

# ALTHUSSER'S PERPETUAL MOTION: FABIO BRUSCHI'S *LE MATERIALISME POLITIQUE DE LOUIS ALTHUSSER*

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## **ABSTRACT**

In this article, I show how Bruschi's *Le matérialisme politique de Louis Althusser* offers, against all attempts conjure up a self-generating general theory of history, a reconstruction of Althusser's work that shows how its systematicity relies upon the unfinished, incomplete and provisional character of scientific research, always subject to constant rectification. I then claim that, from the conceptualisation of the reproduction of the mode of production as dependent upon the singularity of the conjuncture, to the theorisation of the encounter as the source of historical necessity, this constant reworking is crucial to Althusser's ability to grasp the reality of class struggle.

## **KEYWORDS**

Louis Althusser, epistemology, science of history, mode of production, class struggle

The first sentence of Hegel's preface to the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, invoked by Etienne Balibar to explain the difficulties confronting anyone who would compose a preface to Fabio Bruschi's *Le matérialisme politique de Louis Althusser*, applies equally to those who hope to offer a commentary on it (or least a commentary shorter than the book itself). Its breadth, the dense, intricate concatenation of its arguments, the recourse to paradox, leading not infrequently to what Balibar has called, following Foucault, points of heresy, together work to deny entry to would-be commentators, who are then compelled to look for an otherwise overlooked or unnoticed opening in its armature through which to gain entry.

Balibar's reference to Hegel, however, is fortuitous in another way. The striking paradoxes that arise with the movements of Hegel's famous preface, a text that leaves unforgettable images and epigrams in its wake, may in fact prove directly relevant to those that animate Bruschi's text. We might begin with the fact that the preface to the *Phenomenology* often seems to lead the reader away from, rather than to, the work it is

supposed to introduce, a work that has been understood historically to include the preface itself, one of whose objectives is to denounce prefaces and introductions, above all, those attached to a philosophical work. Hegel poses the question of how a philosophical text, whose arguments necessarily form a coherent, that is, closed, totality, could require an explanation that arises from outside this totality. What can be legitimately added to what is in itself complete? At best, introductions and prefaces are superfluous restatements of a work's arguments that, because the arguments have been abstracted from the organic whole of which they are a part, can only prove misleading. When they attempt to reconstruct the outside proper to the work, its genesis, by situating it historically, they are unable to present the history of philosophy as anything other than a chronology, a more or less haphazard succession of antecedents, and thus unable to demonstrate the necessity that governs this history.

From this, we are inescapably led to the conclusion that no commentary can escape Hegel's condemnation of prefaces and introductions (except perhaps a commentary that is an exact replica of that on which it comments—which would then no longer be a commentary): like an introduction, a commentary lacks the intrinsic necessity that governs the object of the commentary on which it nevertheless depends, and thus can neither fully grasp the determinate order internal to a philosophical work, nor the necessity that governs the movement of philosophical thought through the multiplicity of works in which this thought is expressed. Without adopting Hegel's notion of organic unity, even a unity mediated through an essential contradiction, or the notion of the teleological development of thought within philosophical works, we can acknowledge that the "order of reasons," both the deductive order of its six parts, and the concatenation of arguments within each part, that we find in *Le matérialisme politique de Louis Althusser*, appear to leave no alternative for analysis or commentary except to grapple with the whole, the extent and density of which are enough to deter any attempt at a brief analysis.

But we should not fail to note Hegel's own paradox: the architectonic unity of the *Phenomenology* compels him to articulate his denunciation of introductions and prefaces in a preface. Either Hegel's denunciation of prefaces in a preface is itself another instance of superfluity, an error on his part, or it constitutes an acknowledgement that something outside the whole is nevertheless necessary to its intelligibility, which would mean that the whole is incomplete, and not contingently, but essentially. Hegel's uneasiness about the notion of the beginning, about what must precede the beginning in order for it to be a determinate beginning, and therefore about the very need for something that would precede the beginning and, in preceding it, deprive it of its status as beginning, origin, *Anfang*, *principio*, or ἀρχή, also concerns the end, that is, the moment of completion and fulfillment, precisely the moment that gives rise to the

