

## Louis Althusser's 'Centrism'

Anthony Thomson (1975)

It is economism that identifies eternally in advance the determinate-contradiction-in-the last-instance with the role of the dominant contradiction, which forever assimilates such and such an 'aspect' (forces of production, economy, practice) to the principal role, and such and such another 'aspect' (relations of production, politics, ideology, theory) to the secondary role — whereas in real history determination in-the last instance by the economy is exercised precisely in the permutations of the principal role between the economy, politics, theory, etc.<sup>1</sup>

While this passage from “On the Materialist Dialectic” does not necessarily meet the criterion of being 'illuminating', it does contain several important aspects of Althusser doctrine, of which three shall be isolated for discussion. In the first place, the reference to economism reflects the conjuncture in which Althusser wrote these essays. This conjuncture bears directly on his conceptions of his aims, as well as on his own theory. Secondly, as the major part of his critique of economism, Althusser develops what he claims is a distinctive conception of Marxist 'theory' that, however, may not entirely escape the taint of mechanism, albeit a complex mechanism. Finally, within this doctrine that I hope to high-light briefly, two specific issues arise that create difficulties in interpretation: one, explicit in the above passage, concerns the role of the 'economic' as determinate; the other relates to the conjuncture and aim, and concerns the role of 'consciousness'.

Althusser recognizes that his essays "were conceived, written and published ... in a particular conjuncture", specifically "the present ideological and theoretical conjuncture in the international communist movement."<sup>2</sup> His aim was to intervene in this conjuncture "in relation to its dangerous tendencies" to draw a sharp line "between Marxist theory and the forms of philosophical (and political) subjectivism which have compromised it or threaten it."<sup>3</sup> In particular he cites the tendency towards the 'humanist' interpretation of Marxism, which Marx, Engels, Lenin. And now he opposed. Humanism in the present context may be considered a 'left' deviation, deriving theoretically from the conception of the superstructure as 'autonomous', which is based, Althusser claims, on Marx's early works, that is, on his ideological period preceding his *rupture*, his settling of accounts; a period when Marx was not yet Marx.

In the essays of primary concern for this paper, however, Althusser struggles with a “dangerous tendency” from the right, termed ‘economism’, a ‘right’ deviation. Economism derives ultimately from a mechanistic interpretation of Marxism (taking it 'literally and 'out or context'), which identifies the economy with the 'essence' and proclaims the superstructure its epiphenomenon. The source of this misinterpretation, Althusser says, is confusion concerning Marx's 'inversion' of Hegel, interpreting the inversion as a mirror image of Hegel's alleged claim

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<sup>1</sup> Louis Althusser, *For Marx*, translated by Ben Brewster, New York: Vintage Books, 1969, p. 215.

<sup>2</sup> *For Marx*, p. 9.

<sup>3</sup> *For Marx*, p. 12.

that the economic was merely the epiphenomenon of the politico-ideological essence.<sup>4</sup> For Althusser, the imagery of the inversion is merely used as an analogy for the epistemological break which Marx made when he established a new scientific *problematique*, which transcended the ideological *problematique* he derived from Hegel and Feuerbach, although Marx never thought through this *rupture* and placed it on a theoretical basis.<sup>5</sup>

Finally in this connection it is important to note a further element in the conjuncture: in practice the transformation of the economy has not 'automatically' brought about a super structural transformation of consciousness or ideology in the present socialist and ex-socialist countries. This history clearly demonstrated the 'gap' in existing theory which Althusser hoped to begin to rectify. In recognizing this, Althusser says he has applied Marxist theory to Marx's own writing.

According to Althusser, Marxist theory developed in practice without the necessity arising for the theory of its own activity. In his essays, Althusser tries to expound the Marxist implicit theory of theories, and to overcome Marx's 'silence' and place on a theoretical basis the lessons of Marxist practice as developed in Russia and China. This involves precisely the effort to establish fully the existence of a 'break' between Hegel and Marx, a theoretical task that the economists failed to undertake. If, in order to explicate the 'true' Marxism, Althusser finds it necessary to disagree with and 'correct' Marx and Engels, this is so, he claims, because they found it unnecessary to develop the theory of their practice. They posed new problems for which there existed no theoretical answers but never wrote a thorough *Dialectics*. Althusser, it may seem, hopes to repair this omission. I hope to sketch briefly Althusser's conception of the theoretical basis for Marxist practice, indicating in places his disagreements with Hegel and the 'economists', as well as discussing what may be regarded as 'troublesome' aspects of his doctrine.

