–111, and has not yet been reprinted in any collection of Althusser's writings. Bateman's translation of 'Student Problems' first appeared in the journal *Sublation* (University of Leicester, 1967), pp. 14–22, and corresponds to abbreviated versions of sections 2 and 3 of Althusser's article (pp. 83–94 in the French). It is reprinted here with the kind permission of Mike Gane, who was editor of *Sublation* at the time.



working in the boss's interests, and therefore the state's, an exemplary instance of the social division of labour under cover of the technical division of labour. Certain jobs (certain members of the management, even certain engineers) are directly a matter of the social division of labour in a factory. Other jobs have a dual function: technical division and social division united in a single job. The management often puts workers into this social function of control/repression over their comrades. Some men are thus given two contradictory functions; if they accept these jobs and obligations, the relation of social forces, at decisive moments, sometimes push them towards the boss and sometimes towards the workers.

The same thing applies to the university, but in very special conditions which must absolutely be *understood*.

What is traditionally called the 'independence of the university' or its freedoms [*franchises*] (for example the fact that the police may not enter any university establishment without having been invited by the vice chancellor or his representative; the fact that professors are almost always chosen by their peers, etc.) demonstrates the special and 'privileged' situation of the university in relation to the social division of labour.

Why does the university enjoy such 'privilege'? A long struggle of resistance to power, over centuries, has given the university this special situation which shelters it to some extent from government enterprises – that is, from the class politics of the bourgeoisie. After a thousand and one forms of the long struggle which has established and reinforced it, class society has had to yield to the organization that distributes the knowledge it needs (and that, as it distributes it, is often the most likely to produce it, in the form of scientific inventions), the independence that this organization needs, on account of the very nature of the object that is behind all its activity. Such knowledge awakens the critical spirit and demands that freedom of thought indispensable to the birth and development of all science. The first universities were born in the mediaeval 'free' cities – that is, freed from feudal political tutelage; for example, Paris and Bologna. The great scientific and philosophical debates took place in these universities, in which the fate of modern science and very often the development of modern civilization were at stake. Traditionally the university represents 'liberal' values: critical spirit, freedom of scientific research and discussion, and so on. These do not, as some people dangerously say, spring from *bourgeois individualism*, but from genuine scientific values. It would be a serious mistake to confuse the *liberty* every

scientific activity needs, as the very air it breathes, as the basic condition for all scientific research, with the ideology of *economic* and *political* 'liberalism' of the bourgeoisie. It would be extremely dangerous to confuse scientific forms, sometimes necessarily *individual*, which command in given circumstances *all creative scientific activity*, with the juridical and political forms of bourgeois individualist ideology. (For centuries scientific discoveries were often the work of isolated individuals: Marx himself made his discovery alone, with Engels; Lenin worked alone in two or three decisive moments for the history of humanity.) To amalgamate *individual* research (sometimes absolutely indispensable) with *bourgeois judicial, political and ideological individualism*, to oppose *collective* forms to the well-grounded individual or liberal forms of scientific research; to condemn the latter as if they were manifestations of the bourgeoisie's 'liberal' or 'individualist' ideology; these are very dangerous points of view, as much from the pedagogic as from the political and ideological standpoint. For Marxists, it is *not the form* in which knowledge is either transmitted or absorbed or discovered that constitutes the 'decisive link', but the *quality of the knowledge* itself.

University liberalism is today a real *political* value in the struggle against the transformation of the educational organization into an instrument subject to the objectives of the ruling technocracy – that is, to the objectives of the monopolistic bourgeoisie. To neglect this value would be to commit a political mistake. To alienate academics because, being 'liberal', they are 'old hat', and to violate the university's liberal traditions, would be to commit a political mistake. To condemn 'individualism' in general, without carefully distinguishing bourgeois ideological individualism from the need for individual research *in all cases*, would be, according to the particular instance, either a scientific or a political error, or both (and particularly in the case where *individual* work is carried on in rational *collective forms* that can only flourish where there is a development and rationalization over and above that of the individual work itself).

Scientific knowledge of the conditions and the points of application of the social division of labour and its effects in the university is *indispensable* to all political (and trade-union) work in the university.

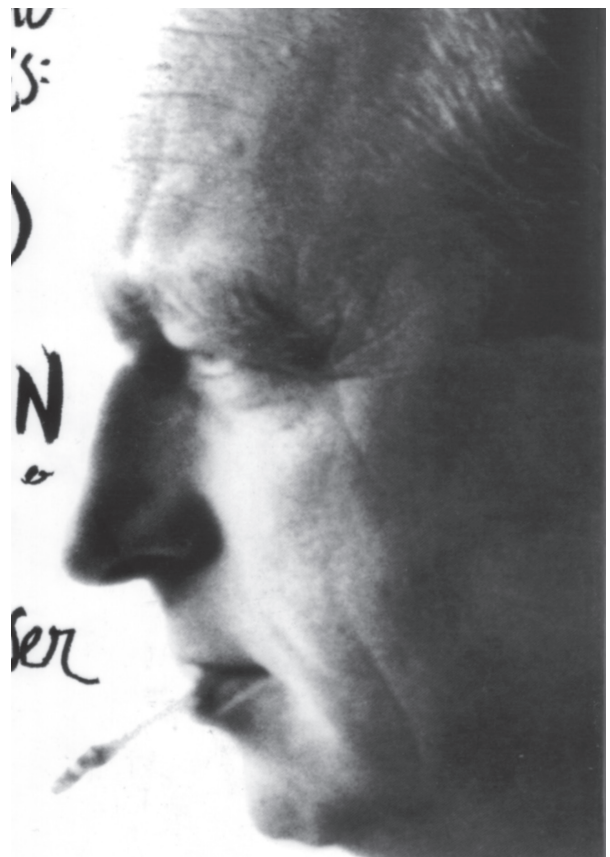
Now, what is remarkable is that in the case of the university the *social division of labour*, and therefore *class domination*, comes *massively* into play, but not only – or even mainly – where student and non-student theorists look for it. It comes *massively* into play, and in a 'blinding' way (which doubtless is why one does

not always 'see' it), in the very *object* of intellectual work; *in the knowledge* the university is commissioned to distribute to the students.

One can easily *see* the general effects of the social division of labour – that is, class domination – in certain serious government measures (control of the appointments of teachers by head teachers [*préfets*], creation of the job of general secretary of national education, politic manoeuvrings behind the nomination of vice chancellors, projects for reforming teaching along technocratic, anti-democratic lines, etc.). Governmental projects to reform teaching are the most dangerous, for they will be able to lean on certain erroneous claims based on theoretical confusions. (For example, the most enlightened technocrats are not, in principle, hostile to 'student wages', with a good limited intake [of students] and suitably precocious professional training, one that is detestable to science but useful to technocracy.) In any case, the struggle for university reform goes beyond the framework of the student struggle alone, and concerns the whole teaching body in its three levels – technical, teaching and research institutions; it also concerns the whole nation, which is to say in what most directly concerns us, the workers' organizations, the worker's unions, and in particular the CGT and the Communist Party. The battle to be waged calls for the union of all abilities and of all university and popular forces.

However, if one 'saw' the effects of the social division of labour *only* in governmental political and administrative measures, the dominant classes' primary strategic point of action, the action of its ideology – which reaches the very centre of the knowledge that students receive from their masters – this point of action, *the true fortress of class interest in the university*, would remain intact. For it is in the very nature of the knowledge which it gives students that the bourgeoisie exerts on them, if not in the short term then at least in the middle term, its *most profound influence*. Through the knowledge taught at university passes *the permanent dividing line between technical and social divisions of labour, the most constant and profound of class divisions*.

Is the knowledge distributed a true *science*? If yes, then its distribution really corresponds to *technical* necessity, and then the pedagogic function is essentially healthy, even if its *forms* are relatively 'old' and need reforming. Is the knowledge distributed a pure ideology? As in certain subjects and courses? If yes, then education is in the service of an ideology, and therefore of a class policy, *even if the 'forms' of teaching are very 'modern'*. Is the nature of the knowledge



that is taught doubtful, are the 'sciences' that are taught still uncertain, problematic, without a definite status, hesitating between ideology and science, and generally settling at the level of techniques shot through with ideology? Then the pedagogic function is itself ambiguous, with two uses, one part technical, the other politico-ideological, *whether the forms within which this half-knowledge is distributed are 'outdated' or modern*. All students will recognize here most of the literary disciplines, literary history, philosophy, law in its general form, and even sometimes history, which are often a place for the reigning aesthetic, ethical, judicial or political ideology, and almost all the so-called 'human' sciences, which are the chosen ground for the contemporary positivist technocratic ideology. Even in the natural sciences, teachers, students and researchers will be able to recognize *in the pedagogic presentation of their subject* the effects of the positivist ideology which is massively entrenched in the natural sciences, without 'contestation'. And if the forms of teaching natural science, including practical work, inspire in the students nothing but passivity, then the students are right. They resist through their passivity, not so much the aberrant pedagogic forms as the deep-seated reason for this aberration: the positivist ideology which chops up a living science into so many segments of a dead body, and makes the students swallow them by force, as if scientific truth were a *thing*. If it happens that these 'things' stick in the throats of the

students and teachers *then they are right*. As long as the reason for this (positivist) thingification of science is not denounced, as long as true pedagogic reform is not imposed against the *reigning positivism* that prevails in the natural sciences (including medicine and pharmacy) and often in the arts, by demanding, for example, instruction in the *epistemology of every science* and in the philosophy of the sciences, *for all disciplines* (everywhere, in the arts as much as in the sciences) and a new conception of the subject matter of science, one requiring adequate new pedagogic forms – as long as this is not done, the essential thing remains to be done.<sup>1</sup>

*The number one strategic point* where class domination over the minds of researchers, teachers and students is at stake is *the nature of the knowledge taught, knowledge* which a class division cuts into two: *science on the one hand and ideology on the other*.

### The pedagogic function

Since this knowledge calls directly into question the *pedagogic function* on which the university is based, it is necessary to provide an objective analysis of the latter.

The pedagogic function has as its object the transmission of a determinate knowledge to subjects who do not possess it. Therefore the pedagogic situation is based on the absolute condition of *an inequality between a knowledge and a lack of knowledge*. Those to whom society transmits, through its pedagogical institutions, the knowledge that it has decided they should assimilate, represent the side of non-knowledge, or, if you prefer (since a non-knowledge is also a certain knowledge), the side of *unequal*–inferior knowledge. Those whom society puts in charge of transmitting to the non-knowers the knowledge that they possess represent the side of knowledge, or those who have *unequal*–superior knowledge. The famous pupil–teacher, lecturer–student, relationship is the *technical expression of this fundamental pedagogic relationship*. As a general rule society gives the job of teacher to past students who have become teachers and who are therefore older than their pupils. But teachers can, in certain cases (adult education, retraining courses, etc.) be younger than their pupils; this is very frequently the case during periods of great political and social transformation, for instance during mass literacy campaigns (the USSR after 1917, China after 1949, and Cuba or Algeria today), or for giving basic education to political leaders who have risen directly from the masses (e.g. the *Rabotfak* in the USSR hailed by their alumnus Khrushchev). In any case, at least in

non-primitive societies, the pupil–teacher relationship is not based on an age difference, but on the fundamental pedagogical relationship between a knowing or *knowledge [savoir]* and the *non-knowledge* of this same knowledge.

A slogan which proclaims ‘The Sorbonne for the Students!’ should be examined under this precise relationship. If this slogan means the Sorbonne does not belong to the police, it is correct. But the Sorbonne does not belong only to the students; it also belongs to their teachers, and to the organization that enables the pedagogical relation to function, and so also to its ‘technical’ administrators. To forget this, in a slogan directed against a government that allows the police to enter the Sorbonne, is pedagogically a mistake, and politically an insult to the convictions of the majority of the teachers.

To stress the *age difference* or difference of generations in order to combat a number of admittedly backward institutions can also be a mistake. It’s not the age of people or of institutions that automatically determines their pedagogical value, but the actual role they fulfil in teaching. Those who are *systematically* against the old and in favour of the new should beware the traps of governmental ‘novelty’. Technocracy is overflowing with intelligent people and new ideas. One should not confuse a claim for renewal, scientifically based, which is always objectively progressive, with the simple attraction of novelty which can lead straight to utopia and its political dangers.