introductions and prefaces that among other things provide a certification of completion. But the truth that requires certification, that must be declared not simply true, but certain, will never be complete: the certainty of the truth must itself be certified, leading to the infinite deferral of completion. From this perspective (which Hegel's Preface is in certain ways designed to suppress), even the most coherently argued philosophical texts are never truly finished or complete: all are compelled to defer something of what is most essential to them beyond their own boundaries, something necessary to their coherence but not present in person to be examined and interrogated. It is in the space of this absence that the reader who seeks to join the conversation a given work embodies and to continue the thinking of its thoughts may find a place from which to act as an interlocutor rather than just another reader.

Very much in the tradition of symptomatic reading, and precisely because I am so profoundly sympathetic to Fabio Bruschi's project that in reading it I was often struck by a feeling of recognition, as if he had clearly formulated ideas that I wanted to think or thought in retrospect I wanted to think, but for different reasons could not, I found that the most effective way to join him was to focus on precisely those terms, phrases or strata in the work that, for reasons I did not initially understand, puzzled me or gave me pause. Among the most significant of these was Bruschi's commitment to retrieving or, more accurately, rehabilitating the concepts most commonly offered as evidence of Althusser's structural Marxism, that is, a Marxism reconstructed in the image of structuralism: above all, the notions of historical materialism, mode of production, transition and social formation. The problem for me was not that these terms were "dated," that is, out of fashion and likely to be dismissed or disregarded by readers; even less would I have declared them invalid, as if they had been replaced by a more precise terminology or even by new concepts. Bruschi forced me to ask myself why I, like many of those who have written about Althusser in the last twenty-five or thirty years, very deliberately avoided using these terms, even when to do so required extraordinary agility. Bruschi's insistence on their unavoidability makes this avoidance visible and challenges us to justify this avoidance or admit that it has no theoretical or political justification (especially now, in 2021).

This avoidance, however, has an explanation and one that is drawn from Althusser's own work and his approach to the history and philosophy of scientific knowledge (as understood by Cavallès, Bachelard and Canguilhem). He regarded the notions identified above as the starting points of the endeavor to develop a science of history, and therefore as unfinished, incomplete and provisional, and thus subject to constant rectification and reworking. While it is true that he decreasingly referred to these concepts over time, he never renounced them or the possibility of the new science that they were meant to serve (despite his nearly constant attempts at self-criticism). Althusser neither

regarded these concepts as finished, operational, and ready to be applied to the data from which a new, scientific history could be constructed, nor did he, in the manner of Karl Popper, to assign an a priori limit to their further development. The failure to understand the specific complexity of his philosophical practice led to a mass of irrelevant criticisms that continue to obscure Althusser's work even today, particularly in the English-speaking world. In my own case, it took one of GM Goshgarian's stern reproofs to force me to see that the term "structure," did not simply disappear from Althusser's work after the early or mid-seventies, but played an important role in *The Underground Current*, where Althusser refers to the "structure of the conjuncture," a phrase that Bruschi examines at some length (Althusser 2006, 191). But what was more disturbing to me than the 1001 versions of Contra Althusser, was the attempt, quite in opposition to everything that Althusser and his group said and did, to construct an Althusserian doctrine, an Althusserianism built on a foundation of concepts drawn as is from the translations of *For Marx*, *Reading Capital* and *Lenin and Philosophy* into English. This effort coalesced around the British journal, *Theoretical Practice*, founded in 1971, where the concepts that Althusser understood to be provisional and unevenly developed, were treated as finished and available for use in the construction of a scientific theory of history the possibility of which, at that time, was never in question. The result was an imaginary Althusserianism for which specificity, singularity and finally the notion of determination itself were little more than signs of theoretical failure. This group produced a series of works in which a science of history based on the notion of mode of production as a functioning system had set for itself an unavoidable problem: how to explain the transition from one system to another, without regressing to some form of evolutionary theory, and thus a teleology, whether immanent or transcendent (Hirst and Hindess. 1977), The unavoidable problem very soon became the insoluble problem, which in turn rapidly produced theoretical and political crisis.