Two of the aspects of Marxism that Althusser claims distinguishes its approach from bourgeois social science are 'structural causality' and the notion that contradiction is the motive force of history.<sup>6</sup> It has been shown in practice that the basic contradiction of capitalism, that between the forces and the relations of production, while indicating that revolution is the 'task of the day', cannot by itself produce a revolutionary situation. Marx wrote that "“when we talk of production we always mean production at a determinate stage in social development of production of individuals living in *society*”".<sup>7</sup> It is not possible to reduce the many existing contradictions in any concrete conjuncture to a single essence or to delve down to the origin of the simple universal — for example, the 'pure' case of the capital-labour contradiction. Every contradiction exists in a complex whole and cannot be extracted from its conditions of existence. A 'concept' is intricately located within its 'field'; it only exists within an ever-pre-given complexity. The Marxist totality, then, comprises numerous contradictions. No single contradiction, however basic to capitalism, indicates a revolutionary situation is immanent.

For Althusser, however, this complexity is not a mere collection of contingencies. On the contrary, it has a unifying principle that makes of this complexity a structure. At the very essence

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<sup>4</sup> In fact, Althusser maintains, this interpretation itself is a caricature of Hegel and hence a double caricature of Marx. Elsewhere Althusser gives a much more plausible interpretation of the nature of the Hegelian dialectic and the Hegelian totality.

<sup>5</sup> It has been argued that there *is* some question about the extent of this break, and that works such as the *Grundrisse* provide a link between the periods. From this it might follow that Althusser gives insufficient attention to Marx's Hegelian background, an omission that may bear on certain parts of his own doctrine.

<sup>6</sup> He claims, however, that other disciplines, (e.g. linguistics, psychoanalysis) are arriving at a similar conception of causality

<sup>7</sup> *For Marx*, p. 195, quoting from the Introduction.

of contradiction is the principle of uneven development, which makes it possible to conceive within the complexity one dominant contradiction and other, subordinate contradictions, asymmetrically related in an “organic hierarchized whole”<sup>8</sup>. While this is not a haphazard complexity, not a pluralism, neither is it a Hegelian totality in which each is a mere moment of the development of the Idea. It is, nevertheless, a unitary whole, and the unity “is the unity of the complexity itself.”<sup>9</sup> It is not a mere ‘collection’ such that an element might be removed at will; each element in the complexity forms a part of the very conditions or existence of all the other elements.

The Marxist whole is a ‘structure in dominance.’ It contains a hierarchy of levels or instances which are distinct and ‘relatively autonomous’ co-existing within the structure in which one element is dominant. This does not imply that the secondary contradictions are epiphenomena. The relations between the elements and the structure cannot be reduced to what Althusser calls the ‘expressive’ type of causality, by which he means linear and unidirectional. “This hierarchy only represents the hierarchy of effectivity that exist between the different structured levels of the whole.”<sup>10</sup> There is, then, a mutual determination of the contradictions in the whole. “The ‘contradiction’ is inseparable from the total structure of the social body in which it is found, inseparable from its formal conditions of existence and even from the *instances* it governs, it is radically affected by them, determining, but also determined in one and the same moment.”<sup>11</sup> This ‘mutual determination’ is qualified, however, by the notion that, given unevenness, one structure predominates and therefore introduces a specific order into the structure. It is, says Althusser, “the manifestation of the structure in dominance that unifies the whole.”<sup>12</sup> He has identified a ‘structural causality’ and applied the term ‘overdetermination’ to account for the effectivity of the contradictions in the structure.

Althusser, in defining his task, identified the two ends of the chain of this undeveloped concept of structural causality derived from Marx, one being the relative autonomy of the superstructure. Far from exaggerating this principle to its voluntarist conclusions, Althusser emphasizes the ‘relativity’, defining it not in the sense of mere contingencies, but by espousing what he argues is a Marxist law that contradictions are always overdetermined.