No pedagogic questions, which all presuppose unequal knowledge between teachers and students, can be settled on the basis of *pedagogic equality* between teachers and students. It is a legitimate claim that students be represented on all the consultative management committees of a faculty or of a school, assuming that they are old enough to attend university. But students are mistaken in demanding that in these *pedagogical* organizations their representatives should have powers of decision equal to those of the representatives of the teachers, for this does not correspond with the reality of the pedagogical function. Student demand for equal representation or even majority representation in the management of student activities outside the teaching situation is valid, for it corresponds to a social and political reality and not to a pedagogical reality. Student demands for a representation that corresponds to their position and their importance in the consultative administrative committees (not strictly speaking pedagogical) are also justifiable. But it is erroneous to transfer a demand (for equal representation) from one sector where it is



objectively justified (the coordination of activities) to a sector where it is not justified (the coordination of syllabuses and of properly pedagogical institutions).

When students want their work relationships with their teachers, which generally presuppose even in higher education an inequality between a knowledge and the non-knowledge of that knowledge, to be organized as if there existed a *genuine equality* of knowledge between teachers and students, they risk committing themselves to a confusion. The attraction that scientific research exercises can foster this error. The collective forms of work that exist in the practice of scientific research presuppose, precisely, that equality of knowledge between researchers that renders their exchanges and collaboration fruitful. But research doesn't just presuppose an equality of knowledge, but an equality in the knowledge that is *indispensable* for conducting true research, rather than its simulacrum. Students should convince themselves of the need for long training in order really to do research, unless they mean by research the technical division of piecemeal investigations, dubbed research by capitalist society, which abound in both the natural sciences and the humanities, and where the researcher is more a blind operative of fragmented tasks arranged by others than a true researcher – these are 'semi-researchers', victims of the consequences of the positivist ideology that dominates the field of research itself. In any case, we must not call the mere personal or collective rediscovery of an already existing knowledge *research* – otherwise we would have to take bibliographical work for scientific research.

Collective work whose goal is the assimilation of an existing knowledge can have a rational direction and meaning [*sens*]. The methodical organization of this collective labour has a direction and meaning: it can save students a lot of time and effort. But any method that seeks to hasten the assimilation of existing knowledge by casting about in the darkness, however full of good 'participational' intentions, is *technically* bad: determined collective work only has a meaning and direction if it is led by teachers or their assistants, teachers who have exactly that knowledge which the students need to acquire, and who have the scientific technique for transmitting that knowledge. This scientific technique is called 'pedagogy'. The ideology of self-instruction, however noble (in fact its enthusiasm cannot ever last long), which distrusts all 'directional' forms, which distinguishes between 'classical' work groups led by teachers (considered 'old-style' and quasi-passive) from groups deemed 'authentic' because they are 'democratic' (i.e. reluctant to call on a teacher

for help), rests on an incorrect conception of the reality not only of research but even of simple pedagogical work (which presumes that those who possess knowledge will help the students tasked with acquiring it). Such an anarcho-'democratic' conception of pedagogy can only lead students to disappointment. It is absurd to waste time rediscovering by uncertain methods, and at the cost of considerable effort, knowledge to which there exists a path that is infinitely more direct, since it is rational. The students who might proceed this way will in fact postpone the moment when they might acquire the training they need to become the researchers they wish to be.

They also risk alienating the goodwill of their professors, who are thus unjustly treated with suspicion in their own pedagogical activity, and whose knowledge is held to be superfluous. They may even alienate them *politically*, to the point of transforming possible allies and comrades in struggle into enemies of the political or trade-union cause that the students defend. By retarding their scientific training, students who content themselves with 'participationist' methods, through which they give themselves the 'democratic' illusion of knowledge, will get stuck for a long time in a half-knowledge – that is, in a state that does not give them the weapons of scientific learning.

It is no accident that a reactionary bourgeois or 'technocratic' government prefers half-knowledge in all things, and that, on the contrary, the *revolutionary* cause is always indissolubly linked with knowledge, in other words *science*. It is much easier to manipulate intellectuals with a weak scientific training than intellectuals with a strong one, to manipulate them and submit them to a policy which, whatever certain people say, is being implemented with considerable skill. What the government fears above all is the scientific and critical training of the intellectuals it is nonetheless obliged to train, in order to provide itself with cadres and teachers.

## Note

1. To avoid any misunderstanding, I should specify that what matters, in the problem posed by teacher/student activity, is to distinguish the *form* of teaching (i.e. pedagogical methods that are more or less valid) from the *content* of teaching (i.e. knowledge that is more or less scientific or more or less ideological); and then, once this distinction has been made, to determine which is the principal and which is the secondary point – which element is *dominant* and which *subordinate*. It is *content* (knowledge) which is dominant, and the *form* subordinate. Needless to say, this conclusion does not imply that we should neglect the transformation of the *forms* of teaching! But we must treat it in its reality; that is, as a function of the *content* which in the last instance is dominant, as a function of taught *knowledge*.

# Red years

## Althusser's lesson, Rancière's error and the real movement of history

**Nathan Brown**

The dissolution of the organizational forms which are created by the movement, and which disappear when the movement ends, does not reflect the weakness of the movement, but rather its strength. The time of false battles is over. The only conflict that appears real is the one that leads to the destruction of capitalism.

François Martin and Jean Barrot (aka Gilles Dauvé),  
*Eclipse and Re-emergence of the Communist Movement* (1973)

'The return to Marx': today the erstwhile slogan of Althusserian theory is once again our watchword. *Why Marx Was Right* (Eagleton 2011); *The Enigma of Capital and the Crisis of Capitalism* (Harvey 2011); *Representing Capital: A Reading of Volume One* (Jameson 2011). A cursory scan of some recent publications will tell us that once again we are Reading *Capital*.

So it seems an auspicious moment for the long-overdue publication in English of Jacques Rancière's first book, *Althusser's Lesson* (1974), a searing polemic against his former mentor.<sup>1</sup> Over a decade after the inception of Althusser's return to Marx – and Rancière's formative participation in its theoretical programme – Rancière asks after the political effects of the Althusserianism in the wake of May '68 and the Red Years that followed. His answer, argued in a prose crackling with the heat of its times, is that Althusserianism had come to function as 'a philosophy of order': a Kautskyist apology for the division of political labour, an opportunistic affirmation of the academic hierarchy of roles and intellects, a reactionary theoretical orthodoxy. By the time the French edition of his *Reply to John Lewis* was published in 1973, Althusser's philosophy had become a discourse which 'cloaks its consecration of the existing order in the language of revolution' (AL 124). The goal of *Althusser's Lesson* was thus to put this discourse in its place:

to re-inscribe it in its history, that is, in the system of practical and discursive constraints that allowed it to be uttered at all; and to surprise its articulations by forcing it to answer other questions than those posed by the complacent partners it had picked out for itself, and by reinserting its argumentation into the concatenation of words used, now as in the past, to articulate both the inevitability of oppression and the hopes for liberation. (AL 123)

If this was Rancière's task in 1973, then the translation of his book in 2011 provides an opportunity not only to reconsider the place of Althusser's thought today but also to carry out a similar critical operation upon Rancière's own discourse – and to do so as we begin to assess the political effects of another return to Marx under different circumstances.<sup>2</sup>

Rancière's critique was prompted by a specific theoretical–political conjuncture, five years after May '68. On the one hand, the 1973 occupation and self-management of the Lip watch factory in Besançon marked, for Rancière, the high point of an ongoing effort to push forward the consequences of the French May. On the other hand, the publication of Althusser's *Reply* the same year – its defence of his anti-humanism under the banner of a Marxist–Leninist orthodoxy – signified a belated effort to reassert the ruined mastery of an exhausted discourse. 'At the precise moment when we were singing in Besançon that nothing would ever again be the same, we found ourselves being forced to face our illusions. Apparently, when it came to Marxist discourse, everything was exactly the same as before' (AL xx). *Althusser's Lesson* is Rancière's effort to insist upon what exactly could not be the same in the relation between theory and politics after May '68.

Today, debates developing within the political context in which Rancière was writing *against* Althusser – debates concerning discrepant traditions of left communism, the ultra-left, council communism, self-organization, and so on – are once again

at the forefront of communist theory. Of particular interest in this respect is a surge of interest in theories of *communization* as these have developed in France since the early 1970s, through the work of Gilles Dauvé and the group Théorie Communiste (TC) in particular.<sup>3</sup> Renewed engagements with this current of communist theory by groups and publications such as Aufheben (UK), Riff-Raff (Sweden), TPTG and Blau-machen (Greece), or Endnotes (UK/USA) suggests a renewed practico-theoretical grasp of communism not as an ‘idea’ but as exactly what Marx said it was: the real movement which abolishes the present state of things.<sup>4</sup>

If this context returns us to the period in which Rancière’s critique of Althusser was written, how might it bear upon the position he stakes out in his text? What can we learn concerning the relation between theory and politics via Rancière’s critique of Althusser’s institutional commitments to the Party and the university? What is the relation between Althusser’s return to Marx and the return to Marx today? How can a re-engagement with Rancière’s first book help us to situate the limitations of his own political thought with regard to such questions?

My goal here is not to adjudicate a theoretical controversy between proper names or even theoretical orientations – a controversy now some forty years past. To lay my cards on the table: I am a sympathetic reader of Althusser who thinks that Rancière’s critique was more or less ‘right’ and that the consequences he drew from it were largely ‘wrong’. My interest is not in pointing out, with the benefit of hindsight, how different consequences *could have* been drawn, but rather in specifying how, within the context from which Rancière was writing, different consequences *were* being drawn, by others. So if I engage this controversy today, the point is not to defend Althusser, criticize Rancière or sift theoretical minutia. Rather, I want to situate their break within a certain historical, political and theoretical *movement* which unfolds unevenly between several years – 1965 (*For Marx*; *Reading Capital*); 1968 (the French May); 1973 (*Reply to John Lewis*; *Althusser’s Lesson*; the Lip conflict) – and which traces a circuitous path to the present.<sup>5</sup> I want to traverse a chiasmus cutting across the Red Years by tracking the encounter of ‘Althusser’ and ‘Rancière’ as it divides into discrepant trajectories. And I want to elucidate the manner in which the traces of those trajectories can be read in relation to the theoretical and practical energies of the present moment, as the years of the twenty-first century bleed into red.

## Althusser’s opportunism

Without revolutionary theory there can be no revolutionary practice. We have repeated this sentence over and over again, thinking it might set our minds at ease. But now we must heed the lesson taught by the Cultural Revolution and the ideological revolt of the students: cut off from revolutionary practice, there is no revolutionary theory that is not transformed into its opposite. (AL 154)

This is how Rancière concludes his 1969 essay ‘On the Theory of Ideology: Althusser’s Politics’, included as an appendix to *Althusser’s Lesson*. It is this *transformation* of Althusserian theory which Rancière’s book studies at greater length. The basic point of the book is simple: Althusserianism had seemed radical; now we know it is not. What had been an internal challenge to the PCF has become an apology for the role of the intellectual within the Party. What had been a conduit to Mao is now not Maoist enough. What had inspired the young now makes us old. What had ‘led more than one person to the toils of combat’ had ‘died on the barricades of May ’68, along with many other ideas from the past’ (AL xix, xx).

But the hither side of the reactionary transformation of Althusserianism is, of course, Rancière’s own political transformation. The subtext of *Althusser’s Lesson* – sometimes submerged, sometimes rising to the surface – is self-criticism. But this self-criticism has its own subtext: like Althusser’s self-criticism, it is shadowed by implied self-congratulation. Althusserianism changed for the worse by remaining the same; Rancière lives out the radicality it promised by changing with the times. Althusserian theory was transformed by its static severance from practice; Rancière was transformed by the toils of combat. Althusserian theory died on the barricades of May ’68; Rancière’s theoretical vocation rises from its ashes. Althusserianism changed by remaining anchored to the Party and the university; Rancière changed by revolting against his place within the institutional hierarchy of knowledge. Althusserianism betrays its Maoism by failing to heed the lesson of the Cultural Revolution; Rancière affirms the Maoism it betrayed by wielding this lesson against his professor. Althusserianism becomes increasingly infantile the older it gets; Rancière grows up by recognizing the political maturity of the students. Althusserianism becomes reactionary by remaining Althusserian; the revolt against the *dispositif* of the university has taught Rancière to align himself with Foucault.

This double subtext – self-criticism shadowed by self-congratulation – makes things less simple. The

complication is that Rancière has to show the subversive current that allowed Althusserianism, at first, to deceive; but he also needs to establish that it has not changed, which is why it was transformed. All of its revolutionary innovations must also have been premised upon an internal logic that would lead it to counter-revolutionary ruin. 'Althusser had misled us, yes, but he had also opened paths that we might never have known without him' (AL xix). This *opening* of new directions is what made it possible for Althusser to *mislead* by drawing his students along with him into the chicanes of Theory. But Rancière also wants to show that these new paths were always leading nowhere. The category 'Althusserianism', that is, requires an *identity*, such that whatever was most subversive in it must also have been compromised from the outset, such that to remain faithful to itself will have been to forgo subversion. In breaking the faith, Rancière will have remained true to the subversive transformations of history.