When a member of the group wrote to Balibar in 1973 about the divisions and impasses to which their theoretical practice had led them, his response was as surprising as it was unwelcome (Balibar 1973). Balibar informed his interlocutor that he now regarded a number of his postulates as badly formulated, ambiguous or simply wrong, as if he had borrowed from certain metaphysical doctrines concerning causality to compensate for the uneven development of his own theoretical work and, for better or worse, fill in its gaps. Balibar now recognized that his account of the theory of modes of production suggested that "the theory of modes of production itself derives from a general theory of modes of production, which can only be a theory of the mode of production in general and of its possible 'variations': in short, a theory of typologicist or structuralist inspiration, however consistent" (Balibar 1973, 66). Indeed, Balibar in the first version of his contribution to *Reading Capital* used the term "combinatory"

(Balibar 1996, 652) to describe the theory of modes of production. According to this model, a finite set of pre-given elements produces out of itself a specific combination of these elements called a mode of production. Here, the question of the causes of a specific mode of production is not answered, but displaced or marginalized. Balibar argues that the search for a general theory that accounts for all possible modes of production, as well as for a general theory of every possible form of the transition from one to another has prevented the kind of investigation and observation of historical experiments necessary for the smallest advance in the knowledge of history. For the supporters of *Theoretical Practice*, Balibar's self-criticism, regarded by him as necessary to the advance of knowledge, was a destructive act that could only open the door to the most anti-theoretical empiricism. From their point of view the constant reworking and recasting of concepts characteristic of the Althusserian tendency, was a perverse resistance to putting the concepts to work. Their impatience, a species of theoretical voluntarism, led them to construct, out of the flimsiest conceptual materials, what Althusser called, following Kant, a science without an object, a form of knowledge endowed with the capacity to expand endlessly, having certified the validity of its findings in advance, thus eliminating any need for the reworking of its theory and concepts.

But we are no longer in the conjuncture in which enormous edifices of Marxist theory (of which the British "Althusserian" variant was by no means the last) rose and collapsed within the span of a few years. The power of Bruschi's intervention derives from the fact that he understands Althusser's refusal to undertake "a great leap forward" in theory and propose a complete and comprehensive theory of history. More than that, he follows Althusser's approach in his analysis of Althusser's work from 1960 to the mid-1980s, examining with great care and attention the concepts already at work, the ways they affect and are affected by their use, the fields in which they operate, etc., as well as the ways marginalized alternatives, like that of Spinoza, whose notion of the immanent cause marks a break with previous ideas of causality, might illuminate a particular difficulty in a given area of inquiry.

Althusser's critique of Lacan in the otherwise very strange essay, "The Discovery of Dr. Freud," (Althusser 1996) written in 1976, a time when both Althusser as a "Maître-penseur," and Marxism more broadly were under attack, in fact represents a defense of Althusser's own efforts to open the way, that is, both block any regression and remove existing obstacles to a knowledge of "the continent of history." He tells us that Lacan spent much of the first half of his career specifying and defending "the Freudian thing," that is, Freud's discovery of the unconscious and its manifestations, from the constant attacks it faced, as well as the attempts to annex psychoanalysis to psychology (Althusser 1996, 90). The work of barring the way to theoretical regression in the case of psychoanalysis, argues Althusser, "might have occupied a man's life" (Ibid.)

Moreover, defending psychoanalysis meant preventing not only its regression into pre-Freudian theory, but just as importantly, a flight forward beyond the conceptual limits imposed by the conjuncture to constitute a self-generating general theory on the bases of elaborate fictions. Lacan at a certain point ceded to the latter temptation and attempted what was not yet possible, that is, “to constitute a scientific theory of the unconscious” (Ibid.) The result was the production of “a gigantic edifice that has not ceased proliferating” because it pursues “an object that was out of reach for the simple reason that it did not exist” (Althusser 1996, 91). At present, the founding of such a science is not possible, for historical, that is, conjunctural, reasons. Lacan’s response to the limits imposed on the development of psychoanalysis was a flight forward in theory toward a science without an object. This stands in stark contrast to Freud who, according to Althusser, refrained from such an endeavor, driven less by the need to establish a science, than the desire to gather as much detail and information as possible. As a thinker who was “in perpetual motion, Freud never stopped, until the final days of his life, recasting his thought, his concepts and what he himself called his general ‘hypotheses’” (Althusser 1996, 92) He did so because he knew that “he had not arrived at a scientific theory” (Ibid.) and never regarded his findings as definitive.