The other end of the chain—determinism—follows from the argument that contradictions are always overdetermined because of the perpetual domination of the economic. Economism eternally identifies the economic as having the role of the dominant contradiction, whereas for Althusser, the dominant role at any time could be played by any of the contradictions. Marx and Engels claimed that ‘the economic’ was determinant ‘in the last instance’. But Althusser claims that, since a contradiction cannot be reduced to its single essence, but exists in an ever-pre-given complex structure, there never has been, nor never will be a time when the economic will dominate to the exclusion of all other factors: “The last instance never comes”.<sup>13</sup>

From the sketch presented here of Althusser’s doctrine, as far as I have as yet developed it, it is not entirely clear why it would be important to include at all this ‘clarification’ about the last instance, except insofar as the idea of an ‘economic base’ is an essential ingredient of Marxism. The passage from Engels, in which was claimed that in the midst of an infinity of

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<sup>8</sup> Louis Althusser, “Part II: The Object of *Capital*”, in Louis Althusser and Etienne Balibar, *Reading Capital*, translated by Ben Brewster, Bristol: New Left Books, 1971: 71-198, p. 98.

<sup>9</sup> *For Marx*, p. 202.

<sup>10</sup> *Reading Capital*, p. 99.

<sup>11</sup> *For Marx*, 101.

<sup>12</sup> *For Marx*, p. 206.

<sup>13</sup> *For Marx*, p. 255.

accidental determinations, the economic ultimately asserts itself, was criticized by Althusser for the exteriority of the economic, as if it were autonomous from the other existing contradictions and ultimately determining them; for Althusser. The economic determines 'in the last instance' in its interiority, as one part of the complex whole of contradictions. Yet it still seems only one element among many, and the basis for singling out the economy 'in the last instance' seems unresolved.<sup>14</sup>

Althusser believes, however, that this principle is of the first importance: "in order to conceive this 'domination' of a structure over the other structures in the unity of a conjuncture it is necessary to refer to the principle of the determination 'in the last instance' ... by the economic."<sup>15</sup> But how are we to think this principle? It does not mean that contradictions can be reduced to their (economic) essence, as Engels suggested. To be a Marxist, claims Althusser in *Reading Capital*, it is not sufficient to claim that the economic governs the other spheres of life; rather the essential thing is to grasp the social and material conditions, which are the very conditions of existence of the economic in a determinate form: "Certain relations of production presuppose the existence of a legal-political and ideological superstructure as a condition of their peculiar existence."<sup>16</sup> There is more to the unity of a structure in dominance than only mutual conditioning. More fundamentally, "the nature of the relations of production ... establishes the *degree of effectivity* delegated to a certain level of the social totality .... The whole superstructure of the society is thus implicit and present *in a specific way* in the relations of production."<sup>17</sup> It appears from this argument that, essential to the 'unity' of the overall structure is the conception that the degree of effectivity (i.e. the conditions of domination and subordination of certain elements) is somehow 'established' by 'the economic'.

A social formation is never static; rather, it undergoes a process of development that, however, may be relatively slow or fast. If a structure in dominance remains relatively constant, changes still occur, but they take the form of 'displacement', a process whereby one opposite passes into the place of another. This is not, however, an arbitrary succession; the key to this internally necessary exchange of roles 'according to circumstances', what gives "these displacements the necessity of a function"<sup>18</sup> is the 'determination in the last instance by the economy'. On the other hand, the complex contradictions in the structure may undergo condensation—a process in which they fuse or combine in a specific direction. The phrase 'in the last instance', then, does not really refer to the last 'instance', that is, a time that will never come; if it were so it would be a meaningless addition that added nothing to Althusser's conception of the structure; a mere empty acknowledgement. Internal to all contradictions, immersing them in a general illumination, "the economic base' *determines* ('in the last instance') *which* element is to be *dominant* in the social formation."<sup>19</sup> If we ignore the literal interpretation of 'in the last instance', it now appears that 'the economic' is essential to the state of overdetermination of the contradictions., their displacement, condensation, and 'fusion'. Economic contradictions may be 'essential' to the state of overdetermination in a given conjuncture; but this is different from claiming that the economic always plays the dominant role. We may be able to find an example of this 'essentiality'.

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<sup>14</sup> 'The last instance' sometimes seems analogous to the mathematical concept of 'infinity', essential to theory, yet not having a concrete existence. This interpretation may result from a too literal reading of the phrase, however.

<sup>15</sup> *Reading Capital*, p. 99.