At times, Rancière's effort to work through his early enthusiasm for the *politics* of Althusserianism results in a candid account of his complicity with its protocols of institutional privilege. At the centre of this account is Althusser's essay 'Student Problems', written in late 1963, in which he intervenes against calls by the students of the syndicalist Left for transformations of the institutional and pedagogical structure of the university. Althusser defends the 'fundamental pedagogic relation' that 'rests upon the absolute condition of an *inequality between knowledge and lack of knowledge*'.<sup>6</sup> Althusser's article, Rancière writes, 'is in fact what convinced some of us to join the political battle inside the Union des étudiants communistes [UEC] to restore Marxist rigor as the way to chase out the prevailing eclecticism' (AL 41). Confronted with a choice between an institutional structure that favoured their immediate interests and a 'leftist' deviation that threatened them, Rancière and the Althusserian students of the ENS sided with 'science' against 'ideology', and also with the hierarchy of knowledge:

Treated like heirs to the throne by our professors, we had no objections to the 'pedagogic relation'; the winners of a fiercely selective competition, trained to compete from very early on, we could not but look upon the critique of individualism and the calls for collective work groups as the reveries of illiterate minds. (AL 41)

For Rancière, 'Student Problems' marks the point at which Althusser's theoretical problematic begins to exert immediately political effects, whereby the priority of theoretical rigour aligns with institutional protocols

predicated upon the inequality of intelligences. He admits that the transformation of Althusserianism into 'theory's police force ... was established through our political actions within the Cercle d'Ulm' (AL 41). In practice, the defence of science against ideology amounted to an alignment with Party authorities and a repression of anti-institutional student radicalism within the UEC.

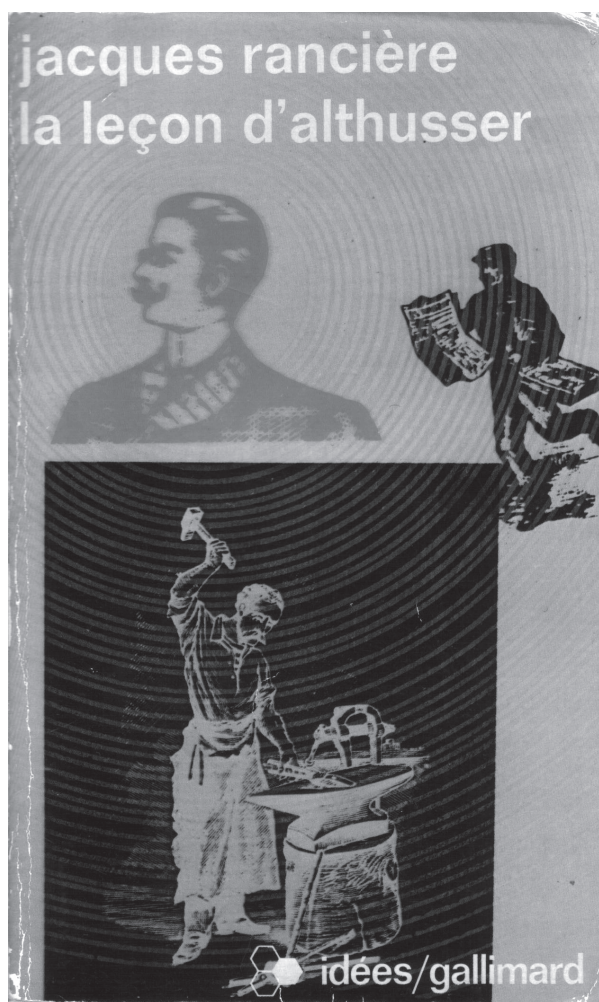
Among these candid remarks, however, there are occasions on which Rancière's effort to seal the fate of Althusserianism by stamping it with a fatal identity, while absolving himself of its destiny, leads his critique into paranoid reconstructions. Following the publication of 'Contradiction and Overdetermination' and 'On the Materialist Dialectic', Althusser was famously censured for his Maoist sympathies in 1963, first in print by the Party's leading philosopher, Roger Garaudy, then at a meeting of the PCF's Central Committee in October and by the editorial board of *La Pensée* in November. 'The warning he got', judges Rancière, 'must have led him to choose his targets with a specific goal in mind: to bring about the coincidence of theory's long-term interests (the interests of rational politics, in other words) with the immediate interests of the Party, that is to say, with the fight against the dissolution sparked by the Party's politics.' According to Rancière, 'this is where Althusser's grand strategic design and his tactical calculation converged' (AL 36–7).

As a 'good illustration' of this 'convergence' – whereby Althusser seals the counter-revolutionary fate of Althusserianism by bringing his project into line with the immediate interests of the PCF – Rancière cites the critique of humanism. Strategically, he argues, anti-humanism was advantageous because it required the restoration of theory's primacy against the Zhdanovian subordination of theory to politics. Tactically, it was opportune in so far as it 'could serve to halt the Party's break to the right because it assumed the acceptable form of an attack against the 'right-wing' humanism of some communist intellectuals' (AL 37).

It is hard to see why we should read 'Marxism and Humanism' – written in October 1963, between one warning and another – as a tactical compromise with the immediate interests of the Party rather than as a refusal of such compromise. In terms of the theoretical conjuncture within the PCF, Althusser's 'target' is the same as it was in 'On the Young Marx' (1960), 'Contradiction and Overdetermination' (1962) and 'On the Materialist Dialectic' (1963): the ideological categories of the young Marx which propped up an essentialist/expressivist account of historical determination advanced by Garaudy in such texts as *Human-*



*isme marxiste* (1957) and *Perspectives de l'homme* (1959). As Gregory Elliot points out, Althusser's critique of humanism unmistakably echoes the Chinese Communist Party's polemic against the CPSU's 1961 programme, which argued that the Soviet programme 'substitutes humanism for the Marxist-Leninist theory of class struggle and substitutes the bourgeois slogan of Liberty, Equality, Fraternity for the ideals of communism'.<sup>7</sup> On this account, rather than constituting a 'good illustration' of a tactical decision to capitulate to the immediate interests of the PCF, 'Marxism and Humanism' exemplifies Althusser's willingness to reaffirm, against the same Party intellectuals who denounced him, the same Maoist leftism for which he was denounced.



How do we explain Rancière's contortions on this point? Despite the implausible nature of the illustration, why is it Althusser's *anti-humanism* that has to play the role of 'the cross of Althusserian philosophy' (AL 83), exemplifying the fatal convergence of his 'grand strategic design and his tactical calculation?' Most importantly, because it will be Rancière's turn towards a workerist humanism that will ground his archival investigations of *la parole ouvrière* in his

articles for *Les Révoltes logiques* (1975–85) and in his major study *Les nuits des prolétaires* (1981).<sup>8</sup> The critique of humanism – or, more accurately, the proximity of its development to Althusser's political intervention in 'Student Problems' – will thus function as the linchpin of Rancière's critique, the theoretical commitment according to which his teacher will affirm the division of labour and the institutional hierarchy of knowledge against the equality of intelligences that will be the bedrock of Rancière's later work.<sup>9</sup>

But this manoeuvre also covers over a symptomatic slip in the chronology of Rancière's account. 'It was only in 1965', he acknowledges, 'when our actions within the UEC started to give some intimation of the effects that were to follow, that a fraction of the Party apparatus came to perceive the appeal of going back to Marx and of the "autonomy of theory"' (AL 35). In 1965, a fraction of the PCF 'sensed the danger of Garaudy's humanism and the usefulness of a return to Marxist rigor' (AL 35–6). Evidently, Althusser must already have known, when he wrote 'Marxism and Humanism' in October 1963, that fractions of the PCF would be persuaded of the practical utility of anti-humanism in 1965, by the actions of his students. Thus his tactical calculation brought his grand strategic design into line with the immediate interests of the Party two years before the Party was aware of what its immediate interests would be. Althusser's critique of humanism could not have been, for example, a principled theoretical stand *against* the immediate interests of the Party in accordance with his own Maoist sympathies and the periodization of Marx's theoretical development he had articulated in 1960. Rather, Althusser's critique of humanism was the manoeuvre of an *opportunist* (and a prescient one at that). This is the crux of what is untenable in Rancière's account of Althusserianism: ultimately everything about Althusserian theory, from its grand strategic design to its local tactical calculations will *converge* upon Althusser's opportunism – the opportunism of a communist intellectual unwilling to forgo the authority of a place in the Party and the opportunism of a Professor anxious to keep his students in their subordinate place.

What this totalizing convergence achieves is the erasure of every genuine theoretical accomplishment of Althusser's work. Rancière's assessment of *Reading Capital* is that 'this reading of Marx via Althusser and Lacan does little more than give a new sheen to the thesis Kautsky had already defended: science belongs to intellectuals, and it is up to them to bring it to producers necessarily cut off from knowledge' (AL 47).

Structural causality? The theory of double reading, of the *bévue*? The relation between the real object and the object of knowledge, developed through a thinking of overdetermination via Marx's concept of the *Gliederung*? Althusser's critique of Hegelian Marxism? Rancière's own outstanding essay on the concepts of critique, process and fetishism? All of this amounts to 'little more' than a consolidation of the hierarchy of knowledge. Rancière's extraordinary assertion is that 'the major thesis of *Reading Capital*' was simply 'the manipulation of the blind subjects of social practice' (AL 53). This bizarre claim allows Rancière to argue that it was precisely the 'major thesis' of *Reading Capital* which resurfaced as a political thesis at the beginning of May '68: 'the students are being manipulated by a social-democratic conspiracy' (AL 53). Every Althusserian concept and position is *converted* into yet another instance of a grand strategic design to prop up Althusser's own position within the consistency of roles and places. In this sense, Rancière's desire to impose a cynical, unitary political logic upon every aspect of Althusserian theory results in a practice of paranoid reading.

What do I mean, then, when I say that Rancière's critique is 'more or less right'? I mean that it is indeed a sad spectacle to watch Althusser, in the *Reply to John Lewis*, attempt to reconsolidate his theoretical authority by appealing to the letter of 'Marxism–Leninism' upon the irrelevant ground of a debate between members of national Communist parties. I mean that Althusser's 'left-wing critique of Stalinism'<sup>10</sup> within the PCF was a hopelessly rearguard battle that was ultimately doomed in advance, by its institutional commitment, to undermine any radical relation to political practice. And I mean that Rancière is correct to identify and destroy the Kautskyist implications of Althusser's position on the 'pedagogic relation', as it bore upon the relation of theory to the Party to the mass movement (though it is *not* correct to identify this position with Althusser's theoretical anti-humanism). I mean that by 1973 Althusserianism is a sitting duck, and Rancière's aim is good enough to blow it out of the water. On its own terms, as a conjunctural effort to assess the political effects of Althusserianism, *Althusser's Lesson* is a devastating intervention. In my opinion, it remains Rancière's best book.

So much, then, for this brief reckoning with Rancière's critique of Althusser. Let us turn to the consequences he draws from his *Lesson*, in order 'to surprise its articulations by forcing it to answer other questions than those posed by the complacent partner it had picked out for itself' (AL 123).

## The Lip affair

In 1964 Rancière chose sides: with Althusser and against the syndicalist left. By 1973 he seems uncritically won over to the cause of the latter.<sup>11</sup> In *Althusser's Lesson*, Rancière's major reference to a political sequence which exemplifies everything he has learned since May '68 – and everything Althusser had failed to learn – is the 1973 occupation, takeover and self-management of the Lip watch factory in Besançon. 'Men don't need masters' (AL 90), Rancière wants to show, so he puts down all his chips, against Althusser's critique of humanism, on 'Lip 1973'. Invoking the appropriation of the instruments of production by tailor-workers in 1833 as an instance of the autonomy of producers, he argues that 'the new chain initiated there leads straight to our present. Lip 1973: workers are not people one can separate and displace how one pleases.' As 'a weapon to remember this by', Rancière offers the song of the Lip workers: 'It is possible: we produce, we sell, we pay ourselves.' 'A future is outlined there', he judges; 'an "economy that serves man"' (AL 90). Lip 1973 is the bearer of the humanist future of the workers' movement, juxtaposed against the dead past of Althusserian anti-humanism.