Bruschi, unlike so many commentators, sees the “perpetual motion” that characterizes Althusser’s own philosophical activity as a ceaseless reworking of concepts and recasting of theories. He neither accepts the “inertia” that afflicts Althusser’s line of inquiry (the movement that came to a halt only in death, forcing readers to divide his thought into early, middle and late periods, each distinct from the others and coherent in itself) as evidence of its failure, or of the lack of validity of the concepts produced along the way, nor does he simply take these concepts as finished and ready to use, as if the problem was Althusser’s weakness of will, together with the disorientation and demoralization produced by the anti-Marxist mobilization of the late seventies. Instead, Bruschi follows Althusser’s own attempts to reconceptualize the theoretical basis of the unresolved problems that blocked the development of a science of history. The title of the first part of his book, “Historical Materialism is a Materialism of the Encounter,” is itself a provocation designed to shock the partisans of both the early and late Althusser. “Historical Materialism,” as emphasized by the capitalization, refers to the moment in which Althusser appears, depending on the reader, most structuralist, most “scientific” (in the pejorative sense of the term) and most Marxist (but in the worst possible way, that is, orthodox, Stalinist, formulaic, and so ardently that the truly orthodox could discern something akin to irony in Althusser’s writing). This was the moment of “On the Materialist Dialectic,” Althusser’s response to the criticism directed at “Contradiction and Overdetermination,” which entailed a certain theoretical bending of the stick to correct his bending of the stick in the earlier essay, away from any notion that an

event like the Russian Revolution could be explained by the maturation of a simple historical contradiction, and towards the idea that such a contradiction (relations of production versus the productive forces) became active only in becoming singular, a composition of a multiplicity of contradictions and conflicts that combined into a ruptural unity. Althusser's use of Lucretius, Machiavelli and Spinoza, although without naming them, could be and was increasingly read as an attempt to deceive and disarm his readers by disguising them as Lenin. Significantly, the word "science" occurs only once in "Contradiction and Overdetermination," while in "On the Materialist Dialectic" it appears sixty-eight times. In the latter essay, Althusser not only refers to historical materialism, but defines it as "the Marxist science of the development of social formations."

At this point, the powerful effect of Bruschi's rendering of historical materialism as "a" (not even "the") materialism of the encounter, can be felt, if not yet entirely understood. He has refused to acknowledge the widely held position that the Althusser of *Machiavelli and Us*, and the *Underground Current* is different from and opposed to the Althusser of *For Marx* and *Reading Capital*. Just as importantly, however, the qualified equivalence he establishes between historical materialism and the materialism of the encounter prevents us from asserting a fundamental continuity of philosophical doctrine beneath the discrepancy between the two that no argument can entirely dissipate. He employs the same strategy (certainly in relation to the "strategy of the *sive*" that Althusser derived from Spinoza), in a later section in which he institutes a relation of synonymy, if not exactly equivalence, between two nearly contemporaneous terms, both associated with the early Althusser, without being associated with each other, as if Althusser developed each in theoretical isolation from the other: overdetermination and structural causality. Here, we are no longer talking about chronology, the early and late Althusser, whether understood as progress or regression, or about inescapable internal contradiction (the two Althusseres). Instead, Bruschi's untimely association of concepts and texts that appeared initially as the sets of terms between which Althusser's thought was condemned to oscillate, each unthinkable except on the condition that the other was absent, as if this were a kind of dissociative disorder proper to the realm of theory, forces us to ask whether the relation between these terms can be understood as one of opposition at all.