<sup>16</sup> *Reading Capital*, p. 177.

<sup>17</sup> *Reading Capital*, p. 177-178, emphasis partly mine.

<sup>18</sup> *Reading Capital*, p. 99.

<sup>19</sup> *For Marx*, p. 255.

the notion of overdetermination of contradiction can be treated empirically, as his analysis of the 'current situation' in Russia in 1917 demonstrated. From the law of unevenness it seems to follow, ultimately, that contradiction is the motor force in the development of a process. Contradiction has three forms of existence: non-antagonism, when the contradictions exist in a state of displacement, antagonism, when the contradictions undergo a process of 'condensation', i.e., "the identity of opposites in a real unity".<sup>20</sup> This 'fusion' identifies a revolutionary situation which may give rise to a third form, 'explosion', in which restructuration of the whole on a qualitatively new basis takes place. Now we may be able to understand the importance of the contention that the contradiction between the forces of production and the relations of production defined that revolution was 'the task of the day' but not necessarily immanent. Antagonistic contradictions in the economic are essential to the process of social transformation, but they are embedded in a given structure that may exist in a state of displacement, in which other contradictions play a role in maintaining social order. We can see, then, that "the 'simple' contradiction is, in fact, always overdetermined" either "in the direction of a *historical inhibition* ... or in the direction of a revolutionary rupture."<sup>21</sup> For transformation, the economic becomes understood in its necessary but insufficient role.

One of the important aspects of Althusser's model of 'structural causality' is the ability to distinguish between the economic and the political struggle. The theoretical conception of a structure in dominance makes political practice specific to the state of overdetermination of the existing contradictions, an argument that distinguishes Marxism from political spontaneity, which is the practice of 'opportunism'. While political practice transforms its object, social relations, into new social relations, the key to the transformation of any process, Althusser claims, is not the *agents*, but the place they occupy in the structure and, hence, the roles they play.

Althusser claims that it is "the structure ... that determines the *places and functions* occupied and adopted by the agents.... The true 'subjects' ... are therefore not ... 'concrete individuals'— *but the definition and distribution of these places and functions*."<sup>22</sup> Dialectics is not a question of being and consciousness; it is a question of the displacement or condensation of 'places' and 'functions'. For Althusser, to reduce 'social relations' to relations between individuals violates Marx's thought. Althusser may have escaped from economic determinism, but certainly not from a more complexly defined determinism.

It is one of the characteristics of the 'mechanistic' interpretation of Marxism to claim that objective conditions determine subjective conditions; that social being determines social consciousness.<sup>23</sup> The trend towards 'voluntarism' Althusser identified asserts that 'consciousness' has an autonomous existence. In his criticism of the 'new left', and in reaction to this subjectivity, Althusser has rejected any role for conscious agents other than as functionaries of concrete places, merely substituted a more complex 'objectivity' for a simplistic 'economistic' one. He does not leave space in his doctrine for the 'subjective side of Marxism, the creative role of consciousness, the material force that is theory—a mistake, he believes of the 'early' Marx. If it could be sustained that Marx's break with Hegel was not as complete as Althusser wants to claim, then there may be much of value in the works of Lukacs and Korsch, and of Hegel.

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<sup>20</sup> *For Marx*, p. 211.

<sup>21</sup> *For Marx*, p. 106.

<sup>22</sup> *Reading Capital*, p. 181.

<sup>23</sup> This famous phrase can support numerous interpretations; the word 'being' seems to imply, however, much more than merely 'economic determinism'.

The distinctiveness of Althusser's approach, within European Marxism, lies in his rejection of the standard 'revisionism' as well as the 'humanism' of much contemporary Marxism and 'leftism'. He attempts to reassert Marxist orthodoxy by taking a centrist position between these two 'distortions'. Political practice is an arduous and extremely conscious process conducted by 'concrete individuals'. Althusser seems to admit as much when he notes that Lenin "forge[d] ... [the] *subjective conditions*, the means of a decisive assault on the weak link,"<sup>24</sup> which means was the Communist Party. This omission of the role of 'consciousness' I believe to be the most serious weakness in Althusser's doctrine, and the basis for my contention that he is substituting a complex 'economism' for a simplistic one. Althusser insufficiently distinguishes himself from the 'right' through his neglect of subjectivity.

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<sup>24</sup> *For Marx*, p. 98.