'It is possible', Rancière repeats: 'the whole ideological struggle between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat is played out there' (AL 90). But what is 'it'? This simple question suffices to reopen every problem Rancière's 'Lesson in History' wants to ignore.<sup>12</sup> Isn't the whole ideological struggle between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat played out over the question of *what* is possible? 'We produce, we sell, we pay ourselves': it doesn't require too rigorous or patrician a Marxism to see exactly what is wrong with the limits of possibility for which Rancière is willing to settle in order to secure his indubitable respect for the speech of 'the man workers' (AL 92). It was not the destruction of wage labour or of capital that was said to be possible at Lip; it was *preservation* of wage labour and the *management* of capital that was at issue.

This, at any rate, is the point made by another text written in 1973 and published in the journal *Négation*, 'Lip and the Self-Managed Counter-Revolution'.<sup>13</sup> Rather than linking together an uninterrupted chain between 1833 and 1973 and triumphantly holding up the human possibility of selling goods within a capitalist market economy in order to pay ourselves, this is a text which analyses the *limits* of the possibilities attained by the Lip workers, which historicizes those limits in terms of periods of formal and real subsumption (thereby *differentiating* between the situation of the workers' movement in the nineteenth and twentieth

centuries), and which draws from this analysis conclusions not only pertaining to the consciousness of the workers or the particularity of their struggle, but pertaining to the historical movement of the form and content of struggles in which the Lip conflict was situated.

According to this analysis, the Lip affair became a self-managed counter-revolution not because of the subjective consciousness of the workers ('it would be wrong to suppose they could have chosen more radical methods. They acted in conformity with their real isolation from other workers in struggle against the loss of their livelihood'), but because of the objective conditions under which their struggle took place:

In the absence of any real solidarity movement the workerist character of the struggle prevailed over its proletarian origin as the conflict developed. In their isolation the Lip workers were unable to go beyond the immediate conditions they had faced from the outset, and it was from this narrow basis that they rushed into the struggle. Attached to their isolated factory, they strengthened their consciousness of themselves as producers and attempted to realize in practical terms that consciousness. They resumed the production of watches. The 'Lips' – and that is the origin of their disgusting popular nickname – became a collective capitalist.<sup>14</sup>

For example, the workers advertised in their catalogue that 'the sale price of the watches includes the price of parts, value-added, tax, depreciation and replacement of machinery, the workers' salary, *and even the owners' profit*.' Asking after the objective reason for this decision, since the workers had no intention of accumulating capital, *Négation* concludes that 'there were no other reasons for their decisions about salary and price than their desire to have everything go on as before: the preservation of their wages required the preservation of the firm's capital.' The problem, however, was that the firm's capital could not be preserved through the cycle of reproduction, since this would have required firing excess labour power: exactly what the workers hoped to avoid by taking over management.<sup>15</sup>

*Négation*'s conclusion is thus rather more considered than Rancière's workerist cheerleading:

'We produce, we sell, we pay ourselves – it is possible' the Lip Action Committee sang along with the confused Ultra-Left and Maoist tail-enders who helped with a good deal of the publicity. But no, it wasn't possible. The development and socialization of the productive forces by capitalism forbid any return to any such low level mode of production and mercantile exchange, unless, in limited or

general crises (with other developments), it is used as a means of hiding the impossibility of continuing the cycle of capitalist reproduction. In that case, the end of the workers' movement immediately has as its content the legacy of this development: the reconversion of its theory and practice into the potential counter-revolution. This should astonish only those who haven't taken into consideration the historical movement or the direct link between revolution and counter-revolution.<sup>16</sup>

Since we know that Rancière has taken the link between revolution and counter-revolution into consideration, it must be the historical movement for which he has failed to account. Referring us to the Lip slogan, 'The economy should serve man, not man the economy' (AL 83), he asks, 'are these workers perhaps still living in 1844?', sarcastically citing the year prior to Marx's epistemological break with the early humanism of his *Manuscripts*. But the question is badly posed. It isn't that the workers are still living in 1844. The problem is that they are living in 1973, while the form and the content of their struggle relied for its success upon conditions proper to the nineteenth century. This conditioned its limits. While Rancière can only see a triumph of workerist humanism, *Négation* concludes that the Lip affair 'reflects the end of the workers' movement as a progressive historical force'.<sup>17</sup>

What is at stake in juxtaposing Rancière's analysis of the Lip conflict with that of *Négation*? First and foremost, the movement of debates concerning council communism and the ultra-left in the wake of May '68. These were debates over, among other things, the problem of *organization* – debates in the context of which Althusser's Leninist commitment to the party form and the role of Marxist philosophy in the construction of a 'general line' would have been laughable. But how can we situate Rancière in relation to those debates, and what theoretical developments does his effort to resituate Althusserianism in 1973 not bring into view?

By way of conclusion, let me quickly trace some of these up to the present moment.

## Programmatism

In 1973 François Martin and Jean Barrot (aka Gilles Dauvé) published *Eclipse and Re-emergence of the Communist Movement*, a collection of their writings since 1968.<sup>18</sup> In a subsection of their 1969 essay 'Leninism and the Ultra-Left' titled 'Managing What?' they link the role of workers' councils for the ultra-left to that of the party for Leninism: 'the councils act as the fighting organs of the workers under capitalism and as



the instruments of workers' management under socialism. Thus the councils play the same central role in the ultra-left theory as the party in the Leninist theory.<sup>19</sup> This is, roughly, the position on workers' councils that we find retained in *Society of the Spectacle*, for example. Dauvé's effort to move beyond the ultra-left involves clearly identifying the problem with this theory of organization in terms of Marx's critique of political economy:

The theory of workers' management analyses capitalism in terms of its management. But is capitalism first of all a mode of management? The revolutionary analysis of capitalism started by Marx does not lay the stress on the question: who manages capital? On the contrary: Marx describes both capitalists and workers as mere functions of capital: 'the capitalist as such is only a function of capital, the laborer a function of labour power'. . . . In other words, the manager is at the service of definite and compelling production relations.<sup>20</sup>

Despite their humanist rhetoric, this is what the workers at Lip found out, due to the impossibility (without lay-offs) of preserving the firm's capital (and therefore their wages) through the cycle of reproduction. And this is why communist theory needs to think revolutionary struggle in terms of the contradiction between labour and capital (not between workers and capitalists) – and, more specifically, in terms of the double cycle of reproduction (of labour power and capital) structuring that contradiction, which Marx termed the *Zwickmühle*, or 'double mill'.<sup>21</sup>

Emerging from the same context as *Négation* and Dauvé, and in conversation with them, it is the Marseille-based group *Théorie Communiste* (TC) which has done the most to develop a theory of *communization* in such terms since the mid-1970s.<sup>22</sup> Perhaps their signal contribution has been a periodization of what they call 'cycles of struggle'<sup>23</sup> according to the distinction between formal and real consumption, a theory which offers a sophisticated structural account of the end of the workers' movement as a progressive historical force and the development since the 1970s of a new period of class conflict.

TC assigns the name *programmatisation* to the period of class struggle in which 'the proletariat finds, in its drive toward liberation, the fundamental elements of a future social organization which become the *program to be realized*'.<sup>24</sup> In the period of *programmatisation* the revolution is 'the affirmation of the proletariat, whether as a dictatorship of the proletariat, workers' councils, the liberation of work, a period of transition, the withering of the state, generalized self-management, or a "society of associated producers."'<sup>25</sup> This cycle

of struggle thus encompasses both the party and self-management as organizational forms, forms which affirm class-belonging as the foundation of a transition towards communism. On this account, what Rancière heralds as the future – 'an economy that serves man', managed by workers – is in fact an aspiration proper to the internal *limit* of a period of struggle that was ending as he wrote.

Programmatism ends with a counter-revolutionary restructuring of relations of exploitation during the 1970s and 1980s corresponding to a second period of real subsumption and to the defeat of workers' identity, communist parties, unionism, self-management and autonomy. Within the cycle of struggles emerging from this restructuring, 'the proletariat no longer carries a project of social reorganization as an affirmation of what it is.'<sup>26</sup> Rather than an *affirmation* of proletarian class identity through political mediations or self-organization, the dynamic of class conflict tends towards an overcoming of revindicative struggles, and thus towards the calling into question by the proletariat of its reproduction as a class. A movement towards revolution as communization is *presaged* within struggles whenever this confrontation of the class with itself takes place, whenever 'to be a class is for the proletariat the obstacle that its struggle as a class must overcome/abolish'.<sup>27</sup> This is the nature of the current cycle of struggles. In this confrontation of dynamic and limit, class-belonging is experienced purely as an external constraint, against which the proletariat struggles. The dynamic confrontation with this 'obstacle' appears as a 'swerve' within class struggle: the action of a class, as a class, against its being a class.<sup>28</sup>

TC's primary example of such a struggle is the Greek riots of 2008, which they analyse in their 2009 text 'The Glass Floor'. What they present in that text is a structural account of the internal *limit* of that struggle, and also of the historical *movement* within which the dynamic of that limit unfolds. What their mode of analysis is intended to resist, like Althusser's, is any reference 'to some kind of humanity underneath the proletarian or to human activity underneath work'. Such a reference, they maintain,

not only traps itself in a philosophical quagmire, but always returns to the consideration that the class struggle of the proletariat can only go beyond itself insofar as it already expresses something which exceeds and affirms itself. The sweaty labourer has been replaced by Man, but the problem has not changed, which remains that of *Aufhebung*.<sup>29</sup>

In other words, what TC has developed, in moving beyond debates surrounding councilism and self-



management during the Red Years, is a meticulously theorized and historically specific anti-Hegelian structuralist anti-humanism, by way of a rereading of Marx (though without any patience for the PCF). What Rancière's wholesale post-Althusserian embrace of workerist humanism could not grasp in 1973–74 is exactly what TC have been able to articulate: a historically specific thinking of the present that, rather than linking a chain straight from 1833 to 1973, *situates* class struggle according to both limits and dynamics that unfold within a historical movement.<sup>30</sup>

While Rancière looked to the future, in 1973, in terms of a period of class struggle which had encountered its limit, *Négation*, Dauvé, TC and others thought *through* councilism, self-management and self-organization as a part of the legacy of the ultra-left that had to be pushed beyond. TC, in particular, has done so in a way that certainly does not 'return' to Althusserianism; but from 1975–2011 they have developed a post-ultra-left theory that draws more lessons from Althusser than one might think could be gleaned from a Marxist philosophy that 'died on the barricades of May '68'.<sup>31</sup>

Once again, it is a structuralist anti-humanism that sparks debates at the cutting edge of communist theory and that inspires communist students (though not students willing to fight on behalf of 'the pedagogic relation'). See, for example, *Communiqué from an Absent Future: On the Terminus of Student Life* (2009), which draws its anti-reformist conclusions, its refusal of political mediations and its tactical decisions in part from a periodization of struggles closely influenced by TC's.<sup>32</sup> Of course, the Marxist rigour of TC's account has also been subject to accusations of theoreticist obfuscation and structuralist determinism.<sup>33</sup> Real history returns, and with it a renewed intensity to debates over the relation between theory and politics. But the theoretical articulation of history's real movement doesn't pass through *The Emancipated Spectator*, darling of *Artforum* and the Venice Biennale. Rather, it passes through conjunctural analyses by groups like TC and TPTG/Blauchmachen as they try to situate the significance of sequences like the Greek riots in terms of the dynamics of proletarianization in the twenty-first century, or in relation to the current cycle of struggles.<sup>34</sup>

From the Red Years following May '68 to the red-dening of the twenty-first century, the impasse that TC finds a way through, in my opinion, is precisely that which Rancière reproaches Althusser for walking into. Their supposed determinism is actually a sober reckoning with the place of theory, which cannot 'guide' a revolutionary movement by telling the proletariat what

it should have done differently or what it should do now. Theory can, however, compare, analyse, synthesize, periodize and arrive at a tendential and *structural* account of the concrete situations in which we are historically and geographically immersed. It can do so in a way that emerges *from* particular struggles, and this can help us to situate those struggles in relation to a movement that traverses and exceeds them, a real movement that cannot be guided by 'a general line' or prescriptions from party philosophers. Nor will any effort to situate our struggles be aided by what Rancière has to offer: an abdication of structural analysis and a theory of politics as the unaccountable interruption of 'a freedom that crops up and makes real the ultimate equality on which any social order rests',<sup>35</sup> of politics as what unaccountably 'occurs whenever a community with the capacity to argue and to make metaphors is likely, at any time and through anyone's intervention, to crop up'.<sup>36</sup> This is a theory of the relation between politics and 'the police', as a game of whack-a-mole.