In this way, Bruschi shows that it was Althusser's commitment to developing a rigorous, perhaps scientific, knowledge of history that, as in the case of Freud, required the unending reworking of basic concepts, as well as the self-criticism that was seldom directed at political positions, despite the mimicry of Stalinist and Maoist rituals, but nearly always concerned the unforeseen effects of theoretical postulates and hypotheses. Althusser's perpetual rethinking, however, never led him to renounce Marxism,

however critical he might have been of specific Marxist concepts. While he rejected the notions of alienation and reification, he regarded the concept of class struggle and its role as the motor of history as an essential part of the discovery that made possible his perpetual motion in search of the concept adequate to “Marx’s immense theoretical revolution:” the concept of causality adequate to the Marx’s discovery, which Althusser has named structural causality:

The epistemological problem posed by Marx's radical modification of Political Economy can be expressed as follows: by means of what concept is it possible to think the new type of determination which has just been identified as the determination of the phenomena of a given region by the structure of that region? . . . . In other words, how is it possible to define the concept of a structural causality? (Althusser and Balibar 1970, 186)

This passage from *Reading Capital* is extraordinarily important in that it indicates that “structural causality” is the name of a concept without which Marx’s discovery cannot be fully intelligible, let alone become the new foundation for a science of history, that is, for modes of experimentation that will yield a knowledge that permits new experiments and new hypotheses, but which is also at this point the name of an absence. Structural causality marks and holds open the place that must be occupied by a concept of causality adequate to Marx’s discovery:

This simple theoretical question sums up Marx's extraordinary scientific discovery: the discovery of the theory of history and political economy, the discovery of *Capital*. But it sums it up as an extraordinary theoretical question *contained* 'in the practical state' in Marx's scientific discovery, the question Marx 'practiced' in his work, in answer to which he gave his scientific work, without producing *the concept* of it in a philosophical opus of the same rigour (Ibid.).

The “simple question” of how to produce the concept of structural causality (which exists, but in “the practical state”) “was so new and unforeseen that it contained enough to smash all the classical theories of causality -- or enough to ensure that it would be unrecognized, that it would pass unperceived and be buried even before it was born” (Ibid.) What was it that structural causality contained enough of “to smash all classical theories of causality?” The novelty of a concept of structure that does not designate the hidden order of deep structures or the visible order of a secular providence, but rather a determinate disorder or disarray whose cause is entirely immanent in the structure itself, its diversity and multiplicity. Structural causality thus emerged as the response to the criticisms of overdetermination as nothing more than an empiricist enumeration of factors whose failure to comprehend the determination of the conjunction of these factors is held up as a theoretical advance. Althusser shows that what appeared to his critics as the absence of determination was in fact the initial formulation of a new concept of causality.

Bruschi's statement "historical materialism is a materialism of the encounter" confronts us with the uncomfortable fact that we, as readers of Marx and Lenin, as well as Althusser, have a clearer sense of aleatory materialism today than of historical materialism: the philosophy of the encounter, of a necessity that arises from the concatenation of chance events. The importance of the concept of the void in Althusser's exposition is not limited to the image of the empty space (*spatium vacua*) through which atoms obliquely fall, sometimes colliding, sometimes conjoining, and sometimes falling without any encounter at all. In addition, void for Althusser is a verb, the philosophical act of voiding, emptying, that is, of making a void. The origins and ends, in all their various forms, that once appeared as the condition of the intelligibility of history have been evacuated and the place left empty by their absence no longer a place at all. Instead of the question of how capitalism emerged out of feudalism, Althusser informs us (as had Balibar years earlier) that capitalism did not emerge out of feudalism, whether automatically through the gradual expansion of the market or with the use of force by the bourgeoisie anxious to break through antiquated property forms, price controls and state monopolies, and that capitalism might not have come into existence at all. Capitalism was the consequence of absolutely distinct processes that collided, held together and formed a new singularity, with its own structure and tendential laws. Althusser's conclusion: "we must think necessity as the becoming-necessary of the encounter of contingencies" (Althusser 2006, 194). This is the beginning not of a recommencement of historical materialism, as Badiou once argued, but the beginning of the recasting that permits new questions to be posed.