## Notes

1. Jacques Rancière, *La leçon d'Althusser*, Gallimard, Collection Idées, Paris, 1974; *Althusser's Lesson*, trans. Emiliano Battista, Continuum, London, 2011; cited hereafter in text as *AL*.
2. Emiliano Battista's translator's notes are a helpful guide to this context.
3. The journal *Endnotes* 1 (2008) offers a succinct characterization of Dauvé and TC's shared understanding of revolution as communization: 'According to this shared view, the transition to communism is not something that happens after the revolution. Rather, the revolution as communization is itself the dissolution of capitalist social relations through communist measures taken by the proletariat, abolishing the enterprise form, the commodity form, exchange, money, wage labour and value, and destroying the state. Communization, then, is the immediate production of communism: the self-abolition of the proletariat through its abolition of capital and the state' (209).
4. See the following websites. Aufheben: <http://libcom.org/aufheben>; Riff-Raff: [www.riff-raff.se/en/info2.php](http://www.riff-raff.se/en/info2.php); TPTG: [www.tapaidiatissalarias.org/?page\\_id=283](http://www.tapaidiatissalarias.org/?page_id=283); Blaumachen: <http://libcom.org/library/introduction-blaumachen>; Endnotes: <http://endnotes.org.uk/about>.
5. To be precise about dates: Althusser's *Reply to John Lewis* first appeared in English in 1972, translated by Grahame Lock and published in *Marxism Today*, the journal of the Communist Party of Great Britain. It was then published in France as a book in 1973. *Althusser's Lesson* was written by Rancière in 1973, in response to the French publication of *Reply to John Lewis*. It was published in 1974.
6. Althusser, 'Student Problems', *RP* 170, p. 14, above.
7. Communist Party of China, *The Polemic on the General Line of the International Communist Movement*, Foreign Language Press, Peking, 1965, pp. 91–2; quoted in Gregory Elliot, *Althusser: The Detour of Theory* (1987),

- Haymarket, 2009, p. 22.
8. *La parole ouvrière* is the title of a selection of texts produced by the workers' movement in French from 1830–1851, published in a volume edited by Rancière and Alain Faure in 1976 and reissued by La Fabrique éditions in 2007. Rancière's articles for *Les Révoltes Logiques* are collected in *Staging the People: The Proletarian and his Double*, trans. David Fernbach, Verso, London, 2011, and in a forthcoming companion volume, *The Intellectual and His People. Les nuits des prolétaires* (Librarie Arthème Fayard, Paris, 1981) was first published in English as *The Nights of Labor*, trans. John Drury, Temple University Press, Philadelphia, 1989. A second edition is forthcoming under the title *Proletarian Nights* (Verso, London, forthcoming 2012).
  9. See, in particular, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster: Five Lessons in Intellectual Emancipation*, trans. Kristin Ross, Stanford University Press, Palo Alto, 1991.
  10. Anonymous, 'Dr. Althusser', *Radical Philosophy* 12, 1975, 44.
  11. What remains between 1963 and 1973 is, of course, Rancière's Maoism, which unifies his early devotion to his professor with his later partisanship for the ideological revolt of the students.
  12. 'A Lesson in History: The Damages of Humanism' is the title of Chapter 4 of *Althusser's Lesson*.
  13. *Négation* was a successor of the council communist group Arnichoir, formed in Grenoble in 1968, with close ties to the group Informations et Correspondances Ouvrières. They left the ICO in September 1972 and produced three issues of their own journal. 'Lip and the Self-Managed Counter-Revolution' was translated into English by Peter Rachleff and Alan Wallach and published as a pamphlet by Black & Red in 1975. It is available at libcom.org: <http://libcom.org/library/lip-and-the-self-managed-counter-revolution-negation> (accessed 14 September 2011).
  14. Ibid., pp. 28–9.
  15. Ibid., pp. 30 (my stress), 25, 27.
  16. Ibid., p. 36.
  17. Ibid..
  18. *Eclipse and Re-emergence* was published in French in 1973 and in English in 1974 (Black & Red, Detroit). I cite the Anarchist Library edition, available at: [http://theanarchistlibrary.org/HTML/Francois\\_Martin\\_and\\_Jean\\_Barrot\\_AKA\\_Gilles\\_Dauve\\_Eclipse\\_and\\_Re-emergence\\_of\\_the\\_Communist\\_Movement.html](http://theanarchistlibrary.org/HTML/Francois_Martin_and_Jean_Barrot_AKA_Gilles_Dauve_Eclipse_and_Re-emergence_of_the_Communist_Movement.html).
  19. Ibid., p. 53.
  20. Ibid.
  21. Marx deploys the metaphor of the *Zwickmühle* in the last paragraph of chapter 23 of *Capital*, Volume 1. The term has gone untranslated in English editions; in French it is translated as *double moulinet*. On the provenance of the metaphor in Marx and its relevance for *Théorie Communiste*, discussed below, see 'Beyond the Ultra-Left', *riff-raff* 8, 2006, [www.riff-raff.se/en/8](http://www.riff-raff.se/en/8). See also *Endnotes* 1, 2008, p. 212.
  22. Before coming together as a group in 1975, members of *Théorie Communiste* participated in the publication of *Cahiers du Communisme de Conseils*, edited in Marseille between 1968 and 1973, a publication linked to Informations et Correspondance Ouvrière (ICO). The first issue of the journal *Théorie Communiste*, still running today, was published in 1977.
  23. See Roland Simon, 'On the Concept of the Cycle of Struggles', <http://libcom.org/library/concept-cycle-struggles-roland-simon>.
  24. *Théorie Communiste*, 'Much Ado About Nothing', *Endnotes* 1, October 2008, p. 155. Programmatism includes two major periods (which are also internally subdivided): (1) 1790–1848; 1848–1871; 1871–1914 (formal subsumption); (2) 1914–early 1970s (first period of real subsumption). TC's account is much more nuanced than the cursory overview I can offer here.
  25. Ibid.
  26. *Théorie Communiste*, 'Who We Are', [www.theoriecommuniste.org](http://www.theoriecommuniste.org).
  27. *Théorie Communiste*, 'The Glass Floor', <http://libcom.org/library/glass-floor-theorie-communiste>.
  28. For a detailed analysis of the relation between limit and dynamic, see TC's most systematic text, *Théorie de l'écart*, [http://theoriecommuniste.communisation.net/spip.php?page=imprimer\\_article&id\\_article=2](http://theoriecommuniste.communisation.net/spip.php?page=imprimer_article&id_article=2) (part 1), and [http://theoriecommuniste.communisation.net/spip.php?page=imprimer\\_article&id\\_article=3](http://theoriecommuniste.communisation.net/spip.php?page=imprimer_article&id_article=3) (part 2).
  29. *Théorie Communiste*, 'Who We Are'.
  30. For a better sense of the anti-humanist, anti-Hegelian, structuralist stakes of TC's position, see the first issue of the radical communist journal *Endnotes* (2008), titled *Preliminary Materials for a Balance Sheet of the Twentieth-Century*. Here TC criticizes *Troploin* (Gilles Dauvé and Karl Nesic) for analysing the 'failures' of past revolutionary struggles in terms which render communism a normative, ahistorical invariant and endow the proletariat with a communal human essence which will either be realized as communism, or not, in any given instance. In other words, TC criticizes *Troploin's* *expressivist* rather than *structural* thinking of historical causality.
  31. Roland Simon, of TC, acknowledges the influence of Althusser (and early Rancière) in a 2005 interview published in *riff-raff* 8, 2006, [www.riff-raff.se/en/8/interview\\_roland.php](http://www.riff-raff.se/en/8/interview_roland.php): 'And finally, with a lot of precautions ... Althusser in his critique of Hegelian Marxism, and his critique of humanism. I think that there Althusser, Balibar and sometimes Rancière, are essential. It's not for all that that we are going to take up his theory of the epistemological break, or treat Marxism as a science. But there is a lot to be learnt in the critique of humanism.'
  32. The *Communiqué* was an influential text in the 2009/10 California occupation movement, distributed in September 2009 and subsequently translated into six languages. Available at: <http://anticapitalprojects.wordpress.com/2009/11/26/communiqué-from-an-absent-future-on-the-terminus-of-student-life>.
  33. See TPTG, 'The Ivory Tower of Theory', [www.tapaidiatiscalarias.org/wp-content/uploads/2010/03/ivory.pdf](http://www.tapaidiatiscalarias.org/wp-content/uploads/2010/03/ivory.pdf).
  34. See TPTG and Blaumachen, 'Like a Winter with a Thousand Decembers', [www.tapaidiatiscalarias.org/wp-content/uploads/2009/11/LIKE-A-WINTER-e.pdf](http://www.tapaidiatiscalarias.org/wp-content/uploads/2009/11/LIKE-A-WINTER-e.pdf) (accessed 15 September 2011, and TC, 'The Glass Floor', <http://libcom.org/library/glass-floor-theorie-communiste>.
  35. Jacques Rancière, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*, trans. Julie Rose, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1999, p. 16.
  36. Ibid., p. 60.

# Reviewing Rancière

## Or, the persistence of discrepancies

**Bruno Bosteels**

In the nearly four decades since its original publication, *Althusser's Lesson* has acquired a certain mythical aura as the dark precursor of things to come. Even with the wealth of translations of Jacques Rancière's work that have been published at an increasingly feverish pace over the past few years in the wake of the author's worldwide success as a bestselling thinker of politics and aesthetics, this book – in my eyes inexplicably – had so far been forgotten by translators and publishers alike, or at least it had remained at the bottom of their to-do lists for a very long time indeed. And yet, though unavailable to English-language readers (except for Chapter 6, 'On the Theory of Ideology', translated in *Radical Philosophy* 7, 1974), this book was always famed for containing a ruthless settling of accounts with Rancière's one-time mentor, the philosopher who precisely was not an 'ignorant schoolmaster' but a 'knowing schoolmaster', the very epitome of the master-thinker supposed to know the difference between ignorance and knowledge, or between ideology and science. Now, at long last, thanks to the careful labour of Emiliano Battista, we can read *Althusser's Lesson* in English, more or less in its entirety. (Rancière has chosen to remove the self-critical notes added in 1973 to the 1969 'On the Theory of Ideology'. These remain available in English only in the *Radical Philosophy* translation.)

Does this mean that the book will soon lose its aura as the theoretical equivalent of a Molotov cocktail, one that perhaps, paradoxically, was all the more appealing the more it remained unknown and enigmatic? Will this book – Rancière's first single-authored publication, several years after his contribution to the collective *Reading Capital* with a text on the different concepts of 'critique' in Marx's *1844 Manuscripts* and *Capital*, an orthodox Althusserian text that would be excised from subsequent editions for being 'too structuralist' – enable the retrospective establishment of a single uninterrupted trajectory, or a steady forward march leading up to later books such as *The Ignorant*

*Schoolmaster* and *The Emancipated Spectator*? Or will *Althusser's Lesson* retain the razor-sharp edge of its polemic as a stylistic oddity unlike anything else in Rancière's œuvre? I mean a book that at times can be exceedingly sarcastic – 'Althusser has as many chances of catching up to the revolution as Achilles has of catching up to the turtle' (AL 178) – but also at times poignantly self-critical: 'assuming, of course, that all of this is something more than a scholarly pastime tailor-made to swell the existing ranks of Marxist and para-Marxist literature' (AL 123).

We can easily predict the two most obvious paths that the reception of this particular work might take. Rancière's growing army of followers and admirers – it is hard not to like him – can either dive into the pages of this book in pursuit of early anticipations of notions such as the equality of intelligences, the distribution of the sensible, the order of the police, or the logic of political disagreements and paradoxical litigations; or else they can highlight the prior necessity, in order for these notions to come into being in the first place, of a radical break with the whole legacy and pedagogical machinery of Althusserianism. The two options thus would consist in either reaffirming the sharp discontinuity with regard to Althusser's work or else establishing a hidden continuity within Rancière's own œuvre.

Rancière himself, in the Foreword to the English edition, prefers to downplay the polemical discontinuity: 'The critique I develop in the pages that follow, consequently, should by no means be treated as a personal settling of scores' (AL xv); instead, he gently yet also unapologetically steers the reader in the direction of an underlying continuity with his own later work: 'It is clear that I would not subscribe to some of its claims and analyses today. Still, I have not changed when it comes to the principle which guided them, namely, that only the presupposition of a capacity common to all can found both the power of thought and the dynamics of emancipation' (AL xvii).

My personal take, on the other hand, diagonally cuts across these two readings. That is to say, in the end I would like to draw attention to the profound fidelity to a certain Althusser that enables Rancière subsequently to propose his logic of emancipation in the seductive and ironic manner that we have come to recognize as his trademark. Of course, I am not so blind as to ignore the importance of Rancière's break with his mentor, but a one-sided insistence on the specific reasons for this break may also cause us to lose sight of the larger picture surrounding the contemporary fate of that strange conceptual machine known as Althusserianism.

Or, as a different point of entry, consider the following paradox. Two of Althusser's most famous disciples, Jacques Rancière and Alain Badiou, both start out with a polemical break away from, and dramatic rebellion against, their theoretical father figure. Both do so, moreover, with an implacable critique of the theory of ideology 'in general': the first especially in 'On the Theory of Ideology,' and the second in *Of Ideology*, a small booklet co-authored with the late François Balmès that can usefully be considered an expansion of the arguments in the Appendix to *Althusser's Lesson*.<sup>1</sup> Finally, inspired as they are by Maoism and by the events not just of May 1968 but also of the Cultural Revolution writ large, for both of these disciples their mentor's discourse is fundamentally a discourse of order and revisionism dressed up for good measure in the language of revolutionary subversion. As Rancière explains in the Foreword: 'Above and beyond the

theses specific to Althusser, the book has its sights trained on the much broader logic by which subversive thoughts are recuperated for the service of order. The principle of this process of recuperation is the idea of domination propagated by the very discourses that pretend to critique it' (*AL* xvi). And yet, at the same time, both Rancière and Badiou, even aside from their mutual differences, which also should not be overstated for marketing or other purposes, not only are unanimously seen today as major thinkers of emancipatory practices, they are also frequently lumped together as prime examples of post-Althusserianism, comparable to the place of Étienne Balibar, who, for his part, never felt the need to distance himself as violently as they did from the knowing schoolmaster of rue d'Ulm.<sup>2</sup> Should we then conclude that, in the case of Rancière and Badiou, the attribute *post*-Althusserian actually means *ex*-Althusserian, pure and simple? Or, on the contrary, is there something in the works by the author of *For Marx* that simultaneously functions among his disciples as the condition of emergence for such a radical and emancipatory thought-practice, which therefore is not just *post*- or *ex*-Althusserian but is also justifiably named *post-Althusserian*?

Put differently, and to use the words of Karl Marx in his Postface to *Capital*: is the entire system of thought of Althusser's structural Marxism to be jettisoned wholesale as a purely 'mystified' exercise of speculation, a 'glorified transfiguration' of the status quo after the storm of May 1968? Or is there a





‘rational kernel’ to be retrieved even from the ‘mystical shell’ of this canonical Althusserianism (the system of thought assembled between Althusser’s 1965 texts *For Marx* and *Reading Capital* and his 1973 *Reply to John Lewis*), without the need to resort to the later and mostly posthumous texts (such as the manuscripts on ‘aleatory materialism’ or the philosophy of the ‘encounter’, which Rancière in the Foreword feels the need to insist he obviously could not have taken into account in 1974 at the time of completing *Althusser’s Lesson*)?<sup>3</sup>

From essays such as ‘Contradiction and Overdetermination’ in Althusser’s *For Marx*, of course, many readers learned by rote all the reasons why we ought to reject the metaphors of ‘extraction’ (of the kernel from the shell) and ‘inversion’ (of the head and feet) as false inroads in the treatment of the relation between Hegel’s and Marx’s dialectic. In so far as these metaphors leave intact both the terms and their articulation in Hegel’s idealist dialectic, they would fail to capture the specific difference of Marx’s materialist one. But now, what if the alternative to Hegel’s expressive idealism so rigorously put into place by Althusser – that is, Marx’s greatest ‘discovery’ of structural causality – nonetheless continues to undergird the logic of emancipatory practices developed in the writings of Rancière and Badiou? Finally, what if the seemingly irresistible appeal of these writings (even when expressed negatively as in the case of Badiou – with the capacity to provoke sheer hatred and vitriol, as in Mehdi Belhaj Kacem’s *Après Badiou* (2011) or François Laruelle’s *Anti-Badiou* (2011), still being a symptomatic form of appeal, albeit a form that is unlikely to befall the universally likeable Rancière) is tied to the gaps and discrepancies in the structure that, though already discovered and practised in the analysis of history and capital by Marx, are supposedly theorized only in what is known as Althusserianism? This is what I would like to propose as my working hypothesis for reading or rereading *Althusser’s Lesson*.

## Academic ideology

We can begin by recalling the more obvious reasons for Rancière’s break with Althusser, before addressing the question of whether these reasons indeed affect all of Althusserianism, or even its core principles. As Rancière already explains in his text from 1969 ‘On the Theory of Ideology,’ more than anything else this break concerns the line of demarcation that Althusser proposes to draw between science and ideology, with the first being defined as a true form of knowledge (*savoir*) or cognition (*connaissance*) and the second

as a form of necessary illusion or misrecognition (*méconnaissance*). For Althusser, only philosophy as the theory of the scientificity of science is capable of drawing this line of demarcation, while the common lot of individuals is to be caught in the ideological and imaginary misrecognition of their real conditions of existence. Far from occupying himself with the function of ideology in concrete struggles, as a Marxist analysis is supposed to do (‘The soul of Marxism is the concrete analysis of a concrete situation’, Rancière also states, reciting the Lenin of textbooks [AL 143]), Althusser replaces the class struggle with a metaphysical opposition modelled upon the oppositions of truth and error, insight and blindness: ‘The ideology/science opposition presupposes the re-establishment of a space homologous to the space the metaphysical tradition as a whole conceives so as to be able to pit science against its other and thus posit the closure of a discursive universe that it has split into the realms of true and false, into the world of science and its other (opinion, error, illusion, etc.)’ (AL 136). For Rancière, the heart of the matter is precisely this obliteration of the class struggle, which ends up being both masked and displaced, in the name of an ahistorical and metaphysical dualism.

Althusser’s general theory of ideology is furthermore revisionist because, far from tackling the struggle between the ideologies of two antagonistic groups or classes – for example, within the space of the university, between professors and students, or, within the factory, between skilled labourers and special or manual labourers – this struggle is abstracted and transposed into the terms of an epistemological break between ideology and science as such. In his text from 1969 Rancière is still willing to rescue even the opposition bourgeois science/proletarian science as potentially being better equipped, after all is said and done, to name the different practical and strategic uses made out of scientific discourse within concrete institutional apparatuses and power relations. Finally, far from being attuned to the storm of the revolt of May ’68, the theory of the science/ideology break merely confirms the existing hierarchies and inequalities, to which Althusser’s Marxism then lends the supplementary credentials of a metaphysical difference, not in use but in nature, between knowledge and illusion, or between the real and the imaginary. ‘The core of Althusserianism’, concludes Rancière, ‘lies without a doubt in the articulation of the spontaneous discourse of metaphysics to revisionist ideology’ (AL 139). Again, referring specifically to the university system and to the role of the sciences at the service of

the dominant classes and not, as Althusser is wont to believe, at the service of revolutionary truth, Rancière insists: ‘The struggle of science against ideology actually benefits bourgeois ideology because it strengthens two of its crucial bastions: the system of knowledge and revisionist ideology’ (AL 142).

In effect, the other great thesis of Althusser’s argument, according to Rancière, concerns the inequality between knowledge and lack of knowledge, which sustains the whole pedagogical situation: ‘The concept of science now appears in its true colours: the whole function of the science/ideology distinction, it turns out, was to justify the pure being of knowledge (*savoir*) – or, more precisely, to justify the eminent dignity of the possessors of knowledge’ (AL 144). It is for this reason that the very core of Althusserianism represents the betrayal of everything that the revolt of May ’68 and the Cultural Revolution stood for with their attempts at reshuffling the hierarchies between students and workers, between manual and intellectual labour, or between militants and cadres: ‘All that is needed, to seal the operation, is one more mediation, supplied by Althusser’s *academic ideology*, which entrusts to the spontaneous discourse of metaphysics the task of justifying the instructors, the possessors and the dispensers of bourgeois knowledge (to which academic Marxism also belongs)’ (AL 147). When seen in this light, we better understand not only why Althusser did not see anything of the nature of an event or encounter in May ’68, but also how certain intellectuals in the early 1970s could still use elements of this same Althusserianism to give the politics of leftism, which had already died a first time in practice with the return to order in June 1968, a proper burial in theory.

Althusser’s subsequent ‘self-criticism’ of the so-called ‘theoreticism’ of his 1965 publications does not fundamentally change the nature of his philosophy as a discourse of order and orthodoxy disguised in the discourse of disorder and subversion. Rather, with the notion of philosophy as ‘the class struggle in theory’ introduced in February 1968 in *Lenin and Philosophy*, we still remain within a pedagogical hierarchy:

Many people nowadays pretend to see in class struggle in theory a major leftward turn for Althusserianism, an indication that philosophy, at long last, has recognized the class struggle. But what they recognize in it, actually, is nothing other than their own academic views, which assign class positions based on the correct or incorrect use of words, which treat as revolutionary those who know how to say ‘it is the masses which make history’ and as reactionary those distracted students who write ‘man’ where they should write ‘the masses’. (AL 68).

Actual political struggles, including the struggle about the place of intellectual work, continue to be evaded and disguised as if Marxist theory were the combat of lone theorists against ideological deviations, while the French Communist Party can continue to flatter itself for having such a subversive philosopher in its ranks: ‘The fact is that Althusser is perfectly free to propose all the theses he wants. All his ‘subversive’ theses, however, share the following interesting peculiarity: they never entail any disruptive practices’ (AL 112). In the end, even when he rectifies his earlier deviations, Althusser still consistently fails to put into question the privileged place from which he is able to proffer his discourse.

## Foucault’s lesson

Now, to satisfy those readers who are hungry for continuity, let us look at some of the later arguments that are already anticipated in Rancière’s analysis of Althusserianism. These anticipations are of two kinds. First, and perhaps most surprisingly for English-language readers brought up on ‘Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses’, first published in 1970, as Althusser’s most frequently taught and anthologized text, it is Rancière who announces the key concept of this text in ‘On the Theory of Ideology’, and, in the special introductory note for the English translation of this Appendix, he even goes so far as to suggest that his old mentor actually might have taken said concept from him. Thus, while criticizing Althusser’s reductive view of ideology as a system of ideas or representations, Rancière not only seems to have coined the phrase ‘ideological state apparatuses’ but, what is more, in 1969 this phrase was actually intended as a forceful indictment of the blind spots in Althusser’s pedagogy:

The only way to give objective status to ideologies is to think them through the class struggle. This means that ideology does not exist only in discourse or only in systems, images, signs, and so on. In the analysis of the university, we saw that the ideology of a class exists primarily in institutions, in what we might call *ideological apparatuses*, to echo the way Marxist theory speaks about state apparatuses. (AL 151)

This question of the paternity of concepts is not limited to ‘ideological state apparatuses’, since a similar turf war raged over the paternity of ‘metonymical causality’ between Rancière and Althusser, on the one hand, and Jacques-Alain Miller on the other.

Second, as I mentioned earlier, *Althusser’s Lesson* also contains anticipations of some of the more famous notions in Rancière’s own later work. Consider, for

example, the use of the opposition between police and politics, which will become central to *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*, in the criticism of Althusser's idea that

Marx announces ... a 'new philosophical practice'. And this new practice, as we can see in the *Reply to John Lewis*, is thoroughly committed to the general *policing* of theoretical statements. But that is not what Marx has in mind. In the 'Theses on Feuerbach', he proposes a departure from philosophy, one that establishes a *politics* of theoretical statements that is essentially at odds with Althusser's. (AL 12)

Or consider how, in Rancière's explication of the thesis 'the masses make history' as a Maoist thesis that is radically new compared to orthodox Marxism–Leninism, we can find an early formulation of the principle of the equality of intelligences that would receive a more systematic treatment in *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*. 'Mao's thesis is this: it is the oppressed who are intelligent, and the weapons of their liberation will emerge from their intelligence', writes Rancière. 'It is a political thesis that goes hand in hand with a new conception of the development of productive forces and the methods of communist leadership: the intelligence of the class struggle, much like the intelligence of production, does not belong to specialists' (AL 14–15). No longer the special property of cadres, scientists or philosophers, intelligence belongs equally to all, beginning with the intelligence of the poor, who in the eyes of their philosopher count for nothing.

I could continue along these same lines, referring to expressions such as 'the politics of philosophers', which will become the focus of *The Philosopher and His Poor* and, more systematically, in *Disagreement*, or even the 'sharing' or 'partitioning' of the sensible that is nowadays Rancière's main focus in his work on art and aesthetics. It would mean doing this book an injustice, though, by reducing its arguments to being little more than tentative anticipations of future developments. The true originality of *Althusser's Lesson* lies elsewhere: neither in the future that it already promises nor in the past with which it first must break, but in the present that is brought to life on its pages; that is, on the one hand, in the detailed conjunctural analysis of the shifts and displacements within a certain tradition of post-1968 leftist political practices and theories, and, on the other, in the methodological suggestiveness of this very analysis.