Balibar, drawing from the conceptual repertoire of Gaston Bachelard, announced at the beginning of his contribution to *Reading Capital* that "the preceding papers have already formulated the idea that Marx's work contains a general scientific theory of history. In particular, they have shown that, in the formulation of this theory, Marx's construction of the central concept of the 'mode of production' has the function of an epistemological break with respect to the whole tradition of the philosophy of history. For in its generality it is absolutely incompatible with the principles of idealism, whether dogmatic or empiricist, and it progressively revolutionizes the whole problematic of society and history" (Althusser and Balibar 1970, 201). The concept of mode of production marks a break with previous explanations of history and historical transformations, invalidating earlier theories and identifying them as epistemological obstacles. But as Balibar notes this does not mean that the invention of this concept by Marx, and particularly the terms, metaphors (e.g., base and superstructure) and analogies he uses in articulating his discovery are in any way adequate to it or cannot themselves become epistemological obstacles if their inadequacy is not acknowledged leading to their replacement by other, more effective terms and concepts. Indeed, the model of base and

superstructure, in one sense, the image, metaphor and idea of historical materialism (according to both Lenin and Stalin) and of Marx's discovery of the determination of the social whole by the economic, not only tended to appeal to a notion of expressive or emanative causality, became the unifying principle of a given society and the means of the totalization of its most disparate elements. Of course, Marx's most developed version of the base and superstructure model was not a spiritual totality, but was founded on a central contradiction: the antagonism between the productive forces and the relations of production. The history of Marxism after Marx, however, shows how easily this antagonism can be assimilated into a teleology of progress driven by technological development which, at specific thresholds, forces a corresponding change in the relations of production. The fact that such explanations of historical change may refer to class struggle changes nothing: class struggle seldom appears as the motor of history, and when it does it is typically reduced to action at the point of production, the fuel that keeps the machines running. Class struggle as a concept, as the central concept of the theory of historical materialism, remained remarkably underdeveloped.

There are few Marxist thinkers whose work so clearly demonstrates the obstacles that blocked any real, effective understanding of the centrality of class struggle as that of Althusser. Bruschi examines in some detail how the group of extracts taken from the manuscript of *On the Reproduction* and published in 1970 as "Ideology and the Ideological State Apparatuses," was shorn of nearly every reference to struggle and resistance found in the original. Class struggle, separated from the body of the text and nearly absent from its arguments, appeared "in person" only in a postscript. Further, the historical materialism of the first half of the essay is governed by a functionalism as if not simply a given social formation, but the legal and institutional forms proper to a mode of production can be explained by the functions they fulfill, as if a mode of production were a subject acting with an end in view. If class struggle exists in such a schema, it is simply in the form of a ruse of reason, according to which an invisible hand transforms proletarian victory into a means of preserving capitalism and rendering it more efficient than before.

It is at this precise point that Bruschi's provocative formula, "historical materialism is a materialism of the encounter" produces its most powerful effects. A concept of mode of production that cannot accommodate class struggle or can accommodate it only insofar as it is reduced to a game played within the framework of capitalism whose moves are limited and predictable represents a continuation of, rather than a break with, previous notions of society or economy. If class struggle is class war and not just a game, however, it can no more be waged according to a set of rules than actual war. No irresistible historical necessity will carry the proletariat to victory and no advantage or weapon offers anything like a guarantee that the class enemy will be defeated. If

capitalism ends, it will be the result of the becoming-necessary of a multiplicity of contingent encounters that offers the proletariat that is organized and “battle-ready” a chance to neutralize the enemy, not through physical annihilation (except perhaps in the rarest of cases and against an enemy bent on genocide), but by bringing about the collapse of the opposing force. Such a conjuncture is rare, so rare that it appeared to the Bolsheviks in 1917 to be a kind of miracle. But to take advantage of the opportunity it offers requires the ability to maneuver as necessity demands and not to be constrained at such moments by the rules of the game (written or unwritten) or the idea, perfectly consistent with historical materialism as it has been understood, that there could be no greater mistake than to act prematurely, not to have waited until the historical time is “ripe” and the fruit ready to be picked. Rather than understanding aleatory materialism as Althusser’s ontological doctrine, Bruschi argues that it is the means of grasping the reality of the class struggle, unpredictable and overdetermined, a way of thinking without the fictions of end or order, a way of preparing for battles that may be endless.

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