So far as the analysis of the conjuncture is concerned, Rancière gives us fascinating first-hand insights into the inner workings of Maoist student circles in and around the ENS, as well as document-

ing the uses and ruses to which Althusserianism quite willingly lent itself within the PCF. He is especially deft at unravelling the authoritarian justifications of the status quo that are hidden behind clamorous appeals to daring acts of theoretical invention: 'He wants to be the wolf in the flock, but the Party turns to him when it needs to scare its black sheep. He pretends to raise embarrassing questions, but the Party shows him that it understands his words for what they are: a discourse of order' (AL 113). Althusserianism, in sum, allowed the annexation and simultaneous deactivation of leftist and Maoist discourse within the official communist party apparatus, all the while chastising the youthful rebels themselves as being petty-bourgeois ideologues in dire need of the science of Marxist orthodoxy.

Methodologically, Rancière also follows a number of interesting principles, which he claims are influenced above all by the work of Michel Foucault at the Collège de France. A first principle, which we could ascribe to Foucault's nominalism, consists in the pluralization of ways of conceiving of discursive practices. Rancière will thus repeatedly insist on the fact that there is no such thing as *the* science, *the* ideology or *the* Marxism, with an emphatically used definite article, but only a multiplicity of discourses within specific institutional settings. Rancière writes:

These brief indications are intended simply to suggest that maybe there isn't *a* Marxist conceptuality which must be saved from ideological doom and bourgeois invasions. There is not one logic in *Capital*, but many logics: it contains different discursive strategies, each of which corresponds to different problems and each of which echoes, in many different ways, the discourses through which classes think themselves or confront an opposing discourse... The plurality of these conceptualities is also a manifestation, not of 'class struggle in theory', but of the effects that class struggle and its discursive forms have had on the discourse of theoreticians. (AL 81)

But, then, in a second methodological principle, this plurality of discursive practices must also be situated within a specific system of power relations. Thus, for example, 'the bourgeoisie's ideological domination was not the result of a social imaginary wherein individuals spontaneously reflected their relations to the conditions of their existence. It was, instead, the result of the system of material power relations reproduced by different apparatuses', which Rancière sums up in another Foucauldian-inspired combination: 'The question of ideology was not the question of the subject's relationship to truth, but of the masses' relationship to power and knowledge (*savoir*)' (AL 74).

To analyse and overcome his own debts to Althusser's pedagogical lesson, debts which in any case are never worked through in the first person at the level of the author's own psychic economy, Rancière thus seems to find much inspiration, if not solace, in the methodology and playfully self-reflexive personality of the author of *The Archaeology of Knowledge* or *The Order of Discourse*, who, contrary to the schoolmaster from rue d'Ulm, constantly questions the place from where he speaks.

## Décalages

And yet, does this methodological flight forward not omit certain key principles of Althusser's so-called structuralist Marxism? Are certain of these principles not also still at work in Rancière's later work? And, besides, does not the move from Althusser to Foucault, as a kind of rite of passage without which Rancière apparently could not come into his own, hide the extent to which *The Archaeology of Knowledge* is actually written under the influence of Althusserianism – its playful introduction and conclusion after all being a fictionalized self-interview that reworks the author's response to a questionnaire from the Cercle d'Épistémologie at rue d'Ulm, first published in the school's organon *Cahiers pour l'analyse*?<sup>4</sup>

One principle, especially, seems to me to be a crucial component of Althusser's version of structuralism, which thereby at once becomes a version of poststructuralism as well. I am referring to the principle of the uneven development of any given structure, which consequently appears as though decentred or dislocated from within, due to a series of gaps and discrepancies that are never the effect of purely external contingencies but instead signal the structure's own immanent deadlock. Althusser's favourite term for such gaps is *décalages*, typically translated in English as 'dislocations' or as 'discrepancies'.<sup>5</sup> Now, I would argue that much of Rancière's later work in fact continues to rely on the presence of such discrepancies within the social orders, political phenomena and art objects that he is famous for analysing. He may not label them *décalages*, except for one time in *Althusser's Lesson*, where Rancière speaks hypothetically of humanism as the ideology of communication that results from the 'discrepancies' between an 'overdeveloped' philosophy and a politically 'underdeveloped' country. Instead he may prefer to speak of the effects of an *écart*, a 'gap,' or an 'internal distance'. But, if we ignore for a moment the battles over science and ideology and the class struggle in theory, the analysis of a structure's internal excess that separates it from itself nonetheless can be

said to express Rancière's lasting debt to Althusser's legacy.

We could say that what the post-Althusserians Badiou, Rancière and Balibar add to this legacy in the analysis of the structure's inner excess is that they name 'subject', 'subjectivization' or 'subjectification' what in the classical texts from *For Marx* or *Reading Capital* still appears as a purely formal effect of the structure itself. But then, of course, this is never just a matter of nomination. Rather, post-Althusserians argue that the discrepancies within a given structure become apparent only as the retroactive effect of a subjective intervention, without which the analysis falls back in the traps of a positivist glorification of the status quo. Yet the fact remains that the 'rational kernel' for this transformative interpretation of the subject is already at work in the 'mystical shell' of Althusser's analysis of the structure.

In *Disagreement*, Rancière will thus describe the process of all political subjectification in terms of the gap that separates a given social identity or police order from itself. 'Any subjectification is a disidentification, removal from the naturalness of a place, the opening up of a subject space where anyone can be counted since it is the space where those of no account are counted', but this is possible only if the policing of identities is interrupted in the act of political subjectification, which Rancière furthermore compares to the act of literature as the opening up of a rupture, or an interval, in the order between things and words:

The modern political animal is first a literary animal, caught in the circuit of a literariness that undoes the relationships between the order of words and the order of bodies that determine the place of each. A political subjectification is the product of these multiple fracture lines by which the individuals and networks of individuals subjectify the gap [*l'écart*] between their condition as animals endowed with a voice and the violent encounter with the equality of the logos.<sup>6</sup>

Similarly, in the preface to a recently translated collection of texts from *Les Révoltes logiques*, Rancière justifies the continued use of seemingly 'vulgar' or 'awkward' words on the basis of the political efficacy of a certain gap that introduces an internal difference within them:

I simply want to explain the role that words today seen as awkward – people, poor, revolution, factory, workers, proletarians – and wielded by outmoded characters play in this process. To insist on the overly broad words of people, worker, and proletarian is to insist on their inherent difference, on the space of dissenting invention that this difference offers.<sup>7</sup>



What Rancière labels political philosophy, or the politics of the philosophers, on the contrary, systematically tries to cover over this gap so as to establish the stable essence of politics, or of the political. This is not a solution so much as a dissolution and elimination of the constitutive impropriety of politics: ‘The solution, in a word, is to achieve the essence of politics by eliminating this difference from itself that politics consists of, to achieve politics by eliminating politics, by achieving philosophy “in place” of politics’.<sup>8</sup> Rancière’s thought, which rarely accepts the label of philosophy, political or otherwise, is a thinking of the essential discrepancy and impropriety at the heart of every identity, property and propriety.

Now, in a last irony, the fact that the focus for such an analysis of the subjectification of discrepancies in Rancière’s work has gradually shifted from politics to aesthetics could also have been anticipated by Althusser. Indeed, in his ‘Letter on Art in Reply to André Daspre’, Rancière’s mentor already tried to define the specific rapport between art, science and ideology, with a recourse to the concepts of an ‘internal distantiation’, *une prise de distance intérieure*, and a ‘retreat’, *recul* in French:

What art makes us *see*, and therefore gives us in the form of ‘*seeing*’, ‘*perceiving*’ and ‘*feeling*’ (which is not the form of *knowing*), is the *ideology* from which it is born, in which it bathes, from which it detaches itself as art, and to which it alludes. Macherey has shown this very clearly in the case of Tolstoy, by extending Lenin’s analyses. Balzac and Solzhenitsyn give us a ‘view’ of the ideology to which their work alludes and with which it is constantly fed, a view which presupposes a *retreat*, an *internal distantiation* from the very ideology from which their novels emerged. They make us ‘perceive’ (but not know) in some sense *from the inside*, by an *internal distance*, the very ideology in which they are held.<sup>9</sup>

Rancière, in a certain sense, generalizes this notion of the internal difference so as to place its effects of dissensus, first, in politics and then, once again, in art.

This leads me to a final question, which is also an expression of scepticism. Using Rancière’s own words from *Althusser’s Lesson*, could we not raise the question whether this minimal gap that separates art from ideology, without for this reason making it identical to scientific knowledge, is perhaps the prime locus not for the detachment but for the unconscious inscription of a subject in ideology – above all, the ideology of freedom itself? As Rancière suggests with regard to the margin of freedom allowed to the master-thinker from rue d’Ulm:

This is a well-known kind of freedom, the very kind the bourgeoisie reserves for intellectuals: the freedom to say anything and everything at the university, where intellectuals can be Marxists, Leninists, even Maoists, provided they perpetuate its functioning: the freedom to wax ironic about the power that channels the intellectual’s attachment to order. (AL 112)

## Notes

1. See Alain Badiou and François Balmès, *De l’idéologie*, François Maspero, Paris, 1976, esp. pp. 21–37. While Rancière in *Althusser’s Lesson* begins by targeting his mentor’s *Reply to John Lewis*, Badiou, on the other hand, tackles the general theory of ideology contained in Althusser’s later ‘Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses’ and *Essays in Self-Criticism*, which in many ways already pick up on Rancière’s criticisms and suggestions. For Badiou, though, even these later texts continue to propose a theory of ideology that is neither dialectical nor materialist but rather revisionist.
2. For Étienne Balibar’s measured fidelity, see his *Écrits pour Althusser*, La Découverte, Paris, 1991, and Étienne Balibar, ‘Althusser and the rue d’Ulm,’ trans. David Fernbach, *New Left Review* 58, July–August 2009, pp. 91–107.
3. See Karl Marx, Postface to the Second Edition, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, Volume 1, trans. Ben Fowkes, intro. Ernest Mandel, Penguin, London, 1976, p. 103. For Althusser’s analysis, see ‘Contradiction and Overdetermination: Notes for an Investigation’, in Louis Althusser, *For Marx*, trans. Ben Brewster, Verso, London, 1990, pp. 89–90.
4. See Michel Foucault, ‘Réponse au Cercle d’épistémologie’, *Cahiers pour l’analyse* 9, 1968, pp. 9–40. Translated as ‘On the Archaeology of the Human Sciences: Response to the Epistemology Circle’, in *Aesthetics, Method, and Epistemology*, volume 2 of *The Essential Works of Foucault, 1954–1984*, ed. James D. Faubion, New Press, New York, 1998, pp. 279–96.
5. See, for example, Louis Althusser, ‘Sur le Contrat social’, in *Cahiers pour l’Analyse* 8, October 1967, <http://cahiers.kingston.ac.uk/vol08/cpa8.1.althusser.html>; ‘Rousseau: The Social Contract’, in *Politics and History: Montesquieu, Rousseau, Marx*, trans. Ben Brewster, Verso, London, 2007, pp. 111–60. In a translator’s note, Brewster also quotes Lenin’s reminder ‘that there will always be such a ‘discrepancy’ and that it always exists in the development of nature as well as in the developments of society’ (p. 114, n2). For an excellent analysis of why this principle of dislocation means that all good structuralism is already poststructuralism, see Étienne Balibar, ‘Structuralism: A Destitution of the Subject?’, *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies*, vol. 14, no. 1, 2003, pp. 1–21.
6. Jacques Rancière, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*, trans. Julie Rose, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1999, pp. 36–7.
7. Jacques Rancière, *Staging the People: The Proletarian and His Double*, trans. David Fernbach, Verso, London, 2011, p. 18.
8. Rancière, *Disagreement*, p. 63.
9. Louis Althusser, ‘Letter on Art in Reply to André Daspre’, in *Lenin and Philosophy, and Other Essays*, trans. Ben Brewster, New Left Books, London, 1971, pp. 222–3.

# The patient cannot last long

Stéphane Douailler

The presence on our bookshelves of such texts as Louis Althusser's *Reply to John Lewis* and Jacques Rancière's *Althusser's Lesson* immediately invites the readers who pick them up to ask themselves what might be at play between titles that so readily mix, miss or specify the genres – if there are any – through which a text seeks its readers.

Formally, Althusser gave the impression that he was engaging in a straightforward debate. The debate, essentially about Althusser's contribution between 1960 and 1972 to the Marxist theory developed by Europe's communist parties, demanded that he intervene in his capacity as a Party member and a participant in its public discussions. But, right away, the opening sentences of his reply to John Lewis describe something else entirely. Althusser, picking up on the title of the article Lewis had devoted to his texts in *Marxism Today*, improvises a theatrical scene. 'The whole family, as it were, together with his silent colleagues, stood motionless at the bedside, while Dr John Lewis leaned over to examine "the Althusser case". A long wait. Then he made his diagnosis: the patient is suffering from an attack of severe "dogmatism" – a "mediaeval" variety. The prognosis is grave: the patient cannot last long.'<sup>1</sup>

Undoubtedly, what strikes us as we reread this scene, so unambiguously and traditionally ironic, is the extreme variety of resonances it evokes. Beyond its conventional playfulness, today we also hear Althusser's long-lasting and actual illness – which some already knew about, and all eventually came to know – insinuating its voice into what we read. In it, we recognize a certain struggle, one fought to exhaustion on numerous intertwined planes and borne along by metaphors until it reached the final philosophical and political dramaturgies through which Althusser staged and presented his thought.

But we can also note that in availing itself, with the greatest critical simplicity, of the well-known image of the relation between a doctor and a patient (a relation wherein the former deprives the latter of speech and excludes him from the community of speakers), Althusser's scene appears to treat a crucial point as

if it had been decided in advance. You need only linger over it for a moment to recall the real privilege that Althusser enjoyed, at this point, as a result of the growing sense of expectation that had come to anticipate his every word. Everyone was waiting for Althusser. We were waiting for him to speak more, and to speak more directly. Althusser himself had helped to cultivate this mix of expectation and frustration for a long time, from the early 1960s, following the partial retreat of the teacher in favour of his pupils, whose texts started to appear in the *Théorie* book series he published with François Maspero. In addition to publishing his students' works in numerical order, the series, whose titles occupied the central table at the bookstore on rue Saint-Séverin, offered only a few episodic and parsimonious contributions from the master himself, contributions that surfaced like so many theoretical events drawn from a pool of hypotheses apparently worked out in solitude, followed by the last, dramatic publications, presented as heroic flights out of a grave silence.

That Althusser's scene should make us hear a voice we have come to anticipate is something that accompanied the political imaginary of an entire period, something that Étienne Balibar nicely captured with his laconic formula 'Just keep quiet, Althusser.'<sup>2</sup> But the various places and multiple strata on which this voice circulated its secret triumph were also its problem, for it clearly failed to unify the many registers within which it could still be thought as separate from the totality of the venues in which it spoke. It lived in discordant spaces: in the hope for new theorizations capable of replacing with the order of their reasons discourses that were deeply rooted in the all-too-human; in the search for a solution to the persistent silence inside the Party concerning what could really be thought about what was happening; in the discomfort with promising 'the moon and the stars' while always having to 'trudge along' (letter to Franca, 19 January 1962). The falsely pathetic scene of the patient Louis Althusser being publicly examined by Dr John Lewis in reality only just managed to represent (barely and *a contrario*) the staging of a voice that would now finally

speak out. It only succeeded in winning our sympathy and sparking expectation for as long we managed to imagine – outside the frame and beyond the circle formed by the ‘immobile members of the family’ and the ‘silent colleagues’ – the real issues at stake: the powerful burgeoning of the masses, the movement of history, the public advancement of knowledges; that is, those realities from which Dr John Lewis, with his knowledge of medieval varieties of medicine, was apparently cut off, and with which the party that hosted the theoretical controversies of Marxism in its journal, *Marxism Today*, was still actively involved.

But this sense of anticipation, framed by so large and so urgent a horizon, led only to disappointment. However sharp or speculative the formulation of Althusser’s theses, the whole adventure, according to Rancière, actually never had anything more to offer than the re-enactment, indifferent to its object or configuration, of his old critique of ‘economism’ and ‘humanism’. Althusser’s critique of Lewis was frozen in a *dispositif* that had now become plainly political, one that was ripe for reappraisal six years after 1968, at a moment when that *dispositif* was looking to renew itself through a momentous ‘turn to the left’, to be carried out with the support of coldly conquered university posts. Instead of running headlong into the new mirages represented by ‘class struggle in theory’ or by the introduction of Leninist philosophy to the field of studies approved by the Société française de philosophie, Rancière showed how we could examine the ‘positivity of the functioning’ of Althusserian discourse, how we might examine what its simple and practical gestures were plotting in the name of Marxist philosophy. In a few compressed pages in the Preface to *Althusser’s Lesson*, Rancière quickly lists the questions and objects of inquiry – between eleven and seventeen in three pages – he later unpacks in the chapters of the book, in order systematically to describe Althusserianism as the thing and the power that it was. Jacques Rancière opts to give it the name ‘lesson’.

The lesson had come to replace the ‘great ambition’ of Althusser’s initial project, namely to seize anew, in Marx’s works and actions, read in their living history, the dialectical weapon that can change the world. It came to busy itself with the ‘autonomy of theory’ necessary to this return and detour, and thereby proceeded (in the name of Marxism) to refer back, in the field of ideas that people have of their condition and of the history they may perhaps claim as theirs, to the relationship of the learned to the ignorant, to the exclusivity of expertise, to the function of the

educator, to the room for manoeuvre open to those with institutional authority, to the policing of words and phrases. Disguising the power of the university under the name of ‘theory’ and the power of the Party leadership under the name of ‘the labour movement’, Althusserian discourse actually embraced as its own the project of reducing ideas to theses and words to concepts – so as to claim for itself the right to tell the difference, ‘scientifically’ and ‘politically’, between right and wrong, and thereby to disqualify the overblown prattle and disorder of free revolts.

Rereading Rancière’s *Althusser’s Lesson* today allows us to verify that his meticulous dismantling of this Althusserian *dispositif* also takes the form of an active demonstration. Reinserting Althusser’s articles and writings into a vibrant environment teeming with texts of social theory, Rancière exposes the operations and actions of power they perform. He invokes and discusses, among others, the ‘Young Marx’ and Feuerbach, *Capital* and the classics of the Second and Third Internationals, the intellectuals of *La Nouvelle critique*, structuralist philosophers, *La Grande Révolution culturelle prolétarienne* (a collection of texts put out by the Éditions de Pékin), Charles Piaget and the workers at the Lip factory, the utopian and anarchist traditions, the pronouncements of various philanthropic manufacturers confronted by the discourse of typographers, tailor-workers and labour lawyers, Jeremy Bentham, Charles Dickens, the Countess of Ségur. This free but nonetheless studied set of references anticipates the riches and rigour of a new programme. Turning the rarefied logic of the *lesson* upside down, it was possible to embrace the proliferation of voices. May ’68 had begun to stage an unending open-air performance. Michel Foucault had shown how to bring all of this diversity into philosophy books. Even Althusser – at least, it seemed so at that time – was altering the framework of his understanding of ideology by addressing the function of ‘ideological state apparatuses’.

Twenty years later, it will fall to another text, ‘Althusser, Don Quixote, and the Stage of the Text’ (1993),<sup>3</sup> a supplement to *Althusser’s Lesson*, to put a provisionally final point on the matter. In striking fashion, the text confirms, and strengthens, the earlier diagnosis of the lesson. It opens by returning to one of the key operations of the ‘symptomal’ reading advocated by *Reading ‘Capital’*, that of the ‘oversight’ (*bévue*), which invites one to correlate the answers a text supplies and the questions it does not raise, which, by their very absence, hollow the text with a specific lack and determine it. The practice is one that

Althusser's students no doubt indulged to the point of intoxication. Althusser himself relates the following episode, on the eve of Lacan's first lecture at the École Normale:

Tomorrow, they will intervene when Lacan, having finished his lecture, asks: 'Are there any questions?' They explained to me what they plan to do: one of them will stand up and say: 'We have no questions to ask you. What we want is to answer the questions you ask without knowing it, the questions you ask yourself, unbeknownst to you, that is to say, the questions you don't ask, because you haven't asked them yet. We'll ask these questions, ask them of ourselves, because we have the answers, and what we are about to say will give both the questions and the answers. So listen, and if afterwards you have questions to ask of us, we'll listen to you...' Funny, don't you think? They're amazing. (letter to Franca, 21 January 1964)

Indeed, the chapter that Rancière himself contributed to the Althusserian adventure at the time of *Reading 'Capital'* (1965) was itself heavily impregnated by it: its goal, as he himself explains in 'How to Use *Lire le Capital*',<sup>4</sup> had been to bring to the fore the 'break' between the *1844 Manuscripts* and *Capital* by demonstrating in the category of labour mobilized in the first text the operative lack of the category of labour power exposed in the second. It is within this same theoretical matrix that Rancière, in 1993, again finds the mechanism of the lesson. Noting a strange oversight on Althusser's part, who himself refers to certain blanks and parentheses in his text as 'dotted lines', Rancière shows how this substitution confirms that the real task was to transform 'the ordinary exercise of the pedagogue into an extraordinary exercise of the scholar',<sup>5</sup> to show, in the words of one group (the students), the lack and the absence of the concepts known by the other (the master), and thereby

to include in advance, under the figure of this lack and through the effect of this mastered operation, all of this non-seeing in the seeing and knowing (the episteme) of a sharply delimited community. In his replies and questions, Althusser was still, as always, trying to substitute the discussion he deemed appropriate for the great disorder and unruly chatter of the world – he was still teaching his *lesson*. The difference is that now, with this return to the argument, Rancière could risk a remedy. This no longer meant attending to the work made possible through reference to 'ideological state apparatuses' or to any other concept whose legacy might remain fruitful. Instead, after removing the entire mechanism of the lesson, Rancière finds a way of delivering the letter of the Althusserian text to the opening made by the absence of an audience or addressee – in other words, he finds a way of allowing it to exist, at last, as literature.

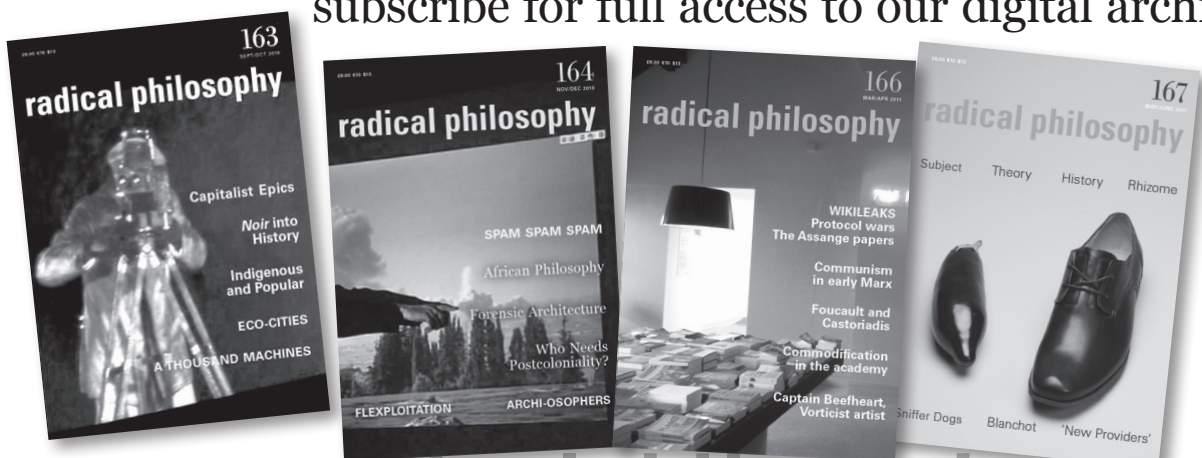
Translated by Emiliano Battista

## Notes

1. Louis Althusser, *Reply to John Lewis*, in *Essays in Self-Criticism*, trans. Grahame Lock, New Left Books, London, 1976, p. 35.
2. Étienne Balibar, 'Tais toi encore, Althusser', *Les Temps Modernes* 509, December 1988.
3. Jacques Rancière, 'Althusser, Don Quichotte et la scène du texte', in Sylvain Lazarus, ed., *Philosophie et politique dans l'œuvre de Louis Althusser*, Presses Universitaires de France, Paris, 1993; 'Althusser, Don Quixote, and the Stage of the Text', trans. Charlotte Mandell, in Jacques Rancière, *The Flesh of Words: The Politics of Writing*, Stanford University Press, Stanford CA, 2004, pp. 129–45.
4. Jacques Rancière, 'Mode d'emploi pour une réédition de *Lire le Capital*', *Les Temps Modernes* 328, November 1973, pp. 788–807; 'How to Use *Lire le Capital*', trans. Tanya Asad, in Ali Rattansi, ed., *Ideology, Method and Marx*, Routledge, London, 1989, pp. 181–9.
5. Rancière, *The Flesh of Words*, p. 134.